

Essay

The 'Cut-n-mix' Culture

The Impossibilities of Production in New Media

Zeigam Azizov

In this essay, artist and writer Zeigam Azizov explores notions of production, autonomy, coding and naturalisation in relation to the different uses of contemporary media. Azizov considers the use of new media and its role in the creation of a contribution economy that eschews typical modes of production, arguing that new media fosters new aesthetics through a process of cutting and mixing – a process which, as he points out, has its roots in editing techniques forged in early Russian 'Kino' cinema. With this essay, the writer articulates the need for the end user to adopt and co-opt the media, rather than be controlled by it.

Aga Ousseinov, In the Middle of Erewhon, installation detail, Venice Biennale, 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



The question of new media poses a need to search for new meaning. On the one hand, there is the ubiquitous use of media, which adopts principles of working life from the mainstream, and which is however insufficient for the articulation of the urgency of reported events. On the other hand, the cross-circulation of images in the media opens up possibilities for examining this question of urgency, while trying to understand them as 'the return of the repressed'.^[1] Images reporting on the 'Arab Spring', first circulated through various online sharing devices, brought this paradox out onto the world stage. This paradoxical dichotomy disturbs the consistency of the production of art, although most of the mainstream structures, such as museums and galleries, continue to impose their power. The non-linear evolution of images in new media is constantly demonstrating the possibility of disturbing this patriarchal consistency. As a result, the use of new media, especially sharing devices on the Internet, poses the possibility of a new form of production. More recently, the use of these devices became politicised by the critical voices that emerged in the Middle East and North Africa.

The question that arises here is an interesting one: how to cope with a situation in which the use of online sharing devices isn't categorised as 'work'? Neither is it strictly leisure, since there is no production or consumption taking place. The striking multiplication of new media devices leaves some to think of new media as uselessly prolific or producing 'otium', with its suggestions of leisure but also withdrawal from the world. The prolific nature of new media is also what constitutes impossibility as the condition of making. It can be described as the French-Tunisian philosopher and artist Mehdi Kacem puts it as '*the non-productive*' (*désœuvrement*).^[2] In this sense, the impossibility of production is connected to the internal censorship dominating the current artworld. The road towards breaking up this internal control is the possibility of exteriorising this impossibility. This act can produce a crisis and function as the 'critical and clinical'.^[3]

There is also the work of Bernard Stiegler, who seeks in these new developments the coming of the new economy: the economy of the contribution. In his view, while sharing their ideas through Facebook or YouTube, sharers are neither producing nor consuming: instead, they contribute to the economy by sharing, which could be called a 'contribution economy'.^[4] There are grounds for the legitimacy of this

[1] Sigmund Freud's idea, which he formulated in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900. He emphasised that trauma is usually repressed in early childhood, but returns at a later stage of life.

[2] Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *La psychose française - Les banlieues: le ban de la République*, Paris: Gallimard (2006), p.9-10.

[3] This is in reference to the Deleuzian concept of the critical, which should at the same time be clinical. See, Gilles Deleuze: *Essays Critical and Clinical*, London: Verso (1998)

[4] See also the theory of 'prosumers', as elaborated by George Ritzer and Nathan Jurgenson. For Bernard Stiegler's text see: Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, Cambridge: Polity (2010). Alongside Stiegler's work see also: Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*, New York: Penguin Press (2010), and Aram Sinnreich, *Mashed Up: Music, Technology, and the Rise of Configurable Culture*, (Science/Technol-

contribution, which could become a mode of production for the new economy. This legitimacy can be linked to the question of memory, which emerges from a necessity to go back to the beginning in order to connect the past with the present, rather than cutting off one's links to the past. This is different from the nostalgic mode of going back; instead it is about the possible connection with what has gone missing. Stiegler states that the future is about repetition and the emergence of the repressed;^[5] knowledge can only be projected in its future and by a return to a primal impulse. Virtualisation via programming can actively foster the contribution rather than production or consumption. I would call into question the necessity of this kind of economy, at least in relation to the current unequal distribution of knowledge in our world. This inequality still effectively harks back to a colonial past, which doesn't even show signs of disappearing. Ineed, quite the contrary; the current situation, to my view, can only be understood through the prisms of this history. Globalisation, described as an 'accumulation by dispossession' by David Harvey, received its first resistance from the sharing devices of new media.^[6] That is, new media constitutes the first attempt at resistance against the forces of globalisation.

Zeigam Azizov, A Soft Topology, installation detail, Baku Biennale, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.



The impossibility of producing or consuming takes place in both colonial societies and former colonies, yet this impossibility is articulated differently in each case. In colonial societies, non-productivity opens up the debate, the discourse, often at the expense of former colonies; whereas in the former colonies, this non-productivity becomes the normal way of existence. In the situation of 'accumulation by dispossession', the power adopts aesthetics and,

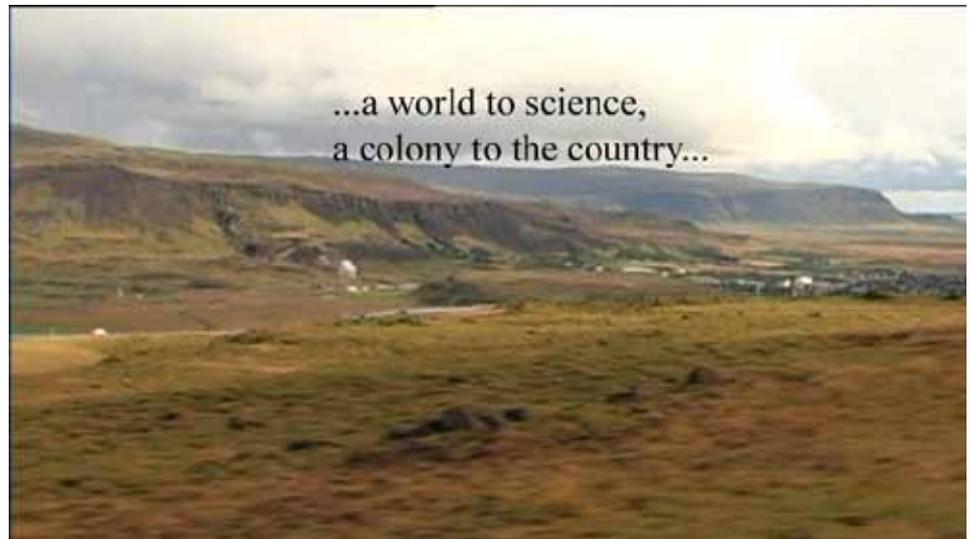
ogy/Culture series), Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (2010).

[5] Stiegler, Bernard, *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, Stanford: Stanford University Press (2011), p.20

[6] Harvey, David, *The new imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2003).

to quote Walter Benjamin, 'the politicisation of aesthetics' brings both danger and risk at the same time. In this paradoxical situation, the role of an artist is to move towards the impossible and to use new media to create new aesthetics. There are a number of questions that are challenged by the use of new media and one can perhaps understand the use of new media as an attempt to find answers to questions created by the consistent challenge to the traditional understanding of space, time and memory.

Zeigam Azizov, A
World to the Science,
installation detail, Global
tour exhibition, W139,
Amsterdam, 2006.
Courtesy of the artist.



There is a radical shift in this sense made by the 'cutting and mixing' capacity of new media, which collapses past, present and future into an intense a-temporal perspective that runs counter to traditional and more clearly defined distinctions of past, present and future. This turns memory into virtual co-existence, which is directed to the future and falls back to the past at the same time. This version of time (as formulated by Gilles Deleuze) is convincing in relation to new media, and this particular aspect is also interesting because of its challenge to the notion of territory. The experiments made by the Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov in the early twentieth century are crucial in relation to these questions. Kuleshov created the method of montage known as the 'creative geography'.^[7] In his 1920 film *The White House in Washington*, Kuleshov filmed passersby on Moscow streets, in reality miles apart from one another, but who in the film 'look at each other' and the White House in Washington.^[8] These multiple segments shot at various locations and/or times are edited together such that they appear to all occur in a continuous place at a continuous time. Kuleshov first removed figures and then buildings and separated them, creating a topological confusion for his contemporaries.

In 1921, he filmed probably his most famous experiment, which involved taking a close-up of the actor Ivan Mozhukin and intercutting these shots with those of a bowl of soup, a coffin and a child: these were 'projected to an audience which marvelled at the

[7] Kuleshov, Lev, *Kuleshov on film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, translated and edited and with an introduction by Ronald Levaco, Berkeley: University of California Press (1974), pp.41-125.

[8] Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art, An introduction*, New York: McGraw-Hill Education (2001).

sensitivity of the acting'.^[9] This editing technique has become known as the 'Kuleshov effect', which Stiegler identifies with the industrial temporal object.^[10] This is a technique in which the meaning in a series of shots arises from the actual juxtaposition rather than from the shots themselves. The phrase is often applied to all sorts of examples of editing. Kuleshov's approach to editing emphasised a dynamic discontinuous relationship between shots and the juxtaposition of images to create ideas not present in any one by itself. It is by creating the object (space) from the subject (time), by separating the space of Washington from the passersby in Moscow, that Kuleshov created the image out of existing city fragments. These fragments are signs of two cities known to people historically. Kuleshov didn't simply edit together these two shots; he also edited together two signs, Gogol's monument in Moscow and the White House in Washington. The sign replaced the object for the subject. Kuleshov's goal was to change the object for the subject and to edit the work in such a way that the collapse of the subject with the object led to another meaning, and created the *negotiated* image. The 'Kuleshov effect' is formulated by the director himself as 'the creative geography', which is made of images or cultural codes that can be defined according to a given time only. Kuleshov's work was already a great challenge to the growing 'patriarchalism' of nation states at the time, a challenge that post-colonial theory experiences in our time. With the proliferation of images in new media now, the 'cut-n-mix' culture receives a new meaning. Stiegler identifies this meaningful process as 'the Kuleshov effect'.^[11]

Zeigam Azizov, Hard Spell, installation detail, Kunstraum Lakeside, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.



There is a need to try to discover the 'right' methods of working with the proliferation of images in new media. There are three elements of the proliferation of images, which creates a crisis: the non-direct image of time; the immaterial nature of the media, and a new topology of non-places. It gives rise to a constant shift in

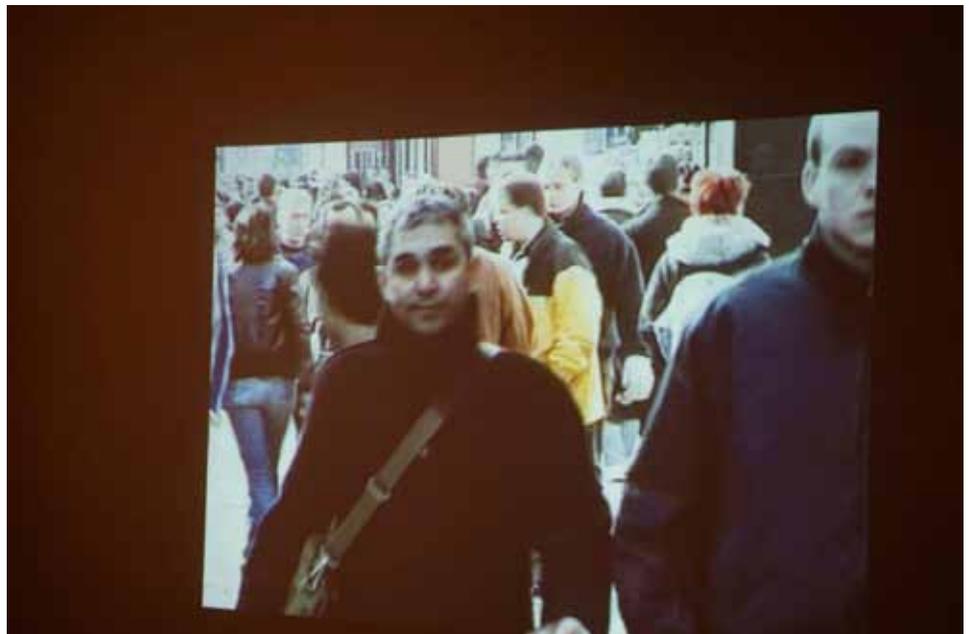
[9] Kuleshov, Lev, *ibid.*

[10] Stiegler, Bernard, *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*, *ibid.*, p.20.

[11] *Ibid.*

the role of art and the artist, which necessarily changes alongside the rapid changes in the political and aesthetic spheres. It makes the task of intervening with images more difficult. This difficulty is expressed in Jean Luc Godard's 1976 film *Here and Elsewhere (Ici et ailleurs)*, in which its protagonists are shown passing in front of the camera while holding in their hands images of their choice. The camera is still, and instead of the movement of cameras we see people moving in front of the them. In Serge Daney's words, 'no longer does the camera record things but people come bearing their images like a cross before an indifferent video camera, set up on the tripod, and it brings them into line, links one to the next'.^[12] On the one hand, it shows the potential of filmmaking as similar to creating a long sentence, or to use Jacques Rancière's phrase, the 'sentence-image'; on the other hand, it shows the difficulty of working with images from a critical point of view.^[13] Filmed in Palestine in an attempt to rally support for refugees, Godard admits to not being able to find an organising principle and instead asks: 'Why can't I find the right montage for these images?'^[14] Yet, while creating the sentence-image, while using still images or freeze frames, which his protagonists actually brought to the film set, tells us more about cinema's return to its reference point, photography. Godard also understood that the saturation of images created a vicious circle that endlessly takes us back to beginnings. This vicious circle is a crucial aspect of working with images, and marks the shift from producing to programming.^[15]

Zeigam Azizov,
installation detail,
Migrasophia, Maraya Art
Centre, 2012. Courtesy
of the artist.



[12] Daney, Serge, 'From Movies to Moving', *Art and the Moving image: A critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton and Charles Esche, London: Tate in association with Afterall (2008), p.335.

[13] Rancière, Jacques, *The future of the image*, London: Verso (2007).

[14] Jean Luc Godard quoted in Serge Daney's 'From Movies to Moving', in *Art and the Moving image*, *ibid*, p.336.

[15] The triumph of programming over production is marked by the use of images creating a new narrative based on the database, which Lev Manovich calls a genre of new media. See: Lev Manovich, 'Database and the genre of new media', *AI & Society*, 14:2 (May 2000), pp.176- 83.

In programming the subject, object and perception do not produce images but are contained in the flux of images. The flux of images finds its trajectory in web streaming, making this process visually more approachable. What becomes important are not images but thinking with and of images. The flux of images becomes programmed in memory. In this way, the retention of memory is not simply recorded in objects, but is streamed in real time. However, the distance between the lived time and real time is still there. The difference is that the streaming makes this distance real, meaning that memory constitutes the distance in time, which is programmed in the stream of images. This distance can be deconstructed as thinking being an existing cinema. I would like to paraphrase Jacques Derrida here ('the language is already writing') and say that the programming is already cinema, which needs to be edited.^[16]

Paula Roush Teresa
Paiva & Maria Lusitano,
Tested, 2012. Courtesy
of the artist.



These new challenges define new media's impossibility as an artwork. Yet this impossibility marks the return to the question of memory being repressed. Mehdi Kacem's use of the term as *désœuvrement* (non-productivity) refers to the very possibility of new media addressing this 'return of the repressed'. The impossibility of producing makes possible the return of missing time, reproducing what is missing and in this way contributing to history by filling gaps and cuts and creating the 'dialectical image', which consists of quotations. Instead of the nihilism of non-recognition of possibility, there should be the recognition of events similar to ones that have already taken place. It may even be based on the very banal repetition of previous events that takes courage to face the new banality and make an escape from nihilism. The Tunisian revolution in 2010 demonstrated the return to this form of struggle as the productive one, since new media opened up the possibility for this attempt precisely by its ambivalence and openness.

For Kacem, post-colonial struggles and the Tunisian revolution indicate a breaking point in the global emergence of nihilism. The breaking down of the barrier of censorship is an event from which

[16] The notion defined in Jacques Derrida's work as the technical memory (writing) is the destroyed memory of Plato.

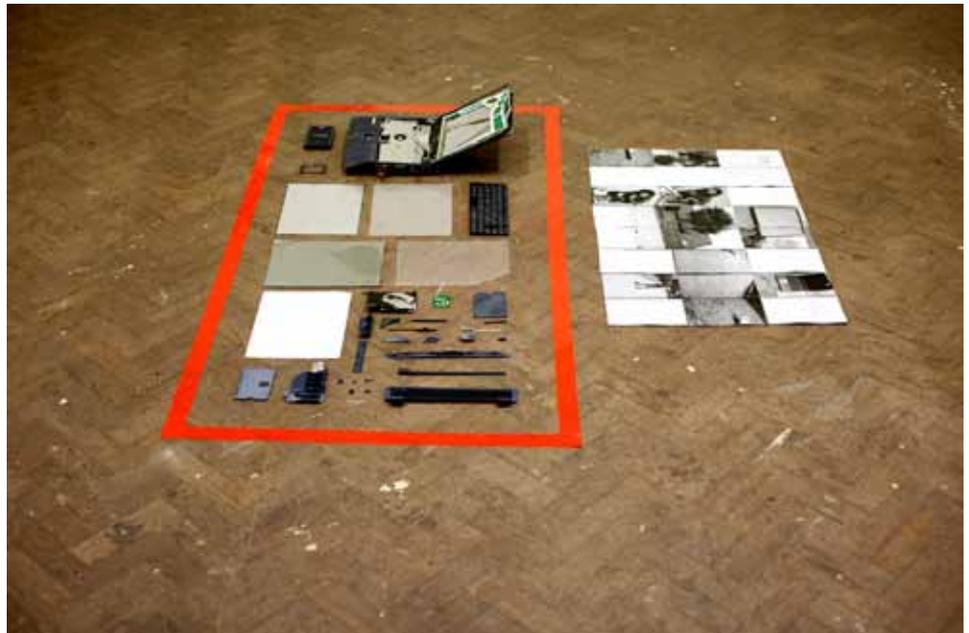
emerges a completely new relationship in the human need for freedom. Kacem reflects on the striking events that took place in Tunisia in 2010:

Overnight, life changed for millions of people, for me included. Concomitantly, in their interiority, the lives of hundreds of millions of people in the Arab world changed: it is possible for an Arab person to be free. If that isn't an event, I really don't see what else one needs.^[17]

By calling these events a 'Tunisian Renaissance', Kacem underlines the importance of not being afraid anymore:

I understood, I'll say it again, that something very important was happening when people, everyone, started saying, 'We're not afraid anymore'. That came out of nowhere, so to speak. That's why it was a real event: the people had no support for weeks and weeks, during which everyone consciously, 'Hegelianly', risked their lives.^[18]

Paula Roush Teresa
Paiva & Maria Lusitano,
Tested, 2012. Courtesy
of the artist.



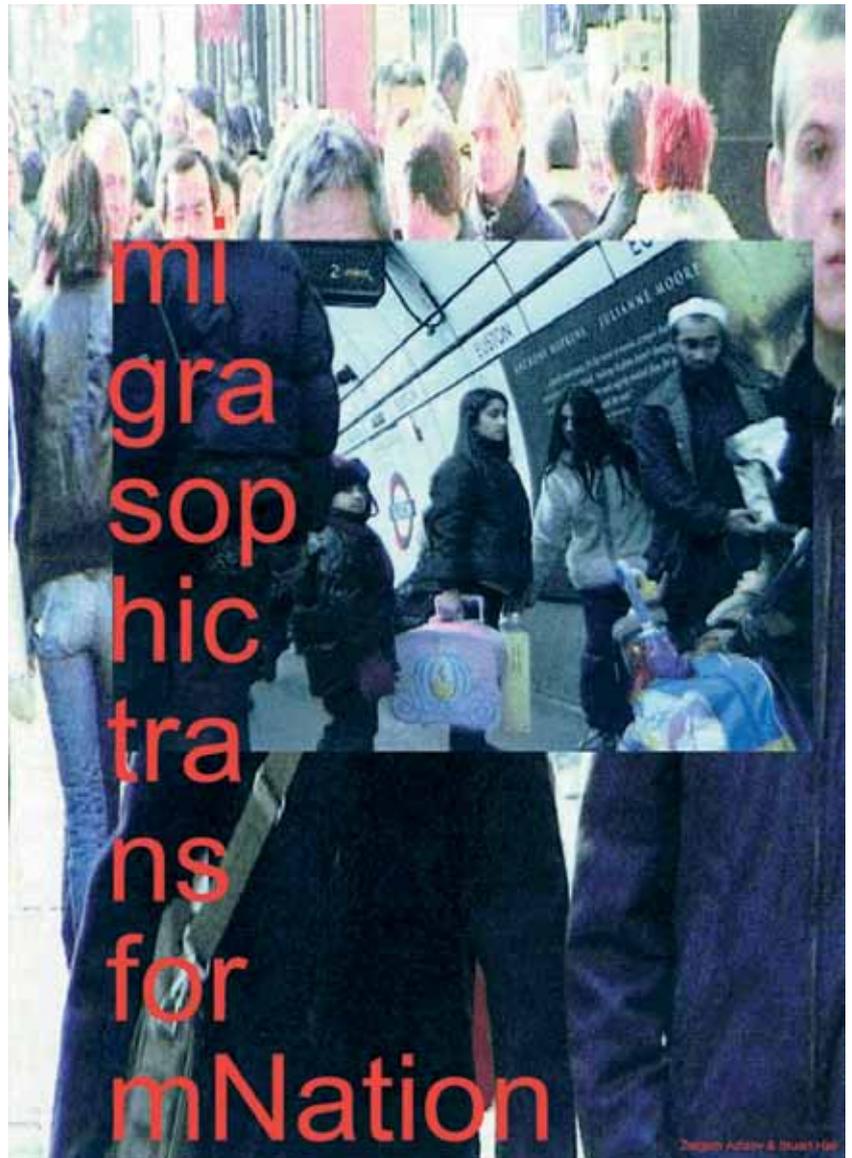
It is crucial here to mention the intensity that is brought to this experience by the use of creative means. This intensity, created by an involvement with new media, is associated with the reading of codes that are circulated within this media. These codes are historically created and endlessly shared by different subjects throughout history. Today, these codes are disseminated in the virtual space of new media. It is also true that all software in new media programmes and sharing devices are set up for simple interaction. However, programming doesn't determine the activity that can take place. It depends on the decision of the user to 'naturalise' this system for his/her needs. This kind of decision-making, which gave rise to the 'Arab Spring', is already a political gesture, a step towards political recognition.

[17] A Tunisian Renaissance, interview with Mehdi Beljah Kacem conducted by Alexander R. Galloway: http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=1046.

[18] Ibid.

It is worth mentioning that the use of new media stretches as far back as the 1960s. The problem that still remains is how to use this media. In western art discourse and more recently in the art market, new media has been utilised for its legitimacy of 'newness', the media part often misused. The idea should consist of the 'naturalisation' of new media. To paraphrase Stuart Hall, encoding and decoding the media for artistic use is a way of naturalising media.^[19] This would entail becoming engaged not only in a new form of art, but also in new genres, new narratives. Before everything there is a need to shift the existing discourse today that is still dominated by nihilism and the western avant-garde. The legacy of conceptual art is in fact reflected in the paradox of looking at the west, while talking of the east. Perhaps it is a good idea to think of their mixture as 'once more with feeling'.

Zeigam Azizov and
Stuart Hall, Utopia
Station, Venice
Biennale, 2003.
Courtesy of the artist.



[19] Stuart Hall spoke of the naturalisation of TV programmes in his essay Encoding, decoding already in the early 1970s. The point here is that TV programmes cannot completely dominate viewers' minds, since there is a response of the viewer, which consists critique and opinion. It also involves the active interpretation of codes, which are used in the media as they are used elsewhere in culture. The active interpretation of codes helps to naturalise the effects of media. See: Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/decoding', Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79, London: Hutchinson (1980), pp. 128-38

The naturalisation of new media should be connected to the cross-circulation of ideas, rather than forms or discourses.^[20] When modernists rejected older forms for new ones, they rejected their function while developing ideas from older media. Naturalisation means to develop ideas that are taken from the older context for a new context.^[21] It is in this sense possible to say that new media is an instrument for the problematisation of new subjectivities through their narratives. An idea, different from the form, is contagious, expands itself from the older form to the newer, and is always present virtually. The virtual is never restricted to any form; it is in constant transformation. Instead of the 'cut-and-paste', there is a need to 'cut-and-mix', and to naturalise the media for an individual use of the collective memory, before the media naturalises individuals.

The most influential ideas from the past century managed to create the legitimacy of the fact of subjects being able to encode and decode themselves through cultural models. These cultural models are made out of relations of production that operate without the solace of closure. Our knowledge exists in order to discover its existence by the articulation of meaning. Codes of meaning are temporary, contingent and open-ended. This makes them possible for their articulation. To quote Stuart Hall, 'we are all fantastically codable encoding agents', able to articulate what is missing from our experience.^[22] There is a need to learn skills for finding the fragments of missing time and to decipher their assembly by carefully mixing and by making surgical cuts into them. The hope for the future is embedded in this kind of naturalisation of new media.

[20] I would like to stress the importance of forms and discourses equally, but they should also be understood in terms of cross-circulation.

[21] Naturalisation of established codes is possible because new media is not completely determined in traditional terms and this indeterminacy creates the opportunity for re-establishing and naturalisation.

[22] Stuart Hall interviewed by Lawrence Grossberg in Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in Cultural Studies, eds. David Morley and Kuan-hsing Chen, New York: Routledge (1996), p.137.