SPECIALE **"Accidental" Postproduction and Acts of Remembering in *Stand By For Tape Back-up*, by Ross Sutherland**

Ever since technological devices such as VCR have enabled, along with a domestic consumption of films and TV shows, the recording and storage of images and sound, the practices of appropriation, recycle and reuse of existing images have begun to confront themselves not only with the abandoned and the discarded reels of film found in flea markets or trash bins, but also with the "debris" incessantly produced by pop culture[1]. Freed from the constraints of projection, as well as of broadcast programming, moving images have finally become "attainable". If, as W. J. T. Mitchell writes, "there is no getting beyond pictures, much less world pictures, to a more authentic relationship with Being, with the Real, or with the World. […] Pictures are our way of gaining access to whatever these things are"[2] is it possible then to seek answers on essential questions concerning our identity, our history, as well as the role of media in shaping and preserving our personal and cultural memory, precisely in the flux of these bits of pop culture-films, television games, TV series and commercials-coming from an old TV set?

This possibility has been envisaged in *Stand By For Tape Back-up*, a 2015 film made by the British poet, writer and performer Ross Sutherland. The film raises issues concerning memory, identity, and how they are indissolubly intertwined to our "everyday environment of images"[3] interrogating, through an act of postproduction, the blurred, distant and haunting fragments of images of the British television that his grandfather has recorded on a videotape. Hence the question is: what do these pictures want?

Stand by for Tape Back-up presents itself, actually, as a *double gesture of postproduction*. On the one hand, there is the tape and its content: excerpts of films such as *Ghostbusters* (Ivan Reitman, 1984) or *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975); part of an episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996); a short segment of the game show *The Crystal Maze* (1990-1995); television commercials (most notably, a 1991 commercial for NatWest); a few minutes of a football match; the music video of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (John Landis, 1982), and fragments of other television programmes. The order of appearance of each single fragment, the sequence that is generated, is the result of "random", *accidental postproduction*. Both Sutherland and his grandfather were using their VCR to record programmes over the years. Although it is very unlikely that, as Sutherland playfully speculates at some point, there was just one tape that was being re-recorded over and over again, tapes nonetheless were meant to be reused a number of times, without erasing what was recorded before. Thus, the fortuitous series of incomplete shreds of audiovisual materials, many of which seem to have been recorded in the Nineties[4], is the result of this process.

On the other hand, there is the *intentional* gesture of postproduction carried out by Ross Sutherland and Charlie Lyne, who co-edited *Stand By for Tape Back-up*. Originally, in fact, Sutherland used the videotape for live, on-stage performances (the debut was in 2014 at the Edinburg Festival Fringe; however, Sutherland has performed parts of the show in public since 2012); the live show has been then transformed into a film with the contribution of Lyne[5], author of works such as *Beyond Clueless* (2014) and *Fear Itself* (2015), whose meditative and intimate tone is also shared by *Stand By For Tape Back-up*. The act of appropriation and reuse engaged by Sutherland and Lyne clearly fits Nicholas Bourriaud's definition of *postproduction*: a way to "interpret, reproduce, re-exhibit, or use works made by others or available cultural products"[6]. The images recorded on the tape are re-edited in order to imitate the gestures the owner of a videotape would make while watching a beloved VHS over and over again: there are prolonged paused frames, rewind-like and fast forward-like effects -usually employed in order to find a point of interest-, repetitions and loops. Other forms of manipulation of pre-existing materials include the addition of Sutherland's voice over and, at the beginning of the film, the replacement of *The Wizard of Oz*'s (Victor Fleming, 1939) original soundtrack with Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of The Moon*.

Since all the audiovisual clips come from a videotape Sutherland has unexpectedly unearthed from

his loft, one may affirm that *Stand By for Tape Back-up* is (literally) a *found* footage film. However, this film decidedly challenges the well-known interpretative categories that the literature on appropriation films has identified, such as the contrast between the compilation film, "associated with documentaries that are believed to convey 'history' through their use of and primary dependence upon appropriated documents"[7] and the found footage film "associated with experimental films that, rather than presenting 'reality' or 'history' [...] problematize the construction of facts through a reflexive interrogation of media images"[8]. A binary opposition that, according to Jaimie Baron, has often resulted in a preference of scholars and critics for the experimental found footage film over the compilation film[9].

Fig. 1

The inadequacy of this dichotomy is particularly evident in the contemporary media environment, with its proliferation and convergence of formats, devices, platforms, as well as the hybridization of approaches and expressive strategies of the "age of remix". *Stand By For Tape Back-up* clearly exemplifies this complexity. In fact, in appropriating and repurposing the existing images, the film adopts a variety of formal and rhetorical strategies: there is the ironic and subversive *détournement* of the television commercials[10], as well as the soundtrack remix for *The Wizard of Oz*; the poetic, elegiac evocation of distant memories; the informed, almost documentary description of *Jaws*' production; the rumination on *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, resulting in sort of fan theory according to which the accident that sets all the series' events in motion (a fight between the main character, Will Smith, and a gang at a basketball court, and his subsequent escape to Bel-Air) has actually caused Smith's death, and the adventures he will live in his uncle's Californian mansion represents his version of heaven[11]. To summarize, it is a hybrid work, one that combines poetic introspection with avant-garde subversive strategies, an attentive observation of the spectatorial experience with a fan-like attitude.

All this considered, trying to pigeonhole *Stand By For Tape Back-up* in one of the categories mentioned above would result reductive. Perhaps, this work can be described more appropriately as an *essay film*,

"a reflexive form that foregrounds the enunciator's individual take on reality"[12]. In particular, it presents itself as a subjective, autobiographical inquiry conducted through audiovisual means of expression. According to Laura Rascaroli, there is a contemporary "ubiquitous tendency" to the self-centred, first-person accounts based on both technological and cultural reasons: on the one hand, lightweight filming equipment, user-friendly digital production and editing software, and the advent of social media have enriched the set of instruments available for personal expression; on the other hand, the flourishing of reflexive and autobiographical works can be considered

> a result of the increased fragmentation of the human experience in a globalised, hyper-real, "liquid" world—and of our need and desire of finding ways to contain the effects of such fragmentation. Autobiography is indeed an ordering of events and experiences, which helps to find and create unity in a life that—according to many postmodern thinkers—is increasingly experienced as disjointed, displaced and dispersed: "The diary grants the person identity, unity and harmony: it's the promise of an I"[13].

Indeed, by appropriating and re-editing the images recorded on the videotape Sutherland pursues "the promise of an I", and aims to find "an ordering of events and experiences" through his constant return to those consumed, low resolution wastes, through his loud rumination that seeks coherence into the accidental, the incomplete, the fragmentary[14].

As the author himself posits at the beginning of the film, this search for a *pattern*, for a thread that attributes wholeness-and therefore *meaning*-to the discontinuous nature of our experience is an innate behaviour of human memory. We are incessantly engaged in an *act of montage*, as montage itself is rooted in this tension between continuity and discontinuity, between the dispersion of the myriad of stimuli we incessantly receive and their coagulation into a meaningful, coherent whole, thus "materializing, thanks to a technical process, a structural feature of our imagination in order to obtain meaning effects"[15].

Fig. 2

The blurred, elusive, fragmentary nature of the remains of pop culture impressed in the tape allows Sutherland to barely acknowledge their original context and to reconfigure and repurpose them with the aim to tell through them, instead, *his story*, to revisit his past and, perhaps, to get a glimpse of his future. This process can be explained by resorting to Omar Calabrese's distinction between *the detail* and *the fragment*. The detail always refers to the whole from which it has been taken, it aims at "*re-constituting* the system of which it is part"[16], while the fragment, instead, is not defined through its belonging to a whole, "it is determined by chance […] and not by a subjective cause"[17]. *Stand By For Tape Back-up* develops its discourse through fragments that, ripped from their original context, serve instead to trace an autobiographical path: Sutherland's childhood fears and the comfort that he finds in repetition are evoked through *Ghostbusters*; he confesses the devastating experience, the alienation derived from his job in a bank over a looping NatWest commercial; he describes a violent asthma attack and the consequent depression over miscellaneous images (*Ghostbusters* again, a talk show, a shampoo commercial etc.). Through those fragments, the author *re-constructs* a system. That system is not the source of each audiovisual piece, but Sutherland's identity: as the depression he suffers from constantly threatens of tearing apart his self-awareness, this continuing, relentless search for a pattern is necessary, to use Sutherland's words, "to anchor him to his story".

Because of its "accidental" nature, the fragment, unlike the detail, "shows itself to the viewer as it is, and not as the result of the act of a specific subject"[18]. However, in the case of *Stand By For Tape Back-up* it is impossible to ignore the sense of intimate proximity, the connection between Sutherland and his deceased grandfather that is established through this gesture of appropriation. The mere act of selecting those images in the continuous flux of available television programmes bears the traces of a subject who remains somehow inscribed in this process. To use the words of the conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith, "Even when we do something as seemingly 'uncreative' as retyping a few pages, we express ourselves in a variety of ways. The act of choosing and reframing tells us as much about ourselves as our story about our mother's cancer operation"[19]. In this regard, one could argue that the videotape is a medium in the sense that it helps "establishing contact with a transcendent world"[20]. In other words, in rebuilding his identity by "postproducing" the tape, Sutherland engages a transgenerational dialogue: not by naively assuming that there is a message from his grandfather hidden in the tape but, rather, by acknowledging that he and his father were sharing in a simple gesture—the act of recording on the videotape—also the memories mediated by and through those television images:

> Autobiographical memories cannot be *embodied* by another person, but they can be shared with others. Once they are verbalized in the form of a narrative or represented by a visual image, the individual's memories become part of an intersubjective symbolic system and are, strictly speaking, no longer a purely exclusive and unalienable property. By encoding them in the common medium of language, they can be exchanged, shared, corroborated, confirmed, corrected, and even appropriated[21].

Therefore, as Sutherland observes, the videotape, and the TV set before it, are not only "like a crystal… that takes in lights and gives us back patterns": they are "an active zone of encounter and admixture, a site of mediation and projection, memory and transformation. The surface of objects and the structure of entities, including screens and their networks, haptically convey energies, for we entrust to our screens memories that are layers of experience and residual existence"[22].

Consequently, *Stand By For Tape Back-up* is endowed with another fundamental feature of the essay film: despite the subjective, individual nature of its reflection, this embodied "I" – and indeed Sutherland's voice over, with the hesitations, the nervous swallowing, the moving away from the microphone, continuously reminds us of the embodiment of a subject – inevitably "presupposes a 'you'", and thus an audience directly implicated in his discourse[23]. This was obviously evident when Sutherland performed *Stand By*

for Tape Back-up as a live show, talking directly to an audience whose reactions where an essential part of the act[24]. But actually, the film presents the same *dialogic* nature: it is permeated by a urge to communicate, to share the author's experience, as if he could not really re-construct his identity without someone else recognizing him. This identification inevitably passes through the acknowledgement of a shared imaginary, populated by the ghosts of our past viewings. Indeed, towards the end of the film the tone of the voice over seems more questioning than assertive: in his quest for unity, meaning, coherence, Sutherland wants to forgive himself for his vulnerability, for his mistakes, and he wants us to be participant witnesses who can understand and approve.
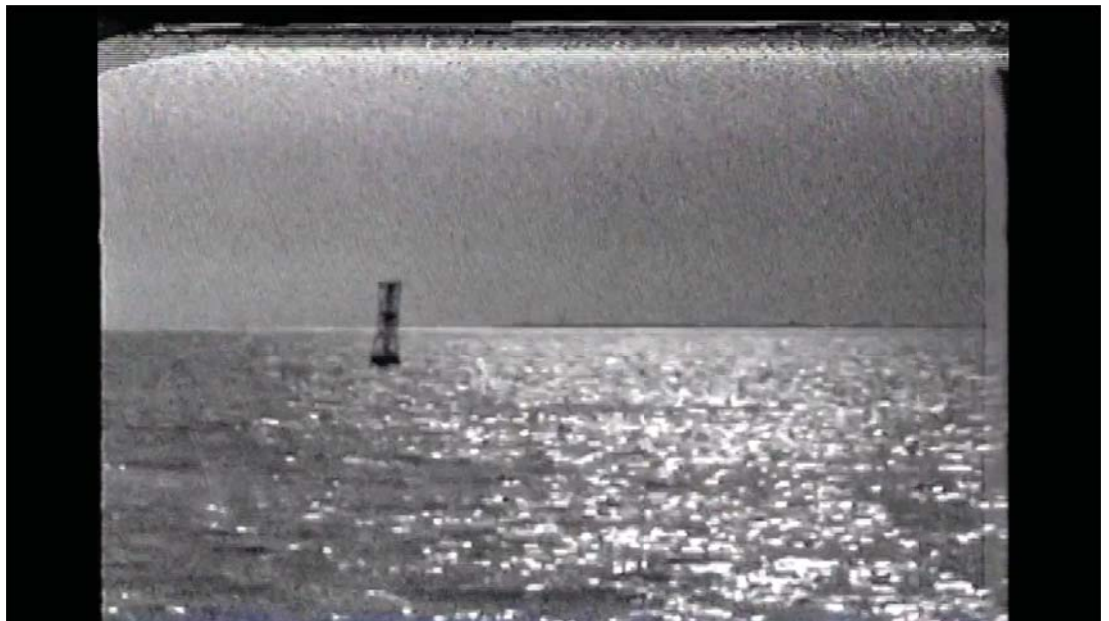

Fig. 3

"The personal investigation of one's life, memories, views and experiences – Rascaroli writes – becomes the analysis of the self in a given socio-cultural context – as well as of the context itself"[25]. What does this reflexive rumination over an old videotape suggests, then, about our contemporary socio-cultural context? At some point, Sutherland's voice over explains to us that the videotape is really important for him because it is one of the few memories he still owns. In fact, a hard-drive crash had caused the complete loss of pictures, videos and audio files he had collected in years, and to which he used to rely on because of his depression. *Stand By for Tape Back-up*, therefore, addresses not only the fragility of identity, but also of the storage devices to which we entrust memories that are essential in order to shape it. On the one hand, the film calls into question the illusory endurance of memories in the digital age: the rapid transformations to which digital devices are subjected, as well as their vulnerability, is a crucial issue both for individuals and archival institutions. On the other hand, it is undeniable that the capacity and the proliferation of digital storage devices and platforms has caused the undifferentiated accumulation of information: as Viktor Mayer-Schönberger argues in his *delete. The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, nowadays it costs more to select and to delete information, rather than storing and remembering them[26]. Therefore, it is as if we could not choose what we want to remember, or move forward from a past that constantly resurfaces on digital archives or social media: "the widespread use of digital remembering leads to a loss of information control, it constricts precisely the freedom to shape one's own identity"[27].

SPECIALE All this considered, *Stand By For Tape Back-up* does not just pretend to affirm a supposed superiority of the analogue over the failing, unreliable digital: it highlights the instability of the contemporary media environment, in which to the increasingly rapid obsolescence of devices and formats corresponds a similarly rampant accumulation of information, memories, images – an accumulation that has started right with the introduction of cheap recording devices like the VCR.

If we cannot really forget, or be in complete control of what we can remember, what is left for us to do, perhaps, is trying to become "postproducers", who never cease to look for patterns and meaning into their everyday environment of images, and who never cease to ask themselves: what do images want? And what do I want from them?

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Notes

1. See Eli Horwatt, "A Taxonomy of Digital Video Remix," *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, (November 2009), <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2009/culturalborrowingsebook.pdf> (Accessed 28 December 2016).
2. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005, p. XIV.
3. Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film*, Reaktion, London 2004, Chapter 4 par. 2 (Kindle ed.).
4. Sutherland does not specify when all the images were recorded; *Ghostbusters* was probably recorded in the Eighties, but *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *The Crystal Maze*, and the commercials (the NatWest's one in particular) were broadcasted in the UK in the Nineties. Sutherland's grandfather died in 2007 – approximately in the same period in which DVD players had almost completely replaced VCRs in the United Kingdom (see, for example, Edward Royle, *Modern Britain: A Social History 1750-2011*, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2012, p. 328).
5. About the strategies employed in adapting *Stand By for Tape Back-up* from stage to screen see the interview to Charlie Lyne by Conor Bateman, "Fear Itself – An Interview with Charlie Lyne", *4:3* (July 26, 2016), <http://fourthreefilm.com/2016/07/fear-itself-an-interview-with-charlie-lyne/> (Accessed 29 December 2016).
6. Nicholas Bourriaud, *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, Lukas & Sternberg, New York 2000, p. 7.
7. Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History*, Routledge, London 2014, p. 7. Here, Baron refers in particular to the well-known work by William C. Wees, one of the first attempts to define the found footage film. Baron herself has proposed in her work an attempt to overcome Wees' taxonomy. See William C. Wees, *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Film*, Anthology Film Archive, New York 1993.
8. Jaimie Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
9. Ivi, p. 8.
10. Developed by the Situationist International and Guy Debord, the concept of détournement implies the overturn of the original meaning of the images in order to unmask the ideological framework which produces them. See for example, Guy Debord, Gil J. Wolman, "Mode d'emploi du détournement", *Les Lèvres nues*, n. 8 (May 1956); Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle*, Buchet/Chastel, Paris 1967. On the found footage film and the strategy of détournement see also Marco Bertozzi, *Recycled cinema. Immagini perdute, visioni ritrovate*, Marsilio, Venezia 2012, in particular pp. 78-79.
11. A similar kind of fan theory, concerning *Grease* (Randal Kleiser, 1978) and originally posted on Reddit in 2013, has become viral on the internet in September 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/09/08/the-dark-fan-theory-about-grease-that-wont-stop-haunting-the-

internet/?utm_term=.c08c43b6d001>. Rodney Ascher's *Room 237* (2012) is also based on this kind of excessive, "aberrant" readings (namely, of Kubrick's *Shining*).

12. Laura Rascaroli, "Autoethnography: Essaying the I", *Comunicazioni sociali*, n. 3, 2012, p. 397. Similarly to its literary equivalent, the essay film has a complex, elusive nature. Nonetheless, in the last decade several works have attempted to outline and elucidate the main features of the essay film: one could mention, among others, Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: The Essay Film and Subjective Cinema*, Wallflower Press, London 2009; Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011. With regard to the essay film as a hybrid form which challenges the binary opposition between the compilation film and the collage see Christa Blümlinger, *Cinéma de seconde main. Esthétique du remploi dans l'art du film et des nouveaux médias*, Klincksieck, Paris 2013, in particular pp. 78-84.

13. Ivi, p. 399. On the issue of autobiography and self-portrait in film and media see also Federica Villa (a cura di), *Vite impersonali. Autoritrattistica e medialità*, Luigi Pellegrini, Cosenza 2012; Federica Villa (a cura di), "Tracciati autobiografici tra cinema, arte e media", *Bianco e Nero*, n. 582-583 (May-December 2015).

14. It should be noted that an inherent quality of low definition media and images is precisely that they need the viewer to complete the information and to cooperate in the interpretative process. With regard to high and low definition, beside Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, New York 1964), in which this opposition is postulated for the first time, see also Francesco Casetti, *The Lumière Galaxy. Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come*, Columbia University Press, New York 2015, pp. 120-128 and Andrea Pinotti, Antonio Somaini, *Cultura visuale. Immagini, sguardi, media, dispositivi*, Einaudi, Torino 2016, chapter V.

15. Pietro Montani, *Montaggio*, in *Enciclopedia del cinema, vol. IV*, Istituto dell'enciclopedia italiana, Roma 2004, p. 127. My translation.

16. Omar Calabrese, *L'età neobarocca*, Laterza, Bari 1987, p. 77. My translation.

17. Ivi, p. 78.

18. Ivi, pp. 78-79. Calabrese's distinction between the detail and the fragment has already been productively connected to the archival film by Francesco Zucconi in his volume *La sopravvivenza delle immagini nel cinema: archivio, montaggio, intermedialità*, Mimesis, Milano 2013.

19. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011, p. 9.

20. Aleida Assman, "Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory," *Representations*, n. 56 (Autumn 1996), p. 123.

21. Id., "Transformations Between History and Memory", *Social Research*, vol. 75, n. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 50.

22. Giuliana Bruno, "Storage Space", *e-flux – Architecture* (November 16, 2016) <http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68650/storage-space/> (Accessed 29 December 2016).

23. Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: The Essay Film and Subjective Cinema*, cit., p. 400.

24. Some of Sutherland's live performances have been recorded and shared online. See, by way of example, his performance at Cafe Oto on May the 31st, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zl-YhtwAm-w> (Accessed 29 December 2016).

25. Laura Rascaroli, "Autoethnography: Essaying the I," cit., p. 402.

26. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton-Oxford, 2009.

27. Ivi, p. 108.