

No Future:
The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Adam Curtis

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The contemporary Western political imagination feels paralyzingly uncertain. The masses of the West were told of revolutionary change by technocratic institutions but the promises of radical change have given way to a system of power structures that seems rigid and uncompromising. An apparent consensus has been built around the universal functionality of global capitalism, liberal democracy and digital escapism, but this order is clearly in a state of crisis. The very narratives that sustain this status quo, those of austerity, technocracy and global finance, are losing credibility with the masses. Throughout the West populism, reactionary politics and a general atmosphere of intense cynicism consumes the political sphere. Our online social media platforms are ablaze with vitriol and divisiveness, as the streets are filled with waves of protest across the industrial world. Yet the apparent lack of meaningful political change has led Western society into a deep sense of uncertainty over the shape of the future.

In the United States of America, Trump has taken the spectacle of political theatre to a new level of artifice and unreality. In the United Kingdom, a nationwide refugee crisis has created a seemingly insurmountable political crisis, where the economic implications of “Brexit” has the nation paralyzed. In France, Parisian streets are flooded with protestors of all ideological stripes, with disparate groups of radicals united in their distaste for the current government. Extortionate gas prices incited a much broader movement that reflected a distaste with France’s status quo. Even in countries where there isn’t as much overt chaos like Germany, Austria and Italy, substantial gains made by far-right parties in light of the current refugee crisis have baffled and frightened political analysts and concerned citizens. What political theorists, historians and economists alike saw in the waning days of the Cold War, the vision of a united world system controlled by technocratic systems, has been realized but its sustainability has taken heavy blows.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union provided no greater clarity to the economic and social struggles and contradictions that burdened the modern West. Instead, the lack of a clear ideological foil to Western capitalist society has only served to highlight the fault lines within their own economic system, resulting in a wave of disillusionment felt across the Western world. This alienation is exacerbated by an increasing sense of uncertainty over the future. It's an anxiety consuming the entire cross section of our Western societies. It's reflected in the corporate culture, in the actions of our political institutions and even in the movements designed to oppose these power structures.

In this atmosphere of cynicism and uncertainty, Adam Curtis (born in Dartford, United Kingdom, 1955) emerged as one of this generation's preeminent political filmmakers. Starting in 1983 with a series of slice of life documentaries for the BBC, such as both the *Just Another Day* series, Curtis examines the widely accepted truisms of the existing logic dictating technocratic late capitalist society. Then, by unearthing the eerie truths underpinning the status quo, he asks key questions about why we have struggled to challenge our dominant social and economic institutions. He examines significant social and cultural trends such as consumerism, technocracy, psychology, concepts of freedom, power, neo-conservatism, neoliberalism and the so-called "war on terror." Most importantly, his films center on the residual sense of unreality and alienation pervading our political condition. For years Curtis has served the BBC as the broadcasting corporation's head archivist, meticulously expanding a massive library of vintage, archival footage. Through his use of this public corporation's expansive archives, he has been able to compose an alternative history where the great sociological experiments of the 21st century are seen as the work of mad scientists, whose experiments have drastic and unintended consequences. He borrows techniques from a varied array of influences ranging from the

pioneering work in montage by the first luminaries of Mosfilm such as Dziga Vertov (1896-1954) and Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), to the heavily stylized aesthetics of modern-day conspiracy theory documentaries along the lines of the *Zeitgeist* films or *Loose Change*. Philosophically his work is indebted to the early sociologists like Germany's Max Weber (1864-1920), who was amongst the earliest critics and analysts of the growing influence of bureaucracy on the structure of modern Western society.

What results are films that can feel as fragmented as the flow of information we are inundated with in our day-to-day lives. Yet Curtis is not a lonely voice in his criticism of late capitalist society. Amongst the post-Cold War left arose a crop of political theorists vaguely referred to as "post-left," due to their lack of interest in Soviet party lines. Yet these "post-left" thinkers were very much invested in pointed critiques of alienation in late capitalist society. In 1990, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, most turned to levying their analyses on the global hegemony of consumerist capitalism in the digital age. Social critics such as Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), Mark Fischer (1968-2017), Ulrich Beck (1944-2015), Giles Deleuze (1925-1995), Frederic Jameson (b. 1934) each have insightfully written about the failures of technocracy, the manipulation of mass media, and our growing collective sense of unreality within the post-modern world.

The aim of this essay is twofold: first it is to act as an exposition of the style and content of Adam Curtis's films, starting with his breakthrough series *Pandora's Box* (1992) and finishing with his latest, widely acclaimed documentary *HyperNormalisation* (2016). It will also frame these films in the context of a broader movement within academia to confront the failings of technocracy and the underlying fragility of late-capitalist societies. Above all, this essay seeks to define what Curtis means when he says it is impossible for our institutions to conceive of a

viable alternative to the present, and thus can't imagine the future, both within *HyperNormalisation* itself and his various interviews.

Before entering the bulk of the essay, it is important to define some terms for clarity. One is the heady concept of “hauntology,” introduced by Mark Fischer in his book *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Fischer explains the concept through the term's inventor, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. He notes that hauntology

was the successor to previous concepts of Derrida's such as the trace and difference; like those earlier terms, it referred to the way in which nothing enjoys a purely positive existence. Everything that exists is possible only on the basis of a whole series of absences, which precede and surround it, allowing it to possess such consistency and intelligibility that it does.¹

Derrida's theories primarily applied to language, wherein he claims that “any particular linguistic term gains its meaning not from its own positive qualities but from its difference from other terms.”

Fischer applies this theory not just to language but to culture as well, fixating on hauntological art and artists as reflective of an absence of a tendency that he identifies as “Popular Modernism.” It is this fixation with cultural breakdown as reflective of late capitalism that connects Fischer's conception of hauntology to Curtis. It is through “hauntology” that we also understand Fischer's conception of “Lost Futures.” These “Lost Futures,” projected through our futurist thinking culture and disseminated in our culture through mass media, constitute a form of “haunting” in Fischer's view. But as to what is “haunting” us, Fischer notes

What should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of the futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never

¹ Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester (UK) ; Washington (USA): Zero books. pp 26

materialised. These spectres --the spectres of lost futures -- reproach the formal nostalgia of the capitalist realist world.²

In this, the link between the cultural pessimism surrounding the future alluded to by Curtis in *HyperNormalisation* and Fischer's notion of "hauntology" and "lost futures" converge. The credibility and image of Western societies has been severely compromised in recent memory, despite emerging in the 20th century as the victors over the collectivist forces of communism. Yet the future is viewed with an even muddier sense of uncertainty than during the Cold War. Instead, both Curtis and Fischer note that in the place of this absence, escapism through the seemingly limitless nostalgia provided by the digital age has consumed these societies.

The setting in which this absence occurs is also important to define. "Late Capitalism" is an umbrella term, used variously for different points in capitalist societies. For the purposes of this essay, the relevant definition is the one used by American sociologist and political theorist Fredric Jameson. He states that the "precondition" for late capitalism is

to be found in the enormous social and psychological transformations of the 1960s, which swept so much of tradition away on the level of mentalites. Thus, the economic preparation of Postmodernism or late capitalism began in the 1950s, after the wartime shortages of consumer goods and spare parts had been made up, and new products and new technologies (not least those of the media) could be pioneered. On the other hand, the psychic habitus of the new age demands the absolute break, strengthened by a generational rupture, achieved more properly in the 1960s.³

In this we can explain the qualifier "late" in the term "late capitalism." The qualifier refers to the cultural shifts enabled by the post-war economic boom for Western countries. To Jameson, these

² Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester (UK) ; Washington (USA): Zero books. pp 92

³ Jameson, Fredric. 2012. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. New Delhi: Rawat. pp 11

shifts fundamentally changed these industrialized societies on a socio-economic level. Jameson elaborates

What "late" generally conveys is rather the sense that something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thoroughgoing and all-pervasive.⁴

It is through this “all-pervasive” atmosphere where the underlying alienation of a completely hegemonic capitalist economic system where the underlying alienation often referenced by Curtis in films such as *Century of the Self* (2000) and *The Trap* (2007) surface. “Late capitalism” does not refer to a state or period in which capitalism is in decline. Quite the contrary, capitalism is from all objective measurements stronger than ever. Instead, as viewed through the lens of Jameson, “Late Capitalism” represents the economic system reaching the limits of its imagination, and thus capitalism’s ability to adapt and progress in the face of crisis has atrophied. For Curtis, these limits apply to the ability to meaningfully project a vision of the future that “people can believe in,” as he repeats throughout *HyperNormalisation*.

Curtis, in addition to being a highly selective and evocative image selector, is also an editorialist aesthetically. His films are rife with visual juxtapositions to hammer home points about ideological motivations, contradictions within systems he is criticizing at times using small dashes of dark humor. In his recent films these moments stand out more starkly, even if it has been a trademark element of his style since at least *Pandora’s Box* (1992). One example comes early in Curtis’s Afghanistan documentary, *Bitter Lake* (2015). In one scene, a high-ranking Taliban leader is being interviewed by British media. The scene is quiet and intense, the man’s

⁴ Jameson, Fredric. 2012. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. New Delhi: Rawat. pp 12

face is completely obscured as ominous questions about “how soon the violence will end?” are met with silence. The scene is framed in a close-up shot, but the man’s eyes are obscured. It is a scene that underlines the degree of otherness with which the media frames terrorists, but also how eager the terrorists themselves are to embrace their images. Then, the interviewee’s phone rings. He stumbles while attempting to answer it. The interruption completely disrupts the flow of the interview, and undercuts the previously established visual atmosphere. The scene stands out as an incredibly dissonant moment in the film, but one with great purpose. The quiet intensity and morbid subject matter are contrasted against those of surreality and levity. Moments like this serve to underline the absurdity of the images being portrayed. The purpose of creating such an intense scene, only to directly undercut it with deadpan humor, is to create a sense of the unreal. What we see on screen is real-life documentary footage, but the oddities within the frame, or in how the scene progresses, serves to heighten the disconnection between what the audience perceives about a subject, and what Curtis has decided to display. This disconnection is crucial to understanding Curtis’s approach to both filmmaking and history, and why Curtis’s filmmaking style so strongly communicates his worldview. Writing for The New Yorker, film critic Brandon Harris said that Curtis

posit that the official history of the twentieth century—told to us by statesmen and newsreaders, amplified by the mainstream media in all its technologically enhanced forms—is the work of “managers of perception.”⁵

Curtis’s fixation with these “managers” has manifested itself in a filmmaking style in which he himself has become a master manager of perception. But whereas the technocratic managers and functionaries Curtis so often criticizes work toward creating a seamless, artificial reality, Curtis

⁵ Harris, Brandon, and Dorothy Wickenden. “Adam Curtis’s Essential Counterhistories.” *The New Yorker*, www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/adam-curtiss-essential-counterhistories.

instead directly highlights the events (through his historical research) and the images (through his skill as a film editor) which undo such carefully orchestrated perception management.

The end of the Cold War looms large over the work of Curtis. In many of his films [*Century of the Self* (2000), *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), *The Trap* (2007), *Bitter Lake* (2015), *HyperNormalisation* (2016)], the resolution of the Cold War is hailed as the ultimate affirmation of Western liberal society. The ideological opponent whom the West had defined themselves against since the Soviet Union's inception had been vanquished. Karl Marx's concept of "dialectical materialism," wherein the contradictions within capitalist societies would precipitate their downfall, seemed like a distant memory. Russian journalist Artyom Borovik (1960-2000) noted that despite the Soviet war in Afghanistan's original intention to modernize Afghan society, instead Afghan society had exposed the Soviets to "bribery, corruption, profiteering and drugs were no less common than the long lines in Soviet stores."⁶ Curtis references Borovik in his film *Bitter Lake* to depict the decay of late Soviet society, one where the larger ideological mission of liberation that Soviet Communism promised to the world had lost all meaning. With the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s came the assumption that the overriding ideology of Western society was the final stage of history. When Francis Fukayama (b. 1952) coined the term "The End of History," the power of the free market had gripped the entire world. He articulated what this market force would represent for the course of human history

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such ... That is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.⁷

⁶ Borovik, Artyom. 2008. *The Hidden War: a Russian Journalists Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. New York: Grove Press. pp 13

⁷ Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. London: Penguin, pp 1.

The former communist foe--Russia, China and Vietnam--were now all embracing the market.

These changes made it seem that this “post-ideological” world was approaching reality.

Fukayama’s idealism was a zeitgeist felt throughout the broader culture of the West, but not in a purely triumphant context. In his book *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fischer cites a quote attributed alternately to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Zizek (b. 1949), “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.” In this chilling citation, Fischer crystallizes his concept of “Capitalist Realism” as “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”⁸

Fischer’s remarks parallel similar ones made by Curtis at the beginning of *HyperNormalisation* (“No one has a vision of a different or better kind of future.”) If previous forms of economic production do not fade away, new economic solutions cannot come forth. The numerous institutions that uphold the macroeconomic system have become rigid and ineffective in the face of preexisting contradictions creating new problems. Curtis uses numerous examples to underline this point; from the subprime mortgage debacle of the 2008 financial crisis to America’s numerous failed efforts at democratic nation-building in the Middle East throughout the 2000s.

To further highlight the institutional dysfunction, Curtis draws narrative parallels between these assorted failings. In this we discover that both Curtis and Fisher are obsessed with the idea of new historical narratives. In the opening pages of *Capitalist Realism* Fischer notes

⁸ Fisher, Mark. 2010. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative ?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books. pp 6

that “dystopian films and novels were exercises in such acts of imagination - the disasters they depicted acting as narrative pretext for the emergence of different ways of living.”⁹

He makes a distinction between these dystopian contexts of the past like director Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* (1982) with current dystopian works like Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2007) where

[t]he world that [the film] projects seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it. In its world, as in ours, ultra-authoritarianism and Capital are by no means incompatible: internment camps and franchise coffee bars co-exist.¹⁰

In comparison to the alien and far flung science fiction worlds of *Blade Runner*, *Children of Men* depicts a vastly more mundane yet no less frightening scenario. Fisher’s analysis *Children of Men* is merely taking the dissonance between the comforting sheen of contemporary capitalist societies and directly juxtaposing it with the mundane, day-to-day violence used to uphold it. In *Bitter Lake*, his film about the modern history of Afghanistan, Curtis draws parallels between the Soviet Union and American occupations of the country. The attempt to establish first a communist paradise and then a liberal capitalist democracy are portrayed as damaging to the very countries performing the occupation on a deep ideological level. The dysfunction that arose in Afghan society as the two superpowers consecutively attempted to modernize it in the mold of their own nations hit a wall against the mountains of Afghani corruption, war crimes and an alien conservative culture resistant to such blunt force attempts at progress. The contrast between benevolent nation-building (including the introduction of modern medicine, women’s rights, modernizing capital city of Kabul over four decades) and the horrifying quagmire that comprised

⁹ Fisher, Mark. 2010. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative ?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books. pp 6

¹⁰ Fisher, Mark. 2010. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative ?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books. pp 6

the bulk of both wars is precisely the dystopian space that Fischer says pervades the modern Western imagination. Returning to the *Children of Men* analogy, Fischer notes in Capitalist Realism that “[t]here is no withering away of the state in *Children of Men*, only a stripping back of the state to its core military and police functions.”¹¹

In the United States’ modern wars of occupation in the Middle East, our attempts to replicate our own society overseas, much like the Soviet’s, has only replicated a shell government whose institutional power manifests only in fatal brute force. Most importantly, in Curtis’s view, the failures of the occupations highlighted severe dysfunction within the nations of the occupiers. He draws a parallel to Afghanistan and the living planet in the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky’s (1932-1986) science fiction film *Solaris* (1972). In this film, Soviet scientists explore a planet that subtly undermines their sense of reality. Curtis uses the film as an allegory for the effect that Afghanistan had on the civic fabric of the imperialist societies that invaded it. In the case of the Soviets, their heavy-handed authoritarianism, decrepit bureaucracy and revisionist approach to news bled over into their puppet state in Afghanistan. The seemingly endless series of bloody coups occurred within the Afghan state’s leadership also reflected the inner political turmoil within Russia itself, hastening the USSR’s collapse. In the case of the U.S. and Great Britain, the rampant corruption of their installed Afghan government reflected both the shadiness of these two Western nations’ financial sectors in addition to the unstable and self-defeating alliance the Western powers maintained with Saudi Arabia.

For the Western powers in particular, Curtis notes how the alliance with the Wahhabists of Saudi Arabia are intertwined with the financial institutions that uphold the West’s prosperity.

¹¹ Fisher, Mark. 2010. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative ?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books. pp 6

These institutions are often criticized by Fischer, who believes Western technocrats have a complete inability to come up with a viable alternative. The lucrative investments of Saudi oil money in Western markets made this alliance of mutual benefit, even if it directly contradicted the pro-democracy ideology of Western democracy. For those within Western societies, the results were cheaper products and an economic upward mobility. But beyond the borders of Western societies, the violence used to uphold these economic systems is not easy to ignore. We see now in the bloody proxy wars that continue to smatter the Middle East, a byproduct of the alliance between the United States and its Gulf State allies, to understand the consequences of these contradictions. The dystopic dissonance alluded to by Fischer, where “coffee shops sit alongside internment camps,”¹² is not literal but rather an impression left by the bleak material realities of late capitalist society.

At the end of the Cold War, Fukayamaist technocrats promised a market-driven utopia that would render human conflict obsolete. The reality was that the very economic systems promising universal liberation were instead the source of much of the most terrifying conflicts of the day. Resource wars in Africa and sectarian civil wars throughout the Middle East bankrolled clandestinely by richer nations, became seemingly endless wars of occupation waged by the U.S. In the face of this naked barbarism, the technocrats had no answers other than misdirection. Curtis describes contemporary capitalism in terms of incarceration in interviews, concluding that “[t]he downfall of capitalism is that it’s become appropriated by rational technocratic disenchantment. It’s become an iron cage.”¹³ There isn’t a future where the United States

¹² Fisher, Mark. 2010. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative ?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books. pp 6

¹³ “Adam Curtis on the Dangers of Self-Expression.” 2020. – *The Creative Independent*. Accessed April 19. <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/adam-curtis-on-the-dangers-of-self-expression/>.

upholds the nation's democratic values by abandoning its alliance with Saudi Arabia. There isn't one where the United States uncouples itself from its disastrous foreign policy obligations. It is in this that the relevance of Fischer's analysis of *Children of Men* as a contemporary dystopia crystallizes. On whether *Children of Men* is predictive of the future Fischer writes

The catastrophe in *Children of Men* is neither waiting down the road, nor has it already happened. Rather, it is being lived through. There is no punctual moment of disaster; the world doesn't end with a bang, it winks out, unravels, gradually falls apart.¹⁴

It is precisely this post-Cold War illusion of benevolent liberal capitalism that has unraveled before the eyes of the masses, yet these revelations do not hasten the system's collapse. The "War on Terror" has generated protests with participants numbering in the millions, yet the American invasion of Iraq proceeded, with Gallup polls in 2003 showing that 79% of the American public thought the war was justified.¹⁵ In this dystopian reality, the only response in both Curtis and Fischer's estimations is a form of apathy manifesting in individual and politically impotent escapism.

This defanging of meaningful political activism is another theme in Adam Curtis's work, as well as a defining aspect of post-left cultural analysis. This is especially true of Curtis's later films such as *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011), *Bitter Lake* (2015) and *HyperNormalisation* (2016). In these films, an ultra-individualistic approach to politics that rose out of the end of the Cold War is shown to have facilitated an atmosphere of collective political paralysis that benefitted the elites, represented by powerful financial institutions and government

¹⁴ Fisher, Mark. 2010. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative ?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books. pp 6

¹⁵ *USA Today*. Gannett Satellite Information Network. Accessed April 19,2020. <https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/polls/tables/live/01132003.htm>.

technocrats, atop the status quo. But perhaps the most prescient analysis of political apathy stems from one of his earlier and most acclaimed works, *Century of the Self* (2000). The film functions as both a personal history of the Freud family through two generations, but it also reveals how their pioneering works on psychoanalysis were directly influential on the institutions of modern capitalist society. Corporations, the security state and politicians alike turned to psychoanalysis as a means of maintaining their control in periods of political unrest during the 20th century. It is through this narrative that Curtis explains his own perspective on power.

One of the main focuses of this film is the relationship between Freud's son-in-law Edward Bernays (1891-1995) and his relationship with corporate America. Curtis makes a distinction between advertisements before the influence of psychoanalysis and after. Earlier products were advertised almost solely on a utilitarian basis. Bernays radically changed this through the development of the art of persuasion, arguing that the power of psychological suggestion and consumer identification would draw attention to the product. More insidiously, potential customers would identify elements of the product with their own personae.

Bernays's first experiment with this was attracting women to buy cigarettes. Formerly a social taboo, females using cigarettes accompanied the rise of the Suffragette Movement in the 1910s that had created a new social dynamic that somewhat confused advertisers of the day. The advertising departments within early corporate America were completely confused as to how to sell products that were previously deemed unmarketable to adult women. Bernays utilized a keen strategy that is still an element of advertisement in our contemporary times. He identified the political attitudes of the women's liberation movements of the day and then associated them with the act of smoking cigarettes by staging attention-grabbing displays associated with independent female activism.

With this the goals of advertising shifted towards inducing the consumer to identify with the product through associative strategies and images. In a century where the mass-distributed images and videos were primed to rule the new media landscape, this approach proved to be remarkably effective. But the power contained in this tactic did not just manifest itself in profits, but also with new intangibles like consumer engagement and brand-building. Cigarettes became “Torches of Freedom,” which managed to combine a cross-section of women’s liberation and American nationalism that was relevant and profitable.

As the Curtis series progresses, we see how advertising shapes the image of the quintessential American lifestyle in the post-World War II economy. The American identity became a mixture of nationalism and consumerism, all through the power of applied psychology. There is an image of prosperity and liberty reflected in the abundance of America’s consumer products. In an era directly following the Great Depression, when labor unions and political radicals had begun to question the capitalist institutions that had so dramatically failed them, this manipulative tactic proved useful in reaffirming what corporate America desired to be the status quo. This strategy would be returned to in other times of political crisis throughout the 20th century. In the 1960s, when the youth movements and so-called “Counterculture” began to question and protest the societal inequities along racial, gender and class lines, the institutions which had been assigned to protect the social and economic status quo used researched psychological methods to achieve the most profitable ends.

One of the most unnerving episodes in the entirety of *The Century of the Self* was the episode about MKULTRA, the CIA’s program of various experiments in mind control with psychedelic drugs. Threatened by the radical political movements against the Vietnam War, the security state used the power of psychoanalysis to engineer incredibly brutal methods of

suppression to maintain their hold on power. Curtis' obsession with experiments in social science gone awry reaches its pinnacle here, as the dystopian truth surrounding MKULTRA provides a perfect example of overreach on behalf of the powerful. In the third episode of *The Century of the Self*, we see that the overseers of the MKULTRA project were specifically targeting the mentally ill and those cut off from strong family support. In the end, the memories and identities of the victims of these experiments were effectively erased. Curtis remarks in his voice-over narration that while MKULTRA may have been a failure, the tactics of disinformation they used fomented the paranoia and in-fighting that would ultimately bring down movements like the Black Panthers, radical Marxists and ecological activists at the end of the 1960s. Yet the unpredictable results of these methods of psychological manipulation would prove to erode the elite's grip on power. When the methods of mental conditioning disseminated through traditional means of consumer society falter, we witness those who wield political power abuse them out of fear.

All tactics have their limitations. In the final episode of *Century of the Self*, the tools of psychological influencing are shown to become increasingly ineffective. The results had begun to spiral out of the control of the technocrats that had found the tactics to be so useful in the first place. Curtis uses the example of Tony Blair and the Blairite Labor party in the United Kingdom to illustrate his point. It was a party that was designed to cater to the perceived increase of value of the individual, through democracy. In reality the reforms were creating a bureaucratic nightmare, where the government was often forced into contradictory stances. In general Curtis has always been fascinated with locating and articulating the pitfalls of bureaucracy. *Century of the Self* crystallizes many of his key ideas such as the marginalization of collective political action. He is also highly critical of governmental institutions (such as British Labor) increasing

reliance on technology and by extension technocracy, and noting the escalating sense of cynicism surrounding the consensus that these methods of running a society are airtight. The new reforms became a way to entrench the overriding ideology of neoliberalism and corporate technocracy, while promising revolution within the individual (reflected in their material wealth and social status) in its messaging. Despite some ideological parallels with the post-Cold War Left, Curtis has always pushed back against being identified as a leftist. In an interview with noted art and cultural critic Hans Ulrich Obrist for E-Flux, Curtis remarks

Well, a lot of people go on about how I'm a leftist, but I'm not really, because I believe that ideas have consequences. And why I like people like Weber is because they are challenging what I see as that crude left-wing vulgar Marxism that says that everything happens because of economic forces within society, that we are just surfing, our ideas are just expressions—froth on the deep currents of history, which is really driven by economics. I've never believed that.¹⁶

With this context now established we can center the bulk of social criticism in Curtis's films is not necessarily about capitalism, but bureaucracy. Yet the criticism of capitalism and bureaucratic technocracy have become inextricably intertwined. As alluded to in a quote above, Curtis considers the modern organization of capitalist societies an "iron cage." This is where the thinking of Weber becomes especially relevant. At the dawn of industrialized societies in the mid-19th century, Weber predicted that bureaucracy would come to overwhelm civic society within this mode of production. Weber's analysis was not a Marxist critique but rather one of a liberal, sociological perspective. In an excerpt from a meeting of prominent early sociologists in 1909 Vienna, Weber abhors the idea that

the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones - a state of affairs which is to be seen once more, as in the Egyptian records, playing an ever-increasing part in the spirit of our present administrative systems, and especially of its offspring, the students. This passion

¹⁶ "In Conversation with Adam Curtis, Part I." 2020. *e*. Accessed April 19. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/32/68236/in-conversation-with-adam-curtis-part-i/>.

for bureaucracy ... is enough to drive one to despair. It is as if in politics ... we were deliberately to become men who need "order" and nothing but order, become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it. ¹⁷

Not only is capitalism alienating, but the bureaucratic fashion of organizing society itself undermines people's sense of autonomy. In Weber's estimation, this will be the primary source of tension within industrialized capitalist societies, especially as they continue to accumulate more capital and the urban sprawl absorbs more and more of the population.

Curtis's wonderful series *Pandora's Box* elaborates on this thesis posed by Weber. It takes individual stories of technocratic mismanagement from both sides of the Iron Curtain and examines the broader fault lines within the societies in which they occurred. In the case of the Soviet Union, Curtis examines the ramifications of the 1960s economic reforms under Premier Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971) and the unforeseen complications of handing off the nation's economy to technocrats. One of the most interesting takeaways from the series is that, despite the massive ideological conflict that underpinned the Cold War between capitalist democracy and Soviet communism, there were serious parallels in these rival superpowers' approach to bureaucracy. In addition to the similarities of organization, similar failures to account for the unpredictable existed in both nations. These unpredictable catastrophes usually revolved around the infrastructure of the two countries. Modern innovations in industries, like agriculture and transportation, created unforeseen consequences, such as the health risks of pesticides or the generation of waste. The Soviets created a technocratic system that attempted to run the economy with computer-like efficiency that resulted in an extremely wasteful system struggling

¹⁷ Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik* [*Collected Essays on Sociology and Social Policy*]. Tübingen, 1924. p. 413f.

under the weight of the central party's massive corruption. The emphasis on a technocratic approach to the economy helped precipitate that ideology's downfall.

Conversely, in the West, persistent issues surrounding economic austerity and business-first policies wreaked havoc on working people's faith in their civic society. In the United Kingdom, massive worker demonstrations such as the miner strikes from 1984 to 1985 were forcefully put down, a symbolic moment representing the triumph of the new conservative policy austerity over traditional leftist forces of labor power. A strong sense of alienation within the increasingly bureaucratic nature of work had been articulated by Weber in the mid-19th century, who stated that the "great question" confronting the powerful institutions managing the modern West

is, therefore, not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parcelling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life.¹⁸

While a collective rebuttal to the technocratic method of governance has yet to have meaningfully taken hold amongst the grassroots, the credibility of these institutions is then severely damaged. Even if the effects are unconscious, the omnipresent alienation, the feeling that "men are little cogs" contributes to a world where faith in our institutions now are at an all-time low. Like all other methods of societal control in Curtis's films, whether it is technocratic distribution in the Soviet Union or imposed measures of austerity in the ultra-conservative, Thatcher era United Kingdom, the results have run aground, their original good intentions to bring the modern person closer to their ideal of freedom have tragically fallen short. Within this bureaucratic apparatus, what is meaningful freedom?

¹⁸ Weber, Max, Guenther Roth, and Claus Wittich. 2013. *Economy and Society*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. pp 127-128

One of the most overlooked of Curtis's series is *The Trap: What Happened to Our Freedom?* (2007). The film is from the middle period of Curtis filmography (starting in 2000 with *Century of the Self* and ending with *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* of 2011), still beholden to the miniseries documentary format of his earlier work, but beginning to touch on the broader philosophical ideas that his later period work (2015's *Bitter Lake* and 2016's *HyperNormalisation*) would eventually embrace. What makes this series important in the context of the rest of Curtis's oeuvre is that it criticizes the contemporary idea of freedom as disseminated by political and financial institutions in the West, primarily the United States and United Kingdom. Due to this idea of freedom being rooted solely in the desires of individuals, "positive freedom" became effectively useless to effect meaningful change.

This uniquely individualistic conception of freedom was dubbed "positive liberty" by German sociologist Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997). His influential lecture "Two Concepts of Liberty" was rooted in the contemporary fears of the Cold War. Soviet totalitarianism, despite being perceived at the time as a liberating force that would free workers from their alienation from the Soviet Union's Communist Party, was entrenched in a bureaucratic and repressive political system. If Western democracies were to repress the dangers of a mass political movement undermining the system of democracy itself, Berlin presupposed that the very definition of freedom must change. Rather than freedom being granted at the behest of revolutionaries, instead freedom must be catered to the individual citizens' desires. Governmental structures should have a minimum of interference (vis-a-vis more government control of the market, more regulations, expansion of public institutions) in the development of individual identities. Berlin described such interference as nefarious, saying that

to manipulate men, to propel them towards goals which you — the social reformer — see, but they may not, is to deny their human essence, to treat them as objects without wills of their own, and therefore to degrade them.¹⁹

Instead governmental structures should cater to the individual. This is “negative liberty,” which is a position that concedes, in Berlin’s estimation, that

the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict — and of tragedy — can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social.²⁰

Curtis’s criticism of this method is that this definition of freedom narrowed the scope of political action. Collective institutions, especially in the realm of public funding could no longer form coherent, dynamic and unified policies, as the power these institutions held was directed towards catering individual desires. Social democracy was voted out and crippling austerity was introduced, first in America with the presidential election of Ronald Reagan, then in the United Kingdom with the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. Both leaders embraced an ultraconservative approach to government in line with Berlin’s ideas, being that the government is an impediment to the individual's freedom. This concept of freedom further propelled the existing super-consumerism of industrial societies as “freedom” was rapidly exercised through the freedom to consume. Public institutions quickly became governance by focus groups, overly concerned with catering to the generic “everyone” at the expense of systemic progress.

In this we see the first criticisms Curtis makes of hyper-individualism as the primary goal of politics in the contemporary times, especially within liberal capitalist societies. The faults in the approach became even more evident when the ideology of “negative liberty” was applied to the post-occupation of Iraq. The attempts of Western nations to model a new Iraqi society on

¹⁹ Berlin, Isaiah, and Robert M. Stewart. n.d. *Two Concepts of Liberty*.

²⁰ Berlin, Isaiah, and Robert M. Stewart. n.d. *Two Concepts of Liberty*.

modern liberal democratic societies only served to act as a microcosm to the worst issues the Western nations were facing. Rampant corruption, a rising civilian death toll and a dysfunctional government all stoked the flames of a sectarian civil war that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians. In light of this, Curtis ends the series with a plea to rebalance the dichotomy of positive and negative freedom. Without this balance, Western society stagnates and grows rigid in this post-9/11 world.

If the end of the Cold War marks one of the turning points in Curtis's analysis of Western liberal society, the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent "war on terror" is of equal relevance. Whereas the Cold War functioned in the United States as an affirmation of the values of liberal democratic society, the 9/11 attacks broke through the mindset of American invincibility. More presciently it eroded Fukuyama's idea that the "End of History" had truly occurred. Ideological battles were not finished, market-based solutions were not the antidote to all conflicts. It also represented the far-reaching consequences of American anti-communist foreign policy in the second half of the 20th century. Former allies in the Islamist Mujhadeen had turned on their former CIA handlers. Current allies in Saudi Arabia and the assorted gulf oil kingdoms had enabled and funded the very groups perpetuating terrorist attacks on Americans worldwide. Yet the most interesting part of Curtis's analysis is how the neoconservative movement in the United States and the radical political Islamists contained many parallels, not just in their collaboration in the fight against communism but also how each sought each other as enemies in the absence of the Soviet Union to regain a sense of identity in a post-Cold War world.

The series starts by analyzing the founders of these respective ideologies. The parallels are clear from the beginning. Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and Leo Strauss (1899-1973) were both

disaffected public intellectuals, rooted in largely conservative ideology. Qutb discovered his distaste for Western liberalism while teaching in America during the 1950s, during a time when the governments of Egypt and the United States were very close. Witnessing America's bohemian college lifestyle firsthand, he was appalled by the pervasive lack of piety among America's youth. The open campus culture with its women's freedoms, rampant consumerism and mass media dominance was a nightmare to the fundamentalist Muslim scholar. From this he made it his imperative to prevent the spread of this ideology to Egypt, which at the time was enjoying a diplomatically and economically beneficial relationship with the U.S. He claimed that

[p]eoples and nations basing their social, political, and economic systems on human philosophies are forever confronted with contradictions and "dialectics." The history of European peoples is an example of such a process.²¹

In this Qutb looks upon Western ideology not just as a threat, but a virus. In the wake of two world wars and a century of western imperialism, Qutb believed that the West was pathologically driven to violence and social instability. Secular philosophy was a trojan horse for social chaos, and throughout the third world it was starting to take root in the assorted nationalist movements of the late 1950s, whether it was the Soviet-aligned Algeria and Syria or Egypt's own close ties with America. When Qutb returned to Egypt, his political activism (manifested through the earliest incarnation of the Muslim Brotherhood) was repressed by the CIA-trained Egyptian secret police. Yet his idea of an Islamist vanguard defending the moral values of Islamic society had tremendous resonance throughout the Arab world, spread by the Muslim Brotherhood. He was eventually tortured and executed by the American aligned government in 1966. Meanwhile,

²¹ Qutb Sayyid. 2000. *The Islamic Concept and Its Characteristics*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications.

back in America, dissatisfaction with the liberal status quo was growing amongst the domestic intelligentsia (namely conservative political analysts) as well. The 1960s proved to shatter the social status quo of post-war America, with its emphasis on the traditional nuclear family and pro-market liberalism. The youth movement and the burgeoning counterculture outwardly rejected the hierarchies and social mores accepted by their parents' generation. Civil rights, women's rights, gay rights and class struggles became resurgent forces during the tumultuous decade. As America reeled from the moral and strategic blows of the unpopular and undeclared war in Vietnam, the civil stability at home began to become unmoored.

To the Nixon administration and the conservatives this was fast becoming a nightmare. The questions being posed as a result of America's traditional social structures was undermining the international image of American nationalism and post-war stability. New approaches to old values needed to be found. Enter Strauss, a disaffected former leftist activist turned ultra-conservative academic. Despite the scant literature surrounding him, he was a key figure in mentoring tremendously powerful figures in the neoconservative movement such as Bill Kristol, Newt Gingrich, Antonin Scalia and Paul Wolfowitz. Here Curtis starts manifesting the meaningful parallels between neoconservatives and radical Islamists. Much like Qutb, Strauss believed in "the vanguard," a holdover of Lenin's analysis of history. In a moment of revolution, an intellectual vanguard needed to be trusted by the masses to materialize the revolution's goals. But whereas Qutb grounded his vanguardism in a religious holy war against the demonic Western influence on Islam and U.S. imperialism, Strauss believed in "civic mythology." The perpetuation of myths that would reestablish "traditional American values," which in Strauss's view were Judeo-Christian, pro-free market and conservative. Despite certain differences in tactics, the goals of these two scholars were very similar, as are the underlying anxieties. Both

were confronted with rapidly modernizing countries facing spiritual and moral crises from the perspective of the previous generation's conservatives. To counteract this erosion of "traditional values," the scholars advised their students to undermine social liberalism and re-embrace social conservatism. Curtis notes that the two men found a similar enemy to define themselves against at the dawn of the 1980s in the Soviet Union.

What resulted was an unlikely alliance between American neoconservatives and Arab radical Islamists that would spell disaster and lurid political opportunities for each, as both parties had much to gain by defeating the Soviet Union as the communist superpower teetered on collapse. These shared interests converged on Afghanistan, where the neoconservatives within the CIA and State Department of the Reagan administration allied with the political Islamist foreign fighters ingratiated within the Mujhadeen against the Soviet Union's extended occupation of the country. For America the alliance represented a chance to halt the expansion of global communism and enabled the US to drag their biggest geopolitical rival into a costly proxy war. For the Islamists, in both Afghanistan and the broader Islamic world, the struggle against the Soviets represented an opportunity to lend credibility to a movement that was struggling to gain traction in the Arab world. Both parties gained substantial political capital from this, yet when the fighting ended each was confronted with domestic setbacks.

American Democrats surged in the 1990s, putting the conservatives once again on the defensive. Meanwhile, the foreign fighters who made their name in Afghanistan returned to their homelands throughout the Arab world only to find that their messages elevating the virtues of Islamism which fell largely on deaf ears. Despite the initial waves of political support, Islamists in countries like Algeria, Morocco and Egypt, their political parties faced political repression and election setbacks that were radicalizing the movement. The vision articulated by moderate

leaders within the movement like Hassan Al Banna (1906-1949)--an interview with him is shown in the second part of *The Power of Nightmares*--of a society that can “change people through education and religious conviction” through a “popular base” withered, as the radicals in the movement dehumanized their fellow Muslims. The radical Islamists would attempt to wage Jihad throughout the Arab world, creating bloody cycles of violence in vulnerable countries like Algeria, Morocco and Egypt, sapping whatever popular support they had accumulated through defeating the Soviets in Afghanistan. Battered by the militaries of these countries, the leading minds of the political Islamist movements (notably Ayman al-Zawahiri [b. 1951], and his student Osama Bin Laden [1957-2011]) decided that the new course of action was to “strike at the far enemy,” as stated by Bin Laden regarding a prospective attack on United States soil. This philosophy would eventually culminate in the attacks on America on September 11, 2001. For American morale, it was a disaster.

The years of idyllic 1990s optimism were obliterated in the span of one morning. But for the neoconservative movement, these attacks were a massive boon for their policies of military expansionism and aggressive foreign policy. The attacks created a new ideologically-charged enemy in Islamist terrorism that America could define itself against. But the moment also served to permanently radicalize both the neoconservatives and the political Islamists. The vanguards of both movements began to believe the very myths they had perpetuated about themselves as the two political movements became intractably locked in a nebulous and shadowy war. While bolstering the political energy of their stagnant tactics, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would create nightmares that became inseparable from reality for those actors involved. Both the neoconservatives embedded in America’s security and political systems or the young Islamists being educated in religious schools throughout the Middle East, the image of an all-

encompassing enemy defined the ensuing conflict. It put both on a path to self-destruction and tragedy.

The embrace of these myths, is where the creeping sense of unreality in the contemporary world starts taking shape in the films of Curtis. The fabrication of an international, villainous cabal of terrorists orchestrating massive acts of violence in the shadows by the U.S. State Department and the Bush administration was the logical conclusion of the “civic mythology” tactics that Curtis criticizes throughout *The Power of Nightmares*. This deliberate misinformation echoes similar accusations leveled at the Soviet Union, where every act of political instability from outside of the American sphere of influence, from supplying the Irish Republican Army, to funding militant anti-Apartheid groups in South Africa to the various acts of terrorism throughout the Middle East that were allegedly being directed from Moscow.

When the Soviet Union fell late in 1989, these claims were shown by international intelligence agencies to be fraudulent. Yet this image of organized, clandestine terror remained extremely resonant and convincing in a post-9/11 world. Even as early as with the 1998 American Embassy bombings in Tanzania, the United States made efforts to appoint Bin Laden at the head of a shadowy organization of vaguely defined “global terrorist cells.” In actuality, Bin Laden’s influence on the perpetrators of these terrorist attacks was minimal beyond the funding of them. Individual actors, influenced by the Islamist ideology shared by Bin Laden and Zawahiri, planned and carried out these actions without their direct input. Yet when America began its vilification of Bin Laden, he decided to embrace it. By centering the narrative around Bin Laden, America had made him the leading luminary of the radical Islamist movement, and his strategy of “attacking the far enemy” had now been given extreme validation. Al-Qaeda, a term which Bin Laden had never even used according to Curtis prior to the September 11

attacks, had managed to revive interest amongst radical Islamists in the wake of the crushing defeats of the 1990s. This dichotomy of false media narratives spilling over into real-world consequences recalls the Baudrillard quote from *Simulacra and Simulation* regarding terrorism: “This is what terrorism is occupied with as well: making real, palpable violence surface in opposition to the invisible violence of security.”²²

America in the 1990s had a blanket of security surrounding history, politics and the endless perpetuation of liberal capitalist society. The attacks on America on September 11th and the subsequent “War on Terror” would be some of the first events to seriously erode this sense of security. Yet to uphold this security, the United States exported violence to the fringes of the developed world in order to defeat their foe. Curtis is quick to point out that the war in Afghanistan had only a marginal effect on the declining state of the Soviet Union, despite their purported victory. In this security, the neoconservatives found themselves lost. But with a new villainous antagonist for the United States to define itself against as a world leader, the neo-conservative movement gained a new windfall of support. George W. Bush’s approval rating after 9/11 rose to a staggering 92% according to a contemporary Gallup Poll. The previously embattled and controversial presidency of “Bush II” had now solidified. His neo-conservative policy, formed by key figures like Vice-President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, took shape largely unopposed. The security state widened and deepened in power and influence with new legislation, the so-called Patriot Act, effectively united the state department to the executive branch, allowing for a new wave of regime changes to rock the developing world in the name of “spreading democracy.”

²² Baudrillard, Jean, and Sheila Faria. Glaser. 2018. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. pp 57

Above all, a culture of upholding the U.S. military forces and the new tactics of the Oval Office, despite what the facts on the ground were saying about the war, became accepted by the American masses as the United States expanded its imperial might to encompass Afghanistan and Iraq. These conflicts would also play a major part in the legitimization of crediting surrounding many neoconservative ideas and figures. By the time the documentary *The Power of Nightmares* had been made, a justified atmosphere of cynicism surrounding the United States' foreign and domestic policies following the 9/11 attacks had accumulated. The scope of the terror threat was seen by many, including Curtis, of being greatly exaggerated.

When the United States went into Iraq there was actually no concrete evidence of weapons of mass destruction. In Afghanistan, we did not find a population waiting to be liberated; instead we were confronted with a society that would prove resistant to our attempts at geopolitical influence. Domestically, the security state was confronted with a series of farcical stories about the United States' overreach, and sparingly few genuine terrorist attempts in what appeared to be a prescribed invasive domestic policy. Curtis depicts various follies of the FBI and other anti-terror security agencies handling an influx of false leads and invented terror plots in order to generate an atmosphere of fear through its fake reports, wild speculation and sensationalized film footage. This atmosphere was crucial to helping reinforce the image of America as a military force fighting for the values of democracy and freedom on the world stage. Yet the super-villainous image of a highly organized international terror network, with cells across America, was a thing of fiction

In both of Curtis' later films [*All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace* (2011), *Bitter Lake* (2015) and *HyperNormalisation* (2016)] and the writing of the assorted "post-left" thinkers, especially Baudrillard, the culture of political apathy is driven by escapism. This plays

into fundamental psychological desires: to be validated, to be acknowledged and to form connections. But when confronted with an apparatus that can placate and fulfill all of these desires, the temptation of complete escape is extremely tempting. The elaborately constructed alternative worlds, whether it be those manufactured in the mass media or the social media, is one of the most important contributing factors to our pervasive sense of unreality. Baudrillard referred to these media masses as “simulacra.” The internalization of artifice and our pervasive sense of unreality parallels Curtis’s definition of what he has called “HyperNormalisation.” In his *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard wrote

To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending: "Whoever fakes an illness can simply stay in bed and make everyone believe he is ill. Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms."²³

Just as Curtis associates the effect of “HyperNormalisation” with the heavily propagandized version of the Soviet Union displayed in communal apartments throughout state-sanctioned television, Baudrillard saw in late capitalist society a heavily warped sense of reality, disseminated through the corporate mass media. Those creating these warped realities have substantially different ideological beliefs, but their methods and results are strikingly similar in Curtis’s analysis. In his film *HyperNormalisation* Curtis cites the work of Russian anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (b. 1960), who coined the term in the face of the decaying late-Soviet society. When describing the dead communist society, Curtis said in an interview with The Economist that

in the 80s everyone from the top to the bottom of Soviet society knew that it wasn’t working, knew that it was corrupt, knew that the bosses were looting the system, knew

²³ Baudrillard, Jean, and Sheila Faria. Glaser. 2018. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. pp 3

that the politicians had no alternative vision. And they knew that the bosses knew they knew that. Everyone knew it was fake, but because no one had any alternative vision for a different kind of society, they just accepted this sense of total fakeness as normal.²⁴

Curtis, by way of Yurchak, describes this condition as a “zombie society” of sorts. It is a society that has the veneer of social functionality, but beneath the surface there is only chaos and decay in the institutions keeping the society together. Any truly ideological belief in the system is completely drained away and the surface aesthetics of a well-operating country is maintained and believed in for lack of a better alternative. The fakeness, propagated by the Soviet media apparatus, was embraced by the Russia’s populace, fearful of what would come thereafter. Once again, recalling Baudrillard’s idea of the media’s “simulacra” in relation to politics, in which

The political sphere entirely loses its specificity when it enters into the game of the media and public opinion polls, that is to say into the sphere of the integrated circuit of question/answer. The electoral sphere is in any case the first great institution where social exchange is reduced to obtaining an answer. It is due to this sign-simplification that it is the first one to become universal. Universal suffrage is the first of the mass-media. All through the 19th and 20th centuries political and economic practice merge increasingly into the same type of discourse. Propaganda and advertising fuse in the same marketing and merchandising of objects and ideologies.²⁵

If the society around you continuously fails to live up to its image of itself, and people cannot imagine a valid political alternative to alleviate their alienation, they embrace the simulated society wholesale. In the context of Curtis’s work, Baudrillard’s ideas of simulation is a reflection of “hypernormalisation” in consumer society, as it highlights people’s reflexive desire for escapism in an increasingly consumerist and digital world.

²⁴ “The Antidote to Civilisational Collapse.” 2020. *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper. Accessed April 20. <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/12/06/the-antidote-to-civilisational-collapse>.

²⁵ Baudrillard, Jean, and Sheila Faria. Glaser. 2018. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press., pp 35

Curtis and Yurchak take this analysis and broaden it to include the decaying bureaucracy of late Soviet society. Again, the true root of alienation is portrayed through Weber's lens as opposed to Marx's, where the bureaucratic nature of the modern world rather than capitalism is the culprit for this decay. The heavily manipulated images propagated by Soviet mass media functioned as an appealing alternate reality which enabled people to ignore the complex and depressing demise of Soviet civic society that was occurring around them. This escape from the complexity of the real world for a "fake world," an artificial one that is more comforting, is a repeated theme throughout *HyperNormalisation*. Even when the Soviet Union fell, it was a cultural condition that would come to envelop their former ideological opponents in the West. This cultural condition was defined by political apathy and institutional rot, with these forces driving people into escapist fantasies enabled by mass media. The specifics may vary (Soviet state radio and television versus Facebook, Twitter etc.) but the consequences of its ability to assert social control at an unprecedented rate are eerily similar. On more dire terms, the escapism undermines the self-awareness of these deteriorating institutions to adequately address society's problems. Instead they are only interested in the projection of the image of a functioning status quo.

Curtis's analysis of social media, especially in relation to political activism, is especially biting. Curtis describes it in *HyperNormalisation* as "a mirror" where every individual can "constantly see themselves reflected." In an interview, he expands further saying that social media platforms are using feedback loops, pattern matching and pattern recognition, systems can understand us quite simply. Curtis explains that we are far more similar to each other than we might think and that my desire for an iPhone is a way of expressing my identity, mirrored by

millions of other people who feel exactly the same. We're not actually so individualistic. We're very similar to each other and computers know that dirty secret.²⁶

Curtis's analysis eerily parallels the work of Baudrillard. While Curtis is more concerned with mass media, his point is that "the media represents a world that is more real than the reality that we can experience." This is also applicable to social media explicitly. The simulated qualities of Western mass media have accelerated in our digital age. The false image that Yurchek and Curtis felt had consumed the Soviet Union proliferated to new heights on the World Wide Web, just as corporations have secured a stranglehold on societal power and influence. Within the confines of social media, the gatekeepers of the status quo found their most effective means of nullifying meaningful political threats to their power.

The Web is the avenue of social media activism that Curtis sees as a recurring loop of political impotence, at least for the masses. Curtis cites the failure of movements such as "Occupy Wall Street" and the short-lived "Arab Spring" as emblematic of this new instrument of change, where brief bursts of potentially radical political activism end with profound brevity, in the end reaffirming the status quo. He also considers the rise of political figures like Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, two strongmen who use the tools of mass media to manipulate people's cynicism about politics into powerful cults of personality. Despite "Occupy Wall Street" and the "Arab Spring" being the type of mass political movements that used to be the visible catalysts for wide systemic changes, their origins in cyberspace left them fraught with contradictions that hastened their respective collapses. Amongst Curtis's criticisms is that the

²⁶ "The Antidote to Civilisational Collapse." 2020. *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper. Accessed April 20. <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/12/06/the-antidote-to-civilisational-collapse>.

heavily individualistic nature of the Internet meant that these movements relied on an extremely narrow form of activism.

Addressing the failures of contemporary political movements, Curtis noted in an interview that

[i]f you want to make the world a better place, you have to start with where power has gone. It's very difficult to see. We live in a world where we see ourselves as independent individuals. If you're an independent individual, you don't really think in terms of power. You think only in terms of your own influence on the world.²⁷

Such a contradiction was untenable for the popular momentum of these political movements or their leverage to threaten the institutions they opposed. Throughout the Middle East, the “Muslim Spring” faltered. In Egypt, where the movement originated, the very same mass of street protestors who performed anti-government organization through platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp were cheering the military on when they deposed the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi (1951-2019). One of the most haunting images of Curtis's film are the colored flairs in Cairo lighting the path for the helicopters of the military under General--soon to be President--Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (b. 1954) as they besieged the Presidential Palace. A movement that was hailed in the West as a triumph of liberal values had eaten itself alive, leaving the internet-based idealists who had been hailed as champions of democracy twisting in the breeze.

In Syria these same fault lines existed, in addition to the cruelty of a civil war, and delivered the resistance against tyranny in the form of Bashar Al-Assad (b. 1965) into the arms of radical Islamists. Meanwhile in Libya, the Colonel Muammar Al Gaddafi (1942-2011),

²⁷ Leroy, Gregory. 1970. “18 Mar Adam Curtis on the Dangers of Self-Expression.” *Leroy Brothers*. March 18. <https://www.leroybrothers.com/adam-curtis-on-the-dangers-of-self-expression/>.

previously praised by the West for his renunciation of terrorism in the build-up for the invasion of Iraq, was killed when a revolution inspired by the “Arab Spring” murdered him. Then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in a video interview with CBS that “we came, we saw, he died.” In the power vacuum created by his violent removal, Libya has been rocked by an intense civil war, rapidly devolving into yet another proxy conflict between the region’s rivals in the form of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Qatar. Instead of signaling the collective will of the Arab world towards Westernized ideas of liberal democracy, the failure of the “Arab Spring” has been repeated with the disastrous results in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The desire to unseat domestic tyranny has allowed new forms of tyranny to take center stage within their country’s politics. The “Arab Spring” was emblematic of problems that had begun to undermine the new wave of political activism within Western countries. The extremely contradictory views within the constituency of these movements had inadvertently exposed broader problems in the democratic process within late capitalist societies. Egypt, in particular, is an interesting case, with the country’s many attempts at modernization being confronted by an extremely conservative religious element with heavy grassroots support.

In a bit of continuity between *The Power of Nightmares* and *HyperNormalisation*, we once again see a paradox in which the democratic process produces leaders who seek to undermine democracy. When this contradicts the will of the geopolitical hegemony (represented by the Western powers, primarily the United States), intervention backed by foreign powers inevitably attempts to reset the status quo. Despite the interference of outside influences, the root cause of this failure was the individualistic approach without a set list of goals besides deposing the corrupt regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (1928-2020), the movement was immediately hijacked by groups outside the purview of the original goals. In Egypt’s case it

was radical Islamists. In America, broadly anti-capitalist, anti-corporate movements like “Occupy Wall Street” became a magnet for a wide net of contradictory political ideologies. The original impetus for the “Occupy Wall Street” protests became diluted as an anarchic approach to political activism failed to capitalize on the initial energy of the movement. Curtis would again criticize this hyper-individualist approach to politics, noting in an interview

The idea of individual self-expression—whilst feeling limitless because the ideology of our age is individualism—looked at from another perspective is limiting because all you have is your own desires.²⁸

What we see in the failures of “Occupy Wall Street” and the “Arab Spring” are horizontal political movements, created from the individualist energy of social media, faltering under the inherent weakness of contradictions within their own platforms and means of organization. They were collective movements without a strong backbone of collective solidarity. The conflicting factions within both of these movements never resolved their issues in the definition of a common goal and as a result their popularity as mass political movements fizzled. However, to Curtis, the most damning instance of how the simulacra of social media undermine our collective ability to implement political change came in the rise of Vladimir Putin in the late 1990s and early 2000s and with the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2016.

Even after the Soviet Union fell in November of 1989, the dynamics of “Hypernormalisation” and a heavily simulated media landscape in Russia reemerged with the rise of Vladimir Putin. The abject dysfunction with which Russia plunged into the 1990s fomented the perfect conditions for a political embrace of reactionary nostalgia and deliberately

²⁸ “Adam Curtis on the Dangers of Self-Expression.” 2020. – *The Creative Independent*. Accessed April 19. <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/adam-curtis-on-the-dangers-of-self-expression/>.

engineered incoherence. Vladislav Surkov (b. 1964) was a key figure in facilitating this atmosphere for Putin. According to Curtis, he did not view politics as a battle of ideas or policies, but rather as tactical theatre. He implemented a strategy of intensive disinformation that stoked the flames of a new era of Russian nationalism. Stalin and the Tsars are upheld in a similar light, despite representing opposing ideologies. What resulted was an atmosphere of pure political cynicism, wherein the image of Russia as a stable world power became more important than the actual socio-political functionality of the state.

In this atmosphere of cynicism a strongman like Putin, who projected these images of strength, was perfectly attuned to Russia's need for simulacra. There had been desperate and complex political realities of contemporary Russia, ranging from a stagnant economy to fears of separatism, but the masses escape and buy into a simpler, heavily propagated one where Russia is made out to appear as a resurgent superpower. Explained in the words of Vladislav Surkov, they have facilitated a political status quo where "the main problem is that many support the United Russia Party without even agreeing with its ideology - or even having an ideology of their own."

In the West, in Curtis's estimation, we see some of these same qualities reflected in Trump. Even more insidiously, he used the new vectors of political power such as social media to spread a message of deliberate incoherence that both proliferated his political message of American nationalism while undermining his political opponents on the left. The use of memes, tweets, inflammatory political attacks and a sea of disinformation spread by Trump and his followers completely upended the veneer of civility that had surrounded American politics in the past. While many people voiced their outrage at the soon-to-be president's messages of nakedly reactionary populism, in Curtis's analysis their messages were rendered ineffective by the very

platform they voiced their offenses on. Due to the algorithmic nature of social media platforms, their messages were only viewed by those with aligned political opinions. The very mechanism that made Trump's messages proliferate amongst like-minded American conservatives had managed to defang most of the criticism against him. Political debates raged across the internet, but it amounted to little significance as he clinched first the Republican Party nomination and then the Presidency. This online reaction had become a simulacrum of political activism itself. Curtis summed up this self-defeating media outrage cycle in an interview, saying

[i]f you look at the *New York Times*, for example, it's continually about that feedback loop between what Trump has said and the reaction of liberal elements in the society. It's led to a great narrowing of journalism. So in a way, he is part of the hypernormal situation because it's a politics of pantomime locked together with its critics.²⁹

For Curtis, Trump's election was an emblematic moment that revealed that, despite the narrative of a healthy economic recovery, the socio-economic circumstances that had allowed the banking crisis had ingrained a deep sense of cynicism in America, which had manifested itself through the election of a strongman. It was a perfect parallel to the collapse of the Soviet Union, a total erosion of public faith in the power of technocrats to maintain a stable society, followed by an artificial reassertion of the earlier status quo. In the context of "lost futures," this re-embrace of the status quo for lack of an innovative imagination to picture something better represents a total breakdown in the abilities of our institutions to replace them. So instead, in Curtis's view, we retreat into a fantasy of a functioning society, ignorant of precarious contradictions just beneath the surface.

²⁹ "The Antidote to Civilisational Collapse." 2020. *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper. Accessed April 20. <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/12/06/the-antidote-to-civilisational-collapse>.

Curtis's portrayal of this fantasy is a guiding influence on the aesthetics of his documentaries. Often characterized as a propagandist by his critics, such as film critic Davey Jenkins, writing for Little White Lies, describing Curtis's films as

us[ing] smoke and mirrors to attack the smoke and mirrors. He offers the impression that he is reporting from... a privileged position where the eccentric shifts of global power can be viewed with chilling clarity. Yet the way he presents his arguments suggests that he trades on the ignorance of his audience."³⁰

The kernel of truth in this is that ironically Curtis adopts the aesthetics of the very material that his works often criticizes. In this, however, we discover one of Curtis's true strengths as a filmmaker, and what sets him apart from more conventional documentarians. Whereas many documentarians opt for dramatic recreations of historical events, the dramas of Curtis's films are delivered through the expert manipulation of almost entirely archival footage. Despite his occupation as the Head Archivist for the BBC, Curtis employs an extremely cinematic style to his films. Rare footage of his subjects is underscored by eerie, synthesized soundscapes, occasional flourishes of orchestral music and the occasional, deliberately jarring industrial-sounding electronic track. For example, there is a scene in *Bitter Lake* where an Afghan town that has recently been bombed then bursts into riots, which is set to music by Nine Inch Nails. The mash-up creates a deliberately paranoid atmosphere, as the stark soundscapes tend to underline the morbidity in both Curtis's narration and image selection. This hyper-stylized, manic aesthetic is, in essence, a polished version of the aesthetics that permeates conspiracy theory documentaries. The aim, however, is essentially different.

Whereas the highly stylized aesthetic utilized in conspiracy theory documentaries is a deliberate attempt to hide or underscore manipulated information behind an overwhelming visual

³⁰ Jenkins, Davey. 2016. "The Dirty Tricks and Shady Tactics of Adam Curtis." *Little White Lies*. October 27. <https://lwlies.com/articles/adam-curtis-hypernormalisation-tricks-and-tactics/>.

style, Curtis's use of an overwhelming visual style instead hammers home the clarity of his narration. One of the strongest examples of this is the montage in *HyperNormalisation* highlighting the collapse of the Soviet Union. The sequence is a darkly comedic piece of the art of editing. Images of the public and inglorious execution of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu (1918-1989) are cross-cut with excerpts from the workout videos of actress Jodie Foster. This is a form of political filmmaking that finds its roots, ironically, in the works of the first generation of Mosfilm filmmakers like Eisenstein and Vertov. In his 1938 essay *Film and Image*, Eisenstein set apart the Soviet filmmakers of his era from those across the world due to their fascination "when two film pieces of any kind, placed together, inevitably combine into a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition."³¹

The emphasis on the juxtaposition of multiple images, removed from any sense of spatial or chronological continuity but deeply entrenched in portraying conflicting ideals, is a fine example of political agitprop. But Curtis develops this style one step further. He displays a bleeding effect of unreality into reality that defines an important aspect of post-modernism. The artifice that defines the very medium he critiques manifests its own peculiar and volatile logic.

HyperNormalisation is not the only instance of this. In his Afghanistan documentary *Bitter Lake*, a montage is set to the David Bowie song "The Bewlay Brothers" placed in the middle of the film. It is a stream of footage drawn from various sources about Afghanistan: excerpts from the British film parody *Carry On Up the Khyber* (Gerald Thomas, 1968), footage from the past Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and footage from the contemporary American occupation of Afghanistan. In this montage we see three generations of imperialist perspective

³¹Eisenstein, Sergei, and Jay Leyda. 1977. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich. pp 14

on Afghanistan, with British, American and Soviet perspectives each represented. The montage is edited with a keen sense of dark humor, with an excerpt from the British caricature of Afghanistan's hapless leader (Sir Sidney Ruff-Diamond in the film) being contrasted against the follies of the very real puppet governments of both the Soviet and American occupations. The parallel between Nur Muhammad Taraki (1917-1979) and Hamid Karzai (b. 1957) with the fictitious Sir Sidney Ruff-Diamond is one of many instances wherein Curtis's approach to editing presents a direct illustration of the bleeding effect between fiction and non-fiction. Additionally, this bleeding effect highlights the difference between the simulacra of the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan and the dizzyingly complex and often horrifying conflict lurking beneath. It is in these moments of clarity amongst Curtis's hyper-stylized dissociative filmmaking, that we see his development of Eisenstein's theory of the historical, dialectical powers of film editing in action. These montages are conspicuously bereft of the prominent voice-over narrator that dominates the majority of most traditional documentaries, including Curtis himself very notably. Instead Curtis lets his visual style take center stage and, without many words, lays bare all of the contradictions that are at the heart of his subject matter. It is his precise choice of images that earns Curtis a reputation as a fascinating visual stylist.

Curtis's approach to image manipulation requires further analysis. While Curtis is invested in unearthing often unseen or forgotten footage from the annals of history, he overtly alters them for both aesthetic and narrative purposes. Curtis's image crafting is an aesthetic of warped nostalgia. Sporadic close-ups, liberal use of slow motion and a general fascination with the uncanny are trademarks of Curtis's aesthetic. Even in the images relatively unmanipulated by visual editing, there is an ominous paranoia that colors much of Curtis's films. Extended shots of city skylines, the bustling city streets and other markers of the contemporary world permeate his

films but they are never in a comforting context despite their familiarity. *HyperNormalisation* is rife with these images. The film is heavily preoccupied with kitsch and other past cultural harbingers of the future. An example of this is a montage consisting entirely of post-Cold War disaster films. At the end of this sequence, a clip of an imploding skyscraper is looped and slowed down. This loop repeats three times, allowing the audience to absorb the quaint and dated image. These loops establish the image as kitsch, an absurd caricature of cultural fears that would soon be horrifically realized. After the third repetition we are subject to completely untouched footage of the terrorist attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11th. While this shows off the strength of Curtis's aforementioned editing style, it also highlights his ability to select important images. The assorted images, culled from the extremely popular disaster movie genre revival in the 1990s and early 2000s, were abstractions of underlying fears that the era of "World Peace" ushered in with the end of the Cold War was an illusion. Directly contrasting what seems so kitschy and dated to the contemporary eye to the powerful, immediate and looming memory of the September 11th attacks is paradigmatic of the Curtis style.

This section of the film is intimately concerned with the idea of "The Risk Society," a political pamphlet by prominent German sociologist and political theorist, the late Ulrich Beck, in which his view of the end of the Cold War geopolitical model asserts that Western nations are unequipped to create future societies or cultural forms.³² Instead the world's bureaucratic capitalist societies are doomed to cycles of apprehension and alienation as technocrats operate in a purely reactive societal role. What is more important than anything else, according to Beck, is the maintenance of the status quo in the face of new existential threats like the encroaching

³² Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *The Risk Society*. London: Sage.

environmental crisis, international terrorists, and the proliferation of “rogue nations.” The gaudy, Hollywood blockbuster scenes contrasted with the raw, highly-charged emotional energy of the actual World Trade Center attack footage displays the stark contrast Curtis seeks to create. It delineates between the simulated, controlled and sterilized image of our political nightmares, and the harsh realities of how these nightmares actually look. We see the narratives of intrepid technocrats solving the next existential question rationally in a controlled fictitious space, before seeing the underlying anxieties of this escapist media being brought to life by the failures of those technocrats. Their inability to monitor the fringes of their own empire effectively can be summed up in one of the most ingrained cultural images for Americans of the early 21st century. It is through Curtis’s effective use of image selection and montage that these ideas are, once again, communicated without the need for his signature voiceover-narration. While his films are heavy on the use of exposition, it is these moments of visual intelligence that deliver the substance of his ideas.

Aesthetically, Curtis’s evocative image selection and highly suggestive editing techniques ultimately service an aesthetic of nostalgia, highlighting both its appeal and its pitfalls. In a period super-saturated by repetitive mass media images of the past, where our cultural language is so heavily rooted in the inheritance of popular culture from one generation to the next, Curtis deliberately and skillfully exploits our revivalist culture. He does this both with the images he selects, but also with his careful use of sound design. In his recent films, Curtis utilizes sound artists who aspire to futurist aesthetics but who are shrouded in the anxiety of the present. One such artist is the British electronic musician Burial (a.k.a. William Emmanuel Bevan). Curtis first used Burial’s electronic music in *Bitter Lake*, with the songs “Come Down

to Us” (2013) and “Ghost Hardware” (2007) appearing prominently. Mark Fisher’s described Burial’s music as\

Listening to Burial... it strikes me that the LP is very London Now - which is to say, it suggests a city haunted not only by the past but by lost futures. It seems to have less to do with a near future than with the tantalising ache of a future just out of reach.³³

Fischer was especially fascinated by Burial’s curious balance between analogue and digital sound. Despite making music whole cloth from digital music making tools, Burial includes self-conscious nods to analogue music’s past. To Fischer, this creates another ‘hauntological’ effect. Through Burial, Fischer expands his thoughts on “hauntology,” a development of Jacques Derrida’s theory about language. But while Derrida’s theory was applied to how language is granted context by the preceding and following words/characters/signifiers, Fisher applied these theories to culture. In his book Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures, Fischer explains the dichotomy between analogue and digital sound via a hauntological context:

hovering behind much sonic hauntology is the difference between analogue and digital: so many hauntological tracks have been about revisiting the physicality of analogue media in the era of digital ether.³⁴

The “ghostly” dynamic between analogue and digital is a recurring theme in Curtis’s sound design. There is explicitly referential use of film score, with references to scores for Hitchcock and Welles (*North By Northwest* and *Citizen Kane* respectively) composed by Bernard Hermann (1911-1975), in addition to English musician and composer Clint Mansell (b. 1963)’s work for Danish filmmaker Nicolas Winding Refn (b.1970)’s thriller film *Drive* (2011). There is

³³ Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester (UK) ; Washington (USA): Zero books. pp 92

³⁴ Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester (UK) ; Washington (USA): Zero books., pp 28

a direct contrast between the use of classical and ballet music and the claustrophobic synthetic heavy moments. Fischer was particularly fixated on the concept of hauntology because Derrida's theories about previous signifiers "haunting" the context of contemporary ones was a relevant description of our current cultural condition. In the realm of popular culture and mass media, pre-existing cultural forms exist to be "sampled" or repackaged and ultimately recontextualized as "looting" one's memory of the original. Corporations stand to benefit from this process of commodification, wherein previous cultural signifiers were repackaged and resold beyond their initial means of being consumed.

Our culture is largely defined by reiterated references to previous forms of culture and tends to live actively in its shadow. No one piece of media can stand on its own any longer; instead it is lumped in with a larger scope of content, directed at customers by an algorithmic system. This corrupted memory, whether it is a "remake" or an intentional throwback and/or a stylistic revival, is a form of haunting, wherein zombie-like versions of aesthetics are not replaced, but rather replicated. This represents a crisis of both the time in which new media is created and the space it can now occupy. If we are frequently reliving elements of the past, new ideas of the future struggle to be created.

Fischer elaborates on this dynamic in Ghosts of My Life, an anthology of his essays, noting that

In this sense, hauntology was by no means something rarefied; it was endemic in the time of "techno-tele-discursivity," "techno-tele- iconicity," "simulacra" and "synthetic images." This discussion of the "tele-" shows that hauntology concerns a crisis of space as well as time.³⁵

³⁵ Fisher, Mark. 2014. *Ghosts of My Life Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester (UK) ; Washington (USA): Zero books., pp 27

Once again Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum is invoked, this time within the context of cultural space as opposed to general social behavior. Just as behaviors, social norms and political institutions continuously replicate and reinforce themselves through the space of mass media, so do cultural signifiers. This brings to mind Andy Warhol (1928-1987)'s use of repeated imagery in many of his works from the early 1960s. Warhol is quoted as saying "I don't know where the artificial stops and the real begins".³⁶ Warhol, an artist chiefly concerned with the increasingly commodified nature of objects of our American culture, demonstrated in works like his painting Campbell Soup Cans (1963. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York). Even in the art of our current generation, the praise with which Fischer lavishes on Burial's music, there is a discernible trend in aesthetics that reflect an omnipresent anxiety over the future.

Curtis's documentaries fit neatly within this fold. His use of archival footage, littered with ironic references to old films, vintage advertisements and newsreel imagery is, in and of itself, a hauntological form of filmmaking. Not only are Curtis's films concerned with unveiling the morbid experiments of maintaining power in the modern world, but also with the broader perception of how the societies in which that power was accumulated were viewed in the past as opposed to now. With our shared cultural memories being driven toward creative bankruptcy, no entirely new cultural forms rise to take their place. What we, collectively as viewers, are left with is an artistic loop that is preoccupied with dead, or at least stagnant, aesthetic trends and, in Fischer's words, "lost futures." In his estimation, the ever-present sense of irony surrounding it, serves

³⁶ "A Quote by Andy Warhol." 2020. *Goodreads*. Goodreads. Accessed April 20. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/112385-i-don-t-know-where-the-artificial-stops-and-the-real>.

[t]he attitude of ironic distance proper to postmodern capitalism is supposed to immunize us against the seductions of fanaticism. Lowering our expectations, we are told, is a small price to pay for being protected from terror and totalitarianism.³⁷

The aesthetics of Curtis's films are also preoccupied with these lost spaces. In *HyperNormalisation*, Curtis attaches incredibly symbolic significance to various landmarks across the film's sprawling narrative. An important element is how he chooses to portray the palace of Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad (1930-2000). It is a recurring visual motif throughout all of the segments involving Syria, with a consistently tragic tone. The palace is portrayed as a symbol of Syria's increasing modernization and its dubious future in Middle Eastern politics. For Al-Assad, it was the dream of a pan-Arab nationalism, which in *HyperNormalisation* is undercut by the footage of Henry Kissinger (b. 1923) being driven into the isolation of this palace. From there Al-Assad's mission to undermine the West is formulated, and would later be carried on by his son, Bashar. Curtis associates the palace and Bashar with a different hope: that of modernizing by bringing Syria into the digital age. Bashar would use the palace as the testing grounds for Syria's new internet capabilities. But in Bashar's quest to live up to his father's legacy, Al-Assad's involvement with aiding radical Islamist fighters over the Syrian border during the Iraq War would catastrophically backfire.

With the Syrian civil war conflagration, Al-Assad found himself in the ruins of his palace, besieged by the very forces he had helped to unleash on Iraq. Throughout his arc, Curtis keeps the Presidential Palace in Damascus constantly in the camera's frame, including footage from the Civil War of the building being shelled. By the time the audience reaches this bloody scene, the Palace has risen to the status of a "lost space." The palace itself is completely

³⁷ Fisher, Mark. 2010. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative ?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books., pp 9

associated with the failed ambitions of two tyrants--father and son--with its current besieged state a reflection of the deeply uncertain status of Syria's future. The meaningful use of this location to highlight anxiety over a potentially bleak future is a recurring element of *HyperNormalisation* and Curtis's more recent filmography.

Curtis's image selection, especially in montages, is also deeply invested with the portrayal of urban, corporate spaces. Whenever segueing between the different subjects in his documentaries, the frequent use of a looming presence of an urban metropolis, usually framed from the air, is used as a point of reference. Eerie ambient music usually accompanies these images, but each city has its own recurring story in addition to identifying the specific location of a subject. In the New York City part of *HyperNormalisation*, the footage takes a turn away from the lofty skyscrapers of the city's skyline to the decaying rot of the streets in the 1970s. This is accompanied by dour anecdotes from famous American punk poet and singer Patti Smith (b. 1946) describing the burnout that was felt by artists and activists in this decade; their passion and vision for political change were in ruins. In this culture of cynicism, Curtis depicts New York as the testing grounds for one of the most radical transformations in the history of capitalism. For the first time in American history, an entire city was put under the control of the banks, primarily through the financial institutions of Wall Street.

As alluded to above by Weber, we see an ever-growing expansion of the influence that bureaucracy has on urban sprawl. This is mirrored by another city: Moscow. Like New York City, Moscow is also a deeply hyper-normalized space where ideology has surrendered to an atmosphere of deep political cynicism. Whereas New York endured the aftermath of the 1960s counterculture burnout, Moscow bore the brunt of a much broader systemic and ideological collapse. The fall of the Soviet Union in late 1989 ushered in an extreme cynicism in Moscow.

Moscow becomes the epicenter of the new Russian political theatre; ground zero for the politics of hypernormalisation, where an atmosphere of total political apathy has led to people embracing an unreal image of contemporary Russian politics. Curtis frames the city with the ghost of its Soviet past always hanging above the Russian capital. The Kremlin takes on a peculiarly nostalgic value, reflecting a time when Russia was more ideologically vital. The landmark also represents, within the context of Curtis's films, the last time when the West could appeal to its populace with a simple "good-and-evil" narrative.

There is also London, the capital of Curtis's home country. Like New York City, London is shown to be the epicenter of British finance capitalism. We see the rise and fall of Britain's technocracy, acted out by both the British Labor Party and the conservative Tories. There is the failure of the Labor Party to produce a consistently functional public welfare system. Then they are usurped by the hyper-capitalist, super-individualistic forces of Margaret Thatcher's Tory Party. Their attempts at austerity are hailed as a galvanizing force in the British economy, but instead the cracks in the infrastructure of the British economy were becoming more visible and more blatantly in need of fixing. This segues into the Tony Blair (b. 1953) era of Labor, where a full technocratic system of government began to take hold in the British capital. As a result, Curtis frames the city as a series of offices and boardrooms occasionally intermixed with glimpses of the effects of the country's austerity in the city's streets. We then have the more recent London of "Brexit." Like New York City and Moscow, it has become absorbed in the divisive and incoherent politics of its day. London is an international city, in a country that is tilting increasingly towards retrogressive nationalism. But London is also a city in which, due to the consequences of austerity imposed by late capitalist society, the sense of national identity is being eroded year after year.

The recurring locations in Curtis's films represent microcosms of the societies of various nations. Their character, and how that character shifts over the course of recent history, is intended to be symbolic of the broader cultural shifts that have dominated the socio-political discourse for the past three decades. The cities depicted in Curtis's films are unreal images of functioning day-to-day life, deceptively hiding the greater complexity of their political reality.

Cyberspace itself occupies a peculiarly nostalgic status in the American psyche, especially in these films. Curtis argues that the utopian engineers who constructed the foundation for cyberspace dispersed the deflated energy of the 1960s Counterculture into the digital space. A figure such as John Perry Barlow (1947-2018), the head of Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), had created "A Declaration of Independence" that was intended to detach the internet from the plights and consumerist hierarchies of the material world. Barlow said in this declaration:

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear.³⁸

The leaders of this new digital movement pictured a world in which social and political hierarchies were antiquated. State and corporate control were rendered mute. Yet always reflected was a pure idealism, and rapidly the digital marketplace became dominated by the very entities that controlled the world's major marketplaces. The new, purely capitalist tech barons of Silicon Valley happily obliged, while the idealistic pioneers were ushered out of the public

³⁸ Barlow, John Perry. 2018. "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. April 8. <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

consciousness. Perhaps emblematic of this, Barlow himself, despite his importance in creating much of the social infrastructure of the early internet, died quietly in 2018, with the EFF having shrunk to a fraction of its previous influence. Curtis's visual depiction of this evolution is a strong example of his aesthetic fascination with warped nostalgia.

Curtis portrays the early internet in *HyperNormalisation* as a prototype for a new society. The block-like 1980s rendering of three-dimensional designs filled the vast emptiness which permeated much of cyberspace. Yet this emptiness was emblematic of a revolutionary platform filled with potential for a new, radical society. As the film progresses, however, you see the rampant commodification that occurs in cyberspace, through visual means. As the internet takes a more solid and coherent shape, it becomes a foundational pillar of the new corporate paradigm ushered in at the dawn of the 1980s. Instead of the vast digital planes filled with abstract blocky three-dimensional designs, the aesthetic of the internet is now incredibly smooth and non-confrontational. The internet is filled to the brim with advertising space, corporate signifiers and the omnipresent ideology of the status quo, that being pro-consumerist. The internet of 2020 is not the idealistic and undeveloped space of its early history. Instead the digital space has become yet another outlet for corporate hegemony with corporate forces like Amazon, Google and Facebook at the top of the very hierarchies, figures like Barlow praised the internet for being an escape from. While still entrenched in the escapist fantasies of the 1960s counterculture, where the inequalities and corruption of the contemporary world could be escaped through fringe communities, these ideas also became commodified. Digital escapism through mediums like video games, social media, streaming systems etc. has become the cornerstone in the success of Silicon Valley corporations. Now, the escapist opportunities afforded by the internet resemble another "lost future." The ability to create an individualized escapist space was retained, but

instead of presenting revolutionary new ideas in cyberspace, the grip on power our current leadership has over the status quo has been emphatically maintained. The internet's capacity for self-expression was inherently handicapped.

Curtis addressed these limitations in an interview, stating that the algorithmically driven systems

[u]sing feedback loops, pattern matching and pattern recognition, those systems can understand us quite simply. That we are far more similar to each other than we might think, that my desire for an iPhone as a way of expressing my identity is mirrored by millions of other people who feel exactly the same. We're not actually that individualistic. We're very similar to each other and computers know that dirty secret.³⁹

The climax of this algorithmically generated political stagnation was summed up with the rise of Trump as represented in *HyperNormalisation*. Within the echo chambers of the conservative portion of the internet which were already pro-Trump, stories of his misdeeds either went unseen or were dismissed and celebrated outright by his core followers. Curtis points out that all this did was to raise his digital profile. Conversely, the majority of the criticisms of Trump only registered with those who already felt negatively about him, as the algorithms for websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were guiding the users to those who already agreed with their stances. These limitations were demonstrated, in Curtis's view, clearly with the "Occupy Wall Street" movement and with the events of "Arab Spring." The digital origins within the purely egalitarian and individualized space of the internet collided with the scale and scope of real-world hierarchies and institutions.

The monopoly on meaningful political power in the hands of a few is a direct contributor to the dearth of meaningful visions of the future. For the select people who have control of

³⁹ "The Antidote to Civilisational Collapse." 2020. *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper. Accessed April 20. <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/12/06/the-antidote-to-civilisational-collapse>.

American society, in Curtis's estimation--the Wall Street financiers, the Silicon Valley technocrats and the political establishment--have no reason to change things from what they have now become. But the previously underlying ideological assumptions that uphold the system are now fully undermined. More importantly, the faith the American public have in these elites to create an optimistic future where collective needs are addressed has grown emptier. Yet this discontent is dispersed into cyberspace, where the idealism of the 1960s counterculture has been superseded by an abiding millennial cynicism. The discontent is a viral cynicism too, where memes from both sides of the political spectrum lament a fallen world that seems destined to a sort of apocalyptic finale. Despite our technological advancements in the world of communications, never has information about been less clear and less influential. As Baudrillard insightfully posited, "We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning."⁴⁰ Without a concrete sense of belief in the fairness of media which are supposed to reveal to the public the wayward direction of our society, we opt to defer to prevailing power instead. We flit between multiple identities, through multiple platforms, because our attraction to the para-social elements of these platforms holds a stronger appeal than meaningful political activism.

Yet these individual choices are defused of any meaningful consequence. With the monopoly of wealth shrinking to such a small percentage of the public, so too the possible imagination for a society in which collective political change atrophies. This is our contemporary socio-political condition in Curtis's view, and it is the primary force behind our unending anxiety over whatever future may be possible.

⁴⁰ Baudrillard, Jean, and Sheila Faria. Glaser. 2018. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press., pp 55

When considering Curtis's approach to filmmaking, the criticism leveled at him as a "propagandist" is understandable. His narration is often too broad, usually to accommodate his perception of the grand historical sweep that his film essays encompass. But it is precisely this scale, the accumulation of eerie moments of social science gone wrong, that makes his films so incisive and distinct within the world of social political commentaries. By producing a hauntological aesthetic that could only be composed in the contemporary digital media, Curtis has crafted a resonant aesthetic for 21st century paranoia.

Curtis himself has a consistent fascination with conspiracy theories. His films *HyperNormalisation* and *Century of the Self* reference conspiracy theories both true (MKULTRA, the CIA's mind control program) and propagated (Unidentified Flying Objects). His own take on conspiracy theories is relevant to this study. He states, "I sometimes wonder whether conspiracy theories are an attempt to re-enchant the world in a distorted way."⁴¹ This reflects a paranoia derived from the anxieties of late capitalist society, as articulated by a broad range of thinkers. Curtis fears how conflict is manufactured to retain the power of those in control of the status quo. His unease at how the artificial avenues for escapism in the contemporary world has bled into reality itself, paralyzing any potential political change. Furthermore, Curtis aims to unveil morbid facts about the structure and nature of how history is hidden in plain sight.

Despite our growing sense of understanding the injustices in our society, performed domestically and abroad by the West, we are too complacent to change it meaningfully. This embodies the late capitalism as postmodernism dichotomy as articulated by Fredric Jameson:

⁴¹ "Adam Curtis on the Dangers of Self-Expression." 2020. – *The Creative Independent*. Accessed April 19. <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/adam-curtis-on-the-dangers-of-self-expression/>.

I believe that the emergence of postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism. I believe also that its formal features in many ways express the deeper logic of that particular social system. I will only be able, however, to show this for one major theme: namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past.⁴²

If the past cannot be collectively recognized due to the narrowness of our discourse, how can we hope to change the collective wisdom? Curtis's films are rife with instances that openly contradict the previously accepted narratives of mass media. The connections between Edward Bernays and the elite conservatives of American politics and social economics were revealed in his interviews. The fact that the government actively worked to disseminate misinformation about specious UFO arrivals on Earth to conspiracy theorists was pulled from declassified CIA documents. The American's war in Iraq was a manufactured conflict that was incited by the threat of weapons of mass destruction that were not a material reality. Yet these blatant acts of deceit have produced no meaningful political changes. Jameson said that Western society has

begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve.⁴³

This "perpetual past" is the defining aspect of our contemporary cultural trends and a key factor in the atmosphere of oppressive pessimism surrounding most ideas about the future. We see a political system that is doomed to perpetually reset itself, even as existential threats undermine people's faith that it can continue to do so. Moments that are embraced as revolutionary change

⁴² Jameson, Fredric. 1988. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *Studies in Culture: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan. London: Arnold, 1997, pp. 125.

⁴³ Jameson, Fredric. 1988. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *Studies in Culture: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan. London: Arnold, 1997, pp. 11.

seem to dissipate and dissolve into yet another reinforcement of the previous status quo. Even more frightening, the collective sense of history erodes as the politics of individual identity are subsumed. Finally, and most importantly, it is an anxiety at the future receding from the collective consciousness, replaced with an all-consuming anxiety over an increasingly uncertain present.

The sum of Adam Curtis's films is how the late capitalist apparatus previously thrived in this environment, but now that the narratives of late capitalism and technocracy have faltered in the face of crises, an inescapable atmosphere of political cynicism rules the day. Why dream of the future, when the present instills such paralyzing hopelessness? It is in this state of unknowing that Curtis leaves his audience in, creating films that eloquently diagnose several symptoms of late capitalist rot but are equally unsure of a solution as the average, alienated individual.

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