A Supercut of Supercuts: Aesthetics, Histories, Databases

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ABSTRACT

The genealogies of the supercut, which extend well past YouTube compilations, back to the 1920s and beyond, reveal it not as an aesthetic that trickled from avant-garde experimentation into mass entertainment, but rather the material expression of a newly-ascendant mode of knowledge and power: the database episteme.
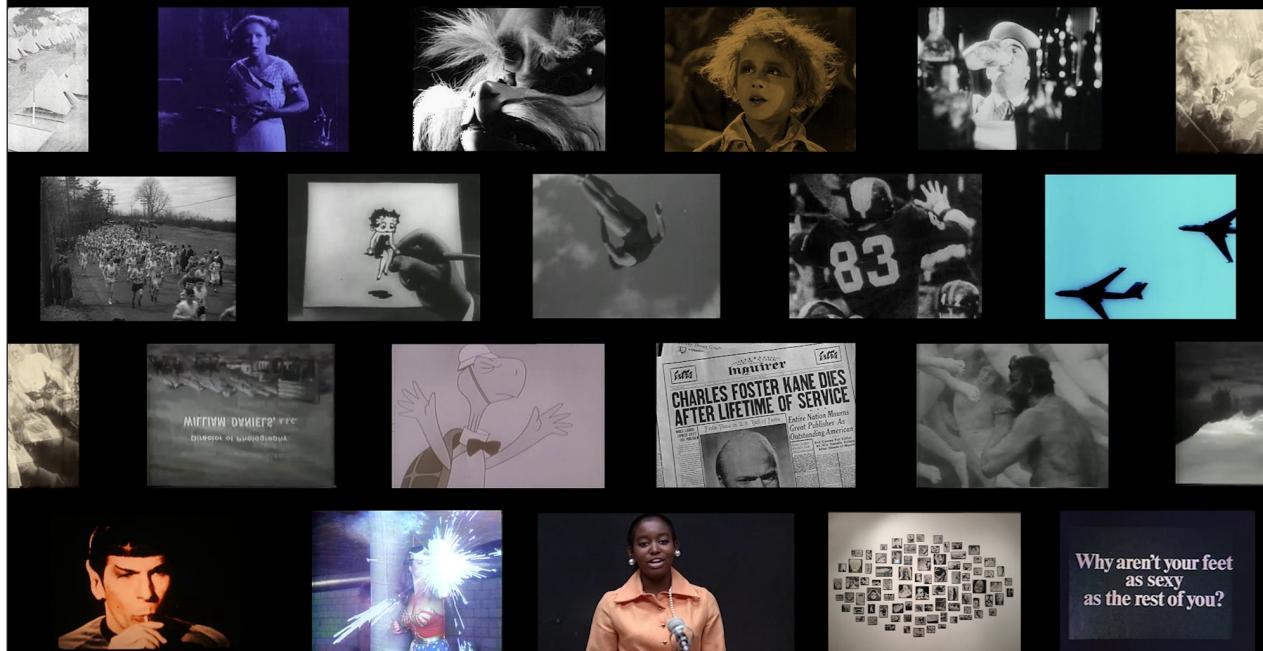
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Some shots were cut out to be something else.

a SUPERCUT
of SUPERCUTS

Aesthetics | Histories | Databases

A Video Essay by Max Tohline

Full Transcript: *https://www.academia.edu/45172369/Tohline_A_Supercut_of_Supercuts_full_transcript*.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

This first inklings of this video essay came in the form of a one-off blog post I wrote seven years ago (Tohline 2013) in response to Miklos Kiss's work on the "narrative" supercut (Kiss 2013). My thoughts then comprised little more than a list; an attempt to add a few works to the prehistory of the supercut that I felt Kiss and other supercut researchers or popularizers, like Tom McCormack (2011) and Andy Baio (2008), had left out. As time went by and the aesthetic of assembling appropriated footage into a matching list of clips spread far beyond fan montages on YouTube, I felt it was time to return to the history of the supercut, try to fill in the gaps of the existing work on it, and account for the social meaning behind its proliferation. And that's how this video essay began: with a hunch that a fad had somehow become ideological. As I performed over a year of image-research and encountered quite a few more cultural tributaries of the supercut in places I had not expected, it became clear that the supercut was never just a subset of remix, compilation, or fan culture, but was instead a material expression of a new historical mode of knowledge and power: the database episteme. The supercut was not invented within the avant-garde, later making its way into more populist forms of entertainment; rather, the roots of the form appeared simultaneously in many places at once. This phenomenon of multiple-emergence is most evident in the 1920s, where montages that first resemble what would later be called supercuts pop up in newsreels, sight gags in silent comedies, city symphonies, agit-prop documentary, German cross-section montages, mainstream narratives, and more (see, for example, *The Cruise of the Jasper B.* (1926), *Rien que les heures* (1926), *Turksib* (1929), *Melody of the World* (1929), or *The Crowd* (1928)). Despite the fact that the supercut embodies database-thinking, or at least a kind of simulation of a computer search operation, up to this point our histories of the supercut have been primarily archival, focusing on a few favored works and creators while not noticing the bulk of the tradition. This project thus primarily represents an attempt to bring a more rounded database-approach to the histories of the supercut, a database-form.

Structurally, this essay breaks up into three parts. Part one analyses the aesthetics of the supercut in terms of what kind of attention the form naturally emphasizes or intensifies. Drawing on Tim Smith's *Attentional Theory of Cinematic Continuity* (Smith 2012) and Eli Horwatt's work on "Instrumental Appropriation" in photocollage (Horwatt 2013), I argue that there is no semiotic or structuralist reason why viewers should prefer narrative patterning to database patterning of images. In fact, just as the conventions of classical continuity editing direct spectatorial attention toward elements of the unfolding narrative and away from extraneous details, so also the

strong patterning in supercuts focuses viewer attention toward that which repeats, stoking uncritical desire for that repetition, regardless of the content of the images. While critical analysis is certainly possible within the form, the supercut, broadly speaking, naturally gravitates toward desire instead of analysis.

Armed with this conclusion, part two sets out to discover the various roots of the supercut with this desire-centered-ness, and other pragmatics, as a guide. Deploying over a hundred video clips, I show how existing histories of the supercut, which tend to center on avant-garde filmmaking or fan cultures, both fail to mention a great deal of relevant works and, in some cases, greatly misunderstand the nature of the form. To correct these errors, I produce an original genealogy of the various tributaries of the moving image that feed into the modern supercut, including: the cinephilic thread, which stretches from *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) and *That's Entertainment* (1974) back to German and American film history montages of the 1920s; the cross-section thread, which begins with Walter Ruttmann's *querschnitt* montages of the 1920s and extends through the avant-garde work of later found footage filmmakers; the archival-analysis thread, with its roots in Shub and Eisenstein, that blossoms in the visual culture work of Berger, Loader & the Raffertys, and others; and the narrative thread, emerging in Vorkapich-style montages of the 1920s and 30s and continuing in later attempts to compress serial narrative events or express a character's essayistic thoughts.

With these various cultural series of the supercut in place, part three theorizes the histories of the supercut as a tale of the emergence of the database episteme. Over the past century, we have come to think of nearly every aspect of our lives as composed of data. The supercut is part of this; indeed, every time we use a search engine, we commission a computer to make us something quite like a supercut. Thus, the supercut entails not simply a mode of editing, but a mode of thinking expressed by a mode of editing. Accordingly, in part three I argue for the supercut as an example of what happens when an episteme takes root ideologically well before the technologies corresponding to the world it envisions have been invented. Just as capitalism treated workers as machines as a prelude to workers being replaced by machines, so also supercutters simulate database thinking in apparent anticipation of a moment, perhaps in the near future, when neural networks will be able to search the entirety of digitized film history and create supercuts themselves, automatically. In its desire-centered aesthetics and its often-evidentiary uses, the supercut carries many of the promises and threats of the database episteme. But like any technology, the supercut's threats need not outweigh its promises. In my conclusion, I imagine decoupling database-thinking from its service to capitalist systems of control and argue that

now is the time to imagine what this liberation of the database episteme could look like, both in the supercut and across culture more broadly.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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