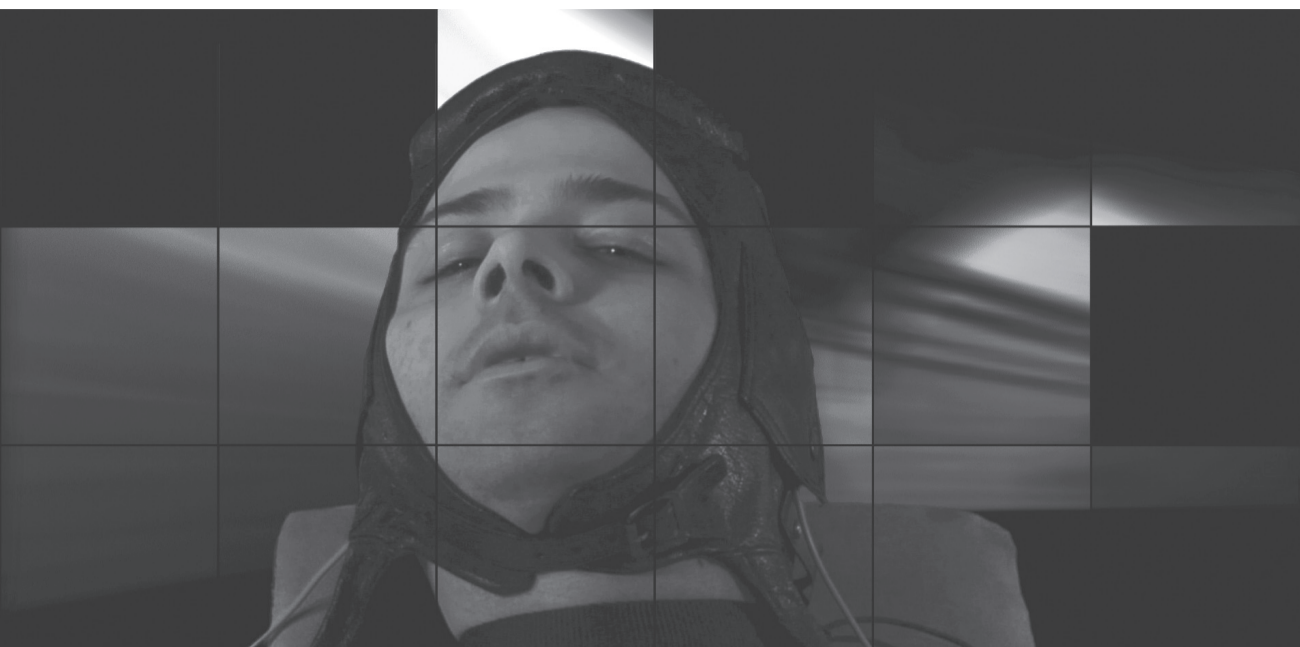


HOW IS IT MADE?

Phillips & Rowley

DAVID PHILIPS / PAUL ROWLEY DISCUSS THE MAKING AND THINKING PROCESSES BEHIND THEIR VIDEO-WORK *COMMONWEALTH*.

Phillips & Rowley *Commonwealth*

Phillips & Rowley. Research images – two stills from Yuri Gagarin newsreel.

COMMONWEALTH (HD video with sound. 2007) began with two found films and the discussion that emerged about points of intersection between them. The first was a 16mm film of Yuri Gagarin's triumphant return to Moscow after becoming the first man to orbit the earth. In less than an hour he went from being an unknown farmer's son to the most famous man in the world. The footage, a black and white newsreel from 1961, shows Gagarin reporting to Khrushchev in front of thousands of cheering, flag-waving Russians – along with motorcades, flowers and flags.

The second film we found was shot around the same time. 'Experiments in the Revival of the Organism' documents a science team tinkering with organ transplants. During the process a dog is taken apart, broken down into its principal parts, heart, liver, head, etc., and each of these separate organs is kept alive through extremely crude systems of bellows and pumps. Then the dog is put back together again and is seen jumping and running about. Same dog? Probably not.

Nothing of these films made it into the final work. Instead they promoted a discussion about a modular hagiography of sorts – a study of ideological figureheads that can be altered or replaced without affecting the remainder of the system. Gagarin was the perfect example of this – from farm boy to cosmonaut and later, without Khrushchev to bail him out, ejected, found face down drunk in the flowerbeds after falling off a balcony trying to grope his nurse – back to earth with a bang.

Both films got us thinking about ideas of the modular, sociological reading of standard units, building blocks, divisions, organised pieces. Some of these ideas have been worked into pieces we have made together over the years; from *Carbon 12*, which reflects standardisation in chemistry onto communication behaviour patterns, to the non-measurable quantum voids in between the flipping clock faces of *Gravity Loop*. Then from Locke's ideas of the 'body politic' comes the idea of a social body – the dog parts of society with the cosmonaut's head, and the need for ideology to put a face on it.

So we began to assemble a library of images that we thought might work in the piece – archive clips, scans from books and so on, and began to build digital collages of the images. We studied a lot of Russian mosaics, especially the glorification of ideology variety – the mosaics and relief sculptures in Treptow park in Berlin – mothers sending sons to war, while gathering grain. These mosaic elements provided the structural framework for the piece. We first built 'blank'



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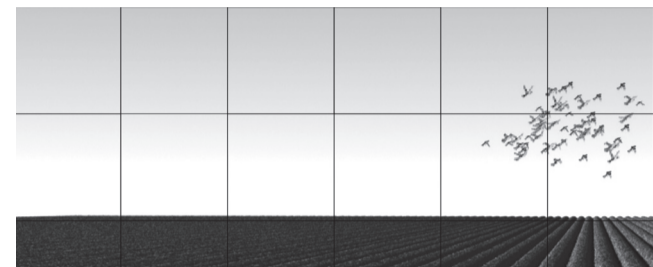
mosaic animations – blocks of colour that formed rigid grids, shuffled and switched on and off – a mosaic puzzle of sorts. This was with a view to making an animated model that would allow us to examine these ideological arrangements – compartmentalised concepts of social order and hegemony.

Into these animated sequences we composited stills and found footage ripped from DVDs – placeholders to see how moving footage would work within the mechanics of the mosaics. We built 'animatics', rough animations placing the temporary footage within the mosaics, matting the images so the footage took on the animating properties of the blocked out sequences – jumping from one part of the frame to the other, switching on and off in gridded sections, mapping the modular onto the frame.

We also examined the temporary architectures of the World Fairs of the late sixties and early seventies, the 1970 fair in Tokyo in particular. These brilliant imaginings of bright possible futures housed in temporary national pavilions show us how images of progress were deployed at that time, and how the permutations and design of images can advertise the ideology of events. So we looked a lot at the way images were presented to the public at that time, and how the visual language of progress was tailored to a large viewing public.

We were simultaneously working on building the original elements we needed for the piece that would later replace the samples. A long opening section was built in 3D software, a Tarkovskian forest, part *Ivan's Childhood*, part natural disaster – a long tracking shot through a black and red forest of silhouetted pines. Hundreds of 3D models of trees were placed and staggered to create the woods, and the camera moves were then set up to take the viewer through the trees to rise up slowly above the treetops to reveal the immensity of the forest.

This was the first section of the loop – a loop that would follow Gagarin's first orbit. The idea was to have the piece follow the physical movement of the Vostok – take off, orbit, landing. For this, we wanted to recreate a sequence with a cosmonaut in a gravity tolerance training machine, as a particle in a cyclotron, taking off from earth and feeling the force of gravity. This was done with a green screen HD shoot in the studio. A friend agreed to stand in for Mr. Gagarin and was fitted up with a suitable helmet, and filmed against the green screen. We then took this footage into the computer and replaced the green with an animated background we created. All this compositing was done in

Phillips & Rowley *Commonwealth*Phillips & Rowley *Commonwealth*Phillips & Rowley *Commonwealth* (Working image).

After Effects. The layers really stacked up, hundreds and hundreds, so we ended up rendering out elements as they were created, making films within the film and building up from these shorted extracts. This worked well with the modular approach.

The editing of the piece itself was done in After Effects as these animatics were built. The work was much more like building an animation than editing a short video work. This has been our working practice for many years, tending to work with the tools mostly used by animators and special effects artists. The stand-in elements were replaced with the 3D renders and the green screen footage. Further elements were shot and added; a fractured edit of numbered wooden balls tumbling in an old bingo wheel, scientific test footage we shot with hammers, lights and ECG machines, crowds, rotating chemical comparators, clouds.

For the end of the piece we built another 3D landscape, the inverse of the forest, a desolate landscape for the cosmonaut to return to. From the clouds the camera moves down to earth again for a second long tracking shot. The trees are gone, perhaps it's another place, perhaps the forest after the trees, perhaps the red furrowed fields before the forest. Isolated electricity pylons are seen on the horizon. The little eagles fly through the frame a second time. The loop begins again.

The audio for the piece was composed with cellist Jane O'Hara. Jane recorded a series of improvisations for cello for us, and these formed the basis of the soundtrack. With these soundtrack elements in place we then built up the sound design with other instruments and processed audio we recorded from various sources. The Air Train to JFK airport stands in for the roar of Yuri's spacecraft, the clacking wheel of the bingo machine, multiple layers of sound coming together to create a textured bed of audio.

Commonwealth is a model in some ways, in the sense that it is an object that can be used to examine the workings of a bigger structure. It ended up being weighted to the Soviet, but in many ways could address any ideology with a simple reshuffling of the content.

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