CONFIA . International Conference on Ilustration & Animation
Aveiro . Portugal . October 2021 . ISBN: 978-989-54939-6-8

Adam Curtis as Illustrator: Interdisciplinary Appropriation for Illustration Practice

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Keywords
Adam Curtis, Illustration, Détournement, Networked Image, Poor Image, Interdisciplinary Practice

Abstract

This paper is part of a continuing project of repositioning or appropriating practices from the wider cultural landscape with the intention of broadening the conceptual landscape of illustration. Specifically, the aim here is the appropriation of the work of celebrated filmmaker and journalist Adam Curtis as illustration. Rather than any detailed explanation of the intention or original context of this work, this paper aims to utilise Curtis's practice as a hypothetical space to explore various instances of interdisciplinary appropriation and mischaracterisation in particular regards to an expanded notion of illustration.

1. Introduction

The filmmaker and journalist Adam Curtis makes documentaries exploring the narratives and structures of society. He utilises BBC archival footage in construction of intentionally iconic montages together with combinations of text and image. These documentaries are accompanied by his own voiceovers asking questions about power and self, intermixed with music and sound.

Curtis describes that early in his career he 'turned his back on academia and went into television' when it occurred to him that academia was unable to tell stories about the workings of modern political power [1]. Nevertheless, his films often find themselves the subject of academic enquiry. Broad Academic focus aims to enlighten on subjects ranging from the rationalities of the filmic essay [2] towards explorations of 'Meta-Journalism' [3]. Very much of the moment, the conference *Forward to the Past: Critical Perspectives on the Films of Adam Curtis* is due to take place September 2021; a collaboration between the University of Nottingham's Institute for Screen Industries Research and the Institute of Historical Research. The stated aim of the conference is to provide a vehicle to explore broader intellectual questions, i.e., film as a historical text, documentary films in relationship to political thought and the delivery of political concepts and ideas with film [4].

While such enquiry does form part of the backdrop; the emphasis in this paper is an unpacking of the notion of interdisciplinary appropriation, positioning Adam Curtis as a concluding focus. In the spirit of this undertaking, Adam Curtis as Illustrator will be suggested, if not actually proven.

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Optimistically, this is done as part of a continuing project of re-positioning or appropriating practices from the wider cultural creative landscape to expand on the concept of illustration. In my previous papers, internet memes [1], the possibilities of networked image [2] and the new town development of Poundbury in Dorset [3] have all been considered under the auspices of illustration.

In writing concerning illustration, perhaps because of the maligned position of the discipline there is an unavoidable impetus to define the potential of the discipline - as the author may see it - through repeated assertion of other literature. In my previous papers this is done with the aim of establishing an expanded notion of illustration.

In this mode, mentioned in my previous papers but also relevant to this paper is the forward to *The Authorial Illustrator: 10 Years of the Falmouth Illustration Forum* within which illustrator and academic Steve Braund defines an 'Authorial Practice' of illustration 'concerned with those areas where the illustrator creates, originates, influences or considers the content of the communication' [4]. Another key point of reference might be Illustrator and program director of illustration at Parsons School of Design, Catrin Morgan and her proposed 'nomadic illustrations' defined as 'single images that are repeatedly repurposed and recontextualized' [5]. which she conceives including both still and moving image. Additionally, one more point of reference cited in my previous papers also relevant to this paper would be illustrator and art director Michael Salu's reasoning that illustration practices 'might need to do more than vocationalise aesthetics' [6]

Expanded definitions of illustration necessitate the inclusion of images produced from both inside and outside the sphere of illustration. Likewise on a theoretical level, to define a progressive or expanded notion of illustration, writing on this subject necessitates reflection on ideas from outside of the discipline.

This being the case, in this new paper I will return to filmmaker and artist Hito Steyerl's poor image and expanding further on the adaptation of French radical thinking from the 60s and 70s by the world of contemporary art. In order to better understand the manoeuvres behind such interdisciplinary appropriation, I will touch upon the hierarchical tendencies within these operations.

One key concept explored in my earlier papers regarding networked image is the 'poor image'. Film maker and artist Hito Steyerl's positioning of digital image with its ability to be exchanged, compressed, anonymously joined and networked [7].

Comparisons between the construction and distribution of Adam Curtis's films and the poor image have been drawn by other scholars. On a surface level but also on the deeper level of the networks that allow audiences to access his films; the poor image can be presented as a straightforward critical companion to the work of Adam Curtis [8].

Not so straightforward would be connections between the poor image, the operations of networked image and the new town of Poundbury in Dorset. Nevertheless, in leading towards consideration of the work of Adam Curtis, next I will attempt to make this link.

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2. Poundbury and the Poor Image

The Poundbury development (Fig. 1) is derided by architectural critics for its kitsch weirdness, mismatching buildings, the emptiness of its social project [9]. Nevertheless, within such folly we could choose to take an optimistic view of the potential of this development. To do this we might conceive of such architectural folly (perhaps more accurately colloquial folly) in conceptual relationship with operations of Internet memes and networked image - towards the poor image.

Fig. 1. Poundbury buildings

This 'Thomas Hardy theme park for slow learners' as labelled by architectural critic Johnathan Meads [10], would have to embrace its own absurdity, its existence as projected edifices, it's very presence as a folly. Akin to Steyerl's poor image, in the lifetime of this settlement it is not inconceivable that these competing edifices would provoke 'translation or mistranslation' possibly 'creating new publics and debates'. In interaction with the community that occupies the work, we might hope for a 'new aura' to be built around such a community. Aided by a confused nostalgia; the loaded imagery of Poundbury, in Hito Steyerl's terms 'this aura is no longer based on the permanence of the "original," but on the transience of the copy' [7].

Bypassing any notions of the original intention of its design, we can only hope that in a similar way to networked image, Poundbury itself might 'build alliances as it travels' [4]. Conceivably, we can take the poor image as a uniting concept that links an expansive illustrative public space with networked image; operating in transgression between the physical and the virtual, the public and the private.

Speculatively for the purposes of this expanded illustration practice, via Steyerl's poor image, we might draw together such seemingly disparate elements as internet memes, the potential for the Poundbury development as illustrated public space and - as I will go on to touch upon - the work of Adam Curtis.

Of course, it would be easy to understand these positionings as mischaracterisations, although as I will also explore, such mischaracterisations - jumps in conceptual understanding - are central to the operations of interdisciplinary appropriation. It is in this way we might perceive a strategic route towards an expanded notion of illustration.

3. Interdisciplinary Appropriation: Theoretical Mischaracterisation

In reflecting on the work of Hito Steyerl and in a wider sense asserted across various practices connected with contemporary art, it is established that 'social movement politics and contemporary art interventions increasingly traverse a porous boundary' [11]. Indeed it is perhaps this shift towards socially engaged practice that operates as one factor in the interdisciplinary potential of contemporary art.

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A key concept in advancement towards such a navigation has been Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics', which he defined as;

> A set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space [12]

With this conceptual agenda, Bourriaud has drawn significant inspiration for his writings on contemporary art from the theories of the Situationist International (SI) and theorist and activist Guy Debord [13].

This historical appropriation of the SI by contemporary art sits paradoxically in relationship to the antiart stance of the SI from its radical heyday. In fact, within Bourriaud's mission to update these theories with concepts of his own, it is not unfair to reflect on this as a mischaracterisation of the SI's intentions and concepts [13].

Perhaps inspired by Bourriaud's mischaracterisation, illustrators might take a rather more pragmatic but nevertheless equally paradoxical understanding of the SI and associated seminal radical ideas, specifically the concept of 'détournement' [14].

From its origins in the parodies and satire of the past, towards Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* and then into the methodologies of the wider protest movement of the 1960's and 70's, détournement could never completely separate itself from what it was held against. Utilising its potential to surprise and techniques in the rearrangement of borrowed formal attributes; détournement can be easily identified as entering the marketing and advertising language of our contemporary world.

> The tendencies toward détournement that can be observed in contemporary expression are for the most part unconscious or accidental. It is in the advertising industry...that one can find the best examples [14]

This process here, dryly noted by Debord, is where the most practical and effective functions of the concept now reside and where they continue to flourish to this day; here within the realm of the illustrator's discipline.

4. Interdisciplinary Appropriation: Practical Mischaracterisation

The focus for this paper, an examination of the work of filmmaker and journalist Adam Curtis as illustration, may also be understood as something of a mischaracterisation. This conceivably ill-fitting undertaking was motivated by an encounter with an anthology of writing regarding the German born novelist and academic, W. G. Sebald; *Searching for Sebald: Photography after W. G. Sebald* [15]. From the introduction onwards connections are implied, made and sometimes straightforwardly asserted between Sebald's combinations of text and image, towards practices of gallery-based photography and contemporary art.

In a review of this book from its time of publication, art critic and academic Brian Dillon noted, 'conventional critical reminders of the

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spectral power of the photograph conjured by Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes' but then specifically asked the question 'what literary or artistic context might explain Sebald's particularly enigmatic deployment of portraits, snapshots, landscapes, and found documents?' [16]. For practitioners of Illustration the appropriate characterisation would seem quite clear, in this context Sebald is an authorial illustrator[2]. Nevertheless, enthusiasm or understanding of illustration, even as mere context for artistic production, is rarely encountered outside of the discipline itself.

In his review, Dillon does acknowledge that Sebald's images are functioning as illustrations, but only to note a 'sly subversions of the very idea of illustration'. Of course, in this way he is positioning the concept of illustration as a limiting factor that requires subversion. This is not an unusual critical framework for the use of the term, illustration is frequently utilised as shorthand for limiting or even improper creative practice.

n a previous paper regarding the rational for a reoriented practice of illustration, I explored such instances in which a notional illustration and associated practices have been utilised as a critical shorthand for bad or impure practice. From seminal critic of the fine arts Clement Greenberg describing a decline of collage into 'montage and stunts of illustration' [17], to narrative theorist Joseph Campbell in his definition of an 'improper art' [18], with his declaration that 'all advertising art is pornographic' [19]. In these examples and others, illustration forms the improper baseline from which to propagate an ideal practice.

In light of this, in an effort to envisage a further potential for commercial illustration, Academic and illustrator Stuart Mills acknowledged the difficulties dealing with a 'snobbery which considers that because a work is commissioned then it cannot be valid or pure' [20]. More recently at the 2019 Confia conference, theorist of commercial illustration practices Alan Male outlined a problem for illustration existing within a 'taxonomic superiority syndrome that defines inherent hierarchies within the parameters of practice' [21].

Returning to the SI and it's antiart stance, in part this was motivated by the perceived elitism of gallery-based fine art from the time [22]. Partially inspired by this mode of radical rejection, Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics, although definitive in the late 90s, was by no means the first instance of gallery-based practice rejecting past frameworks in an attempt to involve itself in a wider socially engaged contextual discourse3. The avant-garde, from its inception, has always been in uneasy relationship to the radical.

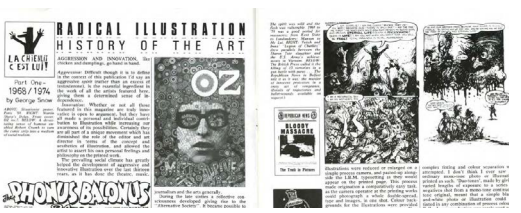

Fig. 2. George Snow's article concerning the history and technical processes of 'Radical Illustration'

Of course, illustration hasn't gone through this same process; although in some sense this is not completely true. The 1981 'Radical Illustrators' edition of the Association of Illustrators magazine [23] (Fig. 2), is often cited as a linchpin

2 For further expansion on the term 'authorial illustration' refer to '*The Authorial Illustrator: 10 Years of the Falmouth Illustration Forum*' [4]

3 Dada, Futurists, Fluxus Etc...

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within arguments that attempt to broaden the possibilities of populist, socially engaged practice under the auspices of illustration.

Nevertheless, perhaps there is some inherent conservatism even to this historical routing. The same inherent conservatism that at times diminishes illustration as imprisoned by process, trapping the practice within the drawn line [24] [25].

As illustrators we might do further justice to our practice by not just celebrating the production of a poster, but actually claiming a central role in the lineage of French radical thinking. As illustrators it may also serve our interests to inhabit the processes of practitioners from other fields.

If the essayists concerned with photography and gallery-based art in Searching for Sebold identified no problem with reframing a work of illustrated literature as their own, why then is it so rare that illustrators would lay claim to practice from other disciplines?

Fundamentally, it may seem a surface judgement, but perhaps it's important to note that illustrators might need to think past the sanctity of the drawn line. In this spirit, in the next part of the essay, we will take on a rhetorical and conceptual consideration of the practice of Adam Curtis; with the aim of drawing associations between his work, practices of illustration, the concept of Détournement and the ramifications of networked digital image.

5. Adam Curtis as Illustrator

Examples of Détoured image and narrative, utilised to engage, reinterpret and interrupt, are easily recognised and frequently cited within the work of film maker and journalist Adam Curtis [26]. Regarding the integration of archive video and repurposed still media into his website, Curtis outlines what illustrators might identify as an authorial approach to repurposed video and image.

> It's quite rich and fulfilling (to be) pulling stuff together, but you have to tell a story you then write very clearly in between [27]

Narrative is central to the way Curtis utilises archive and found imagery. Narrative is also key in preventing Détournement from taking on its most trivialized form; the stunt or the hoax [28] [29]. For the SI, Détournement from its conception was a radical practice of shifting borrowed elements and actions from 'present or past artistic productions', resulting in new frameworks to 'challenge and interrupt held social and cultural operations'- the building of new narratives in order to interrupt the 'spectacle' of consumer society [30].

Perhaps in Curtis's attempts to build new narratives, to interrupt simple narratives, his use of the degraded image and his use of the archive; we could also draw specific comparison to the poor image and the films of Hito Steyerl. This comparison, however, might not be well received by Curtis himself.

> A lot of the art lot, just think it's enough to put things next to each other without commenting. I think that's lazy. I think that you have to put things in a context and make sense of it and then it becomes like a rich novel with digressions. [27]

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Within this explanation of his working method is a critique of contemporary art practice. Interestingly, this critique is made in light of positive acknowledgement and promotion of his work from leading art institutions and publications[4]. In 2016 the contemporary art website Artspace positioned Curtis as someone who is 'known to flirt with the art world', noting that in 2012 the artist Hans Ulrich Obrist 'curated a retrospective of Curtis's films'. In the same article, when asked if he considered himself to be an artist, Curtis answered 'no, I'm a journalist who steals a lot from art' [31].

Conversely this perceived 'artiness' - this link with contemporary art - has also been used in critique of a 'burgeoning self-indulgence' in Curtis's more recent work. Specifically, critic and journalist Owen Hatherley and his criticisms of Curtis' 'wordless sound/image juxtapositions' that 'feel closer to contemporary "artists' film" than anything on television' [32].

In the face of such appraisals of his films and media, drawn up in comparison to practices of contemporary art, Curtis sees himself stealing from a contemporary art practice that he positions on equal terms to the techniques of tabloid journalism and popular music.

> I'm fundamentally a historian who nicks larky ideas and techniques from art, pop music, and all the other things around, and who just bolts them together with some quite basic and often quite boring historical research.

This is a strategically rhetorical positioning for a practitioner who envisions his work as belonging to the popular realm of cultural media. 'Agree or disagree with this, but have you thought of looking at the world this way as a result of this story? as Curtis positions himself [27]. Here, illustrators may appreciate a familiarity with such an approach; a practice of informing and opening up new dialogues built within the power of image.

As illustrators we may also recognise a dichotomy here, central to the challenge of 'illuminating subject matter in awareness of audience' [4]. Ever present in many aspects of popular art, often predominant to both brief lead and authorial illustration - the incentive to entertain in conflict with the need to inform.

Perhaps within Curtis's films there may be some acknowledgement, intentional or otherwise, of the limitations of aiming to both entertain and inform. Regarding Owen Hatherley's critique, often picked up in wider criticism [33]; a set of 'cliched' tropes that have become 'extremely familiar in the documentary filmmaker's work over the last twenty years' [32] (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Still from *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace.* A common trope in the films of Adam Curtis; 'this is a story'

In the failure to escape cliché, these tropes do nonetheless function successfully as identifiers of Curtis's authorship. Operating as evasive or distracting 'snares' [34], a built repertoire of knowing markers. Perhaps inherent in their cliché, these tropes work as playful signposts of the contradictions and limitations of a project that

4 Adam Curtis's work has been the focus of events at the Zabludowicz Collection and the Whitechapel Gallery as well as articles within publication frieze and e-flux.

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combines experimental filmmaking within the context of BBC broadcasting and web-publishing. This is an absurd context for such work, we might consider such cliché in close relationship to this absurdity.

Perhaps then, there is some truth (and possibly no shame) in Hatherley's suggestion that Curtis may be engaging with some level of 'self-parody'; at the very least a required self-awareness. We could very well accept this work as 'a contorted attempt to comment on the very medium - the internet - that has transformed his approach' [32]. However, unlike Hatherley, illustrators may see no problem in such a contortion.

Here this investigation would position practices of contemporary illustration that would also seek to comment or at least acknowledge the medium that has transformed their approach. Again, akin to Curtis's approach this is done in sub-text to any surface communication, with repeated visual tropes that operate on a similar level to his visual or narrative tropes.

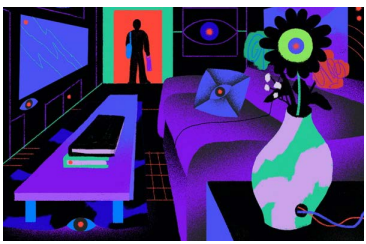

Fig. 4. Top to bottom: *Ariel Davis/The New York Times, Molly Fairhurst/ FORGE Art Magazine, Jack Sachs/ Tate Britain*

With illustration practice transformed by the decline in traditional publishing, illustrators such as Jack Sacks, Molly Fairhurst or Ariel Davis (Fig. 4) cannot help but allow the media and medium to engage and communicate through their work. These illustrators are letting the audience into the joke, the uncomfortableness between the analogue and digital. They expose the workings out – the disconnect between the hand drawn and the digital – as they expose wider limitations of digital image and network technology. Again, in commonality to the operations of the poor image and even perhaps Curtis's tropes, whether this is done intuitively or intentionally is beside the point.

Historically illustrators have always utilised the flawed nature of their illuminations to aid the success of their illustrations. 'What we respond to in any work of art is the artist's struggle against his or her limitations', stated Saul Steinburg in conversation with the novelist Kurt Vonnegut - Steinburg here elegantly positing the idea that limitations may be key to the consumption as well as the construction of artistic media [35].

Returning to Guy Debord, specifically to his filmic and textual work 'Society of the Spectacle', Debord identified a conceptual limitation to his ideas regarding the spectacle 'It is obvious that no idea can lead beyond the existing spectacle, but only beyond the existing ideas about the spectacle' [36].

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Thinking about this in reference to Adam Curtis's films, it is clear that Curtis's mission is not a revolutionary one, his work is created in awareness and appreciation of our current mass media 'spectacle'. He borrows from (and may have actually added to) techniques from film and advertising that sit neatly within Joseph Campbell's critique of a vulgar and impure art [18] [19].

The work of Adam Curtis, in commonality to practices and strategies associated with popular art and specifically illustration, can only add to Debord's concept of spectacle. Debord made allowances for this type of operation. Here he enthusiastically spells out how the functions of 'Détournement' might be turned against the original impetus of the idea;

> The critical concept of spectacle can undoubtedly also be vulgarized into a commonplace hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric to explain and abstractly denounce everything, and thus serve as a defense of the spectacular system

In light of this he goes on to say, 'It is obvious that no idea can lead beyond the existing spectacle, but only beyond the existing ideas about the spectacle'. To effectively destroy the spectacle, what is needed is 'men putting practical force into action' [36].

Debord here is bypassing any ethereal notions of the power of art to disseminate. Seemingly at a theoretical dead-end; we have a fantasy of masculine force placed into action in order to destroy.

Perhaps this is not the case. What is meant by action in this sense is not necessarily clear. If understood as active dissent from within the pacifying ever-pervasive structures of media, then relevant to our contemporary condition we might return to Nicholas Bourriaud regarding the importance of maintaining creative activity in the face of mass production.

> All its elements are usable. No public image should benefit from impunity, for whatever reason: a logo belongs to public space, since it exists in the streets and appears on the objects we use, a legal battle is underway that places artists at the forefront: no sign must remain inert, no image must remain untouchable. Art represents a counterpower [37]

Here Bourriaud in rather grandiose terms spells out a commonality between public space and a notion of image as a malleable legal battleground. As exemplified by the operations of networked images, internet memes as well as the potential for illustration in the built environment, images transgress the public and the private.

Rather than asserting the less desirable aspect of the legal battle, what is interesting in Bourriaud's statement - especially for the purposes of the illustrator - is the malleability of this process; the distance travelled

Perhaps tenuously, perhaps a mischaracterisation; as illustrators we would also want to draw association between this sense of malleability and Curtis's authorial use of the archive, his arrangements of image and text and his combinations of moving image and audio. Akin to the pre-Internet

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definition of memes, media as cultural exchange, in order to survive has to mutate. Whatever the perceived status of authorship, the distance and scope of such mutation is primarily in the hands of the audience.

6. Conclusion

Illustrators have always taken ownership of such mischaracterisations, practical mistakes and mutations in the production of their work. Academics and thinkers in the field have begun to explore this key aspect of the discipline; focusing on digital glitch [38] or more broadly, exploring illustrators embrace of the mistake [39].

Within such thinking it's important find pathways beyond definitions of practice that emphasise process as a gatekeeper for authentic illustration. As I have put forward in previous papers, to open up new conceptual possibilities for practice, illustrators will need to be prepared to make mischaracterisations and mistakes on a theoretical level as they already do on a practical basis. i.e. the 'happy accident' scenario [40] [41].

Finally, tangentially returning to Debord's strange statement regarding 'men putting practical force into action'. Taking this on face value as a fantasy of masculine destruction, then perhaps it can be seen that many progressive advancements and subsequent retreats within cultural practice are bookmarked by the denial or the assertion of the physical manifestation of identity. This is John Perry Barlow from his manifesto of the nascent internet 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' a text positioned at the centre of Adam Curtis's film 'Hypernormalisation' [42].

> We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity...Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge. [43]

Hopefully, in some less bombastic variety of this retrofuture didactic is where the contemporary illustrator might find intriguing new opportunities. This ambiguous space between the physical and metaphysical, the private and public, now forming such a crucial part of our social reality. What a strange and exciting world for new illustrators to explore, illuminate and interrupt. Nevertheless, whatever way our future frameworks and audiences operate - 'have you thought of looking at the world this way?' [27] should remain a pertinent question.

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