CHAPTER 2

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Between Citational Genealogy and the Counter-Archival Uncanny: Adam Curtis and the Democratisation of the Archive

Emily Baker

University College London

Can't Get You Out of My Head is a six-part documentary film series made by Adam Curtis and released on the BBC iPlayer in February 2021. Media scholars such as James Bennett have taken the launch of the iPlayer as their first example of the disruption to the 'structure of television's scheduled flow' in this new era of digital and thus personalised viewing.[1] Curtis declared himself aware of the extra freedom this immediate release to iPlayer would give him in terms of the complexity of content he could deal with; yet apart from being longer, in many ways the series's form and content adheres to his signature style, inaugurated with the release of *Pandora's Box* (1992, BAFTA winner for Best Factual Series in 1993) and refined over the course of a number of series and stand-alone documentaries.[2] Many of these series such as *The Century of the Self* (2002) and films such as *Hypernormalisation* (2016) operate around constellations of similar themes: power, control, science, individualism, radicalism, uncertainty, and inequality, with distinct and recurring case studies. *Can't Get You Out of My Head*, for example, extends the theme of *The Trap* (2007) in vilifying figures such as Bill Clinton and Tony Blair, as Jonathan Rosenbaum puts it, 'for being elected on liberal/labor platforms and then immediately giving away their hard-won power to the banks and markets, meanwhile increasing class inequality'.[3] While the history of Prozac was examined in *The Trap* as a means of showing how the psychiatric establishment and drug companies worked together to pacify the masses, in *Can't Get You Out of My Head* Curtis charts the story of Valium and its promotor Arthur Sackler who was responsible for its widespread sale to doctors (insisting it was not addictive) thus contributing to it becoming the most widely prescribed medication in the Western world by 1971. Not just politics, medicine, and psychiatry, but culture, mathematics, and a whole host of different social, academic, economic, and

techno-scientific discourses are revealed to have contributed to the formation and perpetuation of damaging assumptions about humankind which, in turn, form the basis for practical actions taken by governments, economists, and individuals with often devastating results. As Michel Foucault himself said, 'Society is an archipelago of different powers' and this chapter takes Curtis's thematic cues to examine his work in the light of Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian theories: biopower, Achille Mbembe's 'necropower', and Byung Chul Han's 'psychopower' as related to the use of big data for the control of populations.[4] I argue that Curtis's series can benefit from being understood as a genealogical study of the present, aware of its own discursive will-to-power, and at the same time, maintaining openness to multiple possible readings. Understanding it in this way should subdue critiques that label Curtis's work as 'incoherent and conspiracy-fuelled'.[5] I demonstrate that while the BBC documentary-making tradition is clearly folded into his work, Curtis's citational use of the BBC, and other, archives produces a clear counter-archive to the hegemonic discourses of power that the BBC was often complicit in producing, reflecting and/or underpinning.

Citing some of the critics of his work, Rosenbaum states that 'a closer look at Curtis's filmmaking style starts to raise a few questions about both the arguments themselves and the way that he propounds them'.[6] Rosenbaum mentions earlier commentators Paul Myerscough and Paul Arthur who pronounced themselves 'worried' and doubtful, respectively, when it comes to 'intellectual shortcuts and simplifications' amongst other elements.[7] Indeed, Foucault was often criticised on the same basis as Curtis with sceptics questioning the historical accuracy of the narrative created. Foucault, for his part, says:

> I am fully aware that I have never written anything other than fictions. For all that, I would not want to say that they were outside the truth. It seems plausible to me to make fictions work within truth, to introduce truth-effects within a fictional discourse, and in some way to make discourse arouse, 'fabri-cate,' something which does not yet exist, thus to fiction something.[8]

Foucault, like Curtis, knowingly sought to analyse and re-examine accounts of the past to reveal damaging operations of power, often linked to narratives themselves, that continued to have detrimental effects on values and practices in the present.

When considering Curtis's use of voice-over, it is true that he does not do much to subvert what Stella Bruzzi calls the 'archetypal solid male narrator' that has aroused suspicion because it is 'inevitably and inherently didactic'. For Bruzzi, transgression, within this model can be achieved through 'the insertion of ironic detachment between image and sound' or 'the reflexive treatment of the narrative tradition'.[9] Whilst Curtis's work is, as John Doyle argues, 'metajournalistic', and certainly meta-discursive, *Can't Get You Out of My Head* does not make use of irony to undermine the narrative discourse in this way. For Curtis, the narration *is* his journalistic position.[10] If there is anything working to disrupt this seemingly closed and edifying perspective, it is the repeated tropes of the visual (and sonic) uncanny that punctuate the narrative. Indeed, I argue that the particular political potentiality comes precisely from this juxtaposition between a somewhat unashamedly homiletic

omniscient narrator and a visual uncertainty and unknowability, which serves to counterbalance this totalising thread and opens up the texts to multiple meanings, to be co-constructed by the viewer.

The uncanny and somewhat open and contradictory effects of Curtis's montages of footage taken from the BBC archives lends the work to further being considered with reference to Derrida's concept of 'archive fever'.[11] In a *New Yorker* feature, Sam Knight comments upon Curtis's 'extraordinary license to explore and experiment with the BBC's archive of television output from the past seventy-four years, which might be the largest in the world'.[12] Due to this privileged access to the BBC archives, which contain over sixty miles of shelves held at Perivale, Curtis could be described as an *archon*, one of those 'guardian' figures who 'have the power to interpret the archives'.[13] There are two further useful intellections in Derrida's 'Archive Fever' that not only shed light on the effects of Curtis's work but are also adjacent and complementary to the Foucauldian tools outlined above: the first asserts the future-orientated work of the interpretation of the archive.[14] This we see immediately from *Can't Get You Out of My Head*'s opening inter-titled quotation by David Graeber: 'The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently'. The second is Derrida's assertion of the archive's own contradictory and thus, to some degree, self-destructive workings.[15] It is not a coincidence that Derrida takes a 'Freudian Impression' as his lens through which to view the archive, and here I argue that Curtis specifically works to accentuate the uncanniness (as theorised by Freud) at the heart of the archive, thus deliberately undermining any totalising interpretation and allowing the viewer to participate in the construction of meaning, further democratising the archive's information, as should be the *archon*'s role.[16]

A Genealogical Exploration of the Present

In a 2015 interview Curtis said, 'Everything is a construction. Personally, I think I'm more honest about the construction in television than some of my peers who pretend that it's neutral. None of television is neutral, it's all propaganda'.[17] Characterising it as 'aesthetic radicalism', Doyle places emphasis on metajournalistic elements in his reading of Curtis's work, describing him as a 'remixologist' due to his heavy reliance on citational practices.[18] Curtis's work makes use of 'found footage', photographs, reportage from the archives, documentary extracts, all pulled into a journalistic narrative through his narration. Indeed, whilst Curtis is more likely to cite literary influences than visual ones, his style is reminiscent of the intermedial archival collage, often with didactic narrator, of the Latin American 'third cinema' movement emblematised by *The Hour of the Furnaces* (*La hora de los hornos*, Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, 1968). The first episode of that three-part film begins with white intertext on a black background reading 'Notas y testimonios sobre el necolonialismo la violencia y la liberación' [Notes and testimonies on neocolonialism, violence and liberation], followed by an opening sequence that intersperses bursts of footage of state violence and mass protest with a black screen and more intertext, overlayed with rhythmic drumming music. In the case of *Can't*

Get You Out of My Head white intertext on black exhibits the previously mentioned, more hopeful, quotation of Graeber: 'The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently'. The music is more otherworldly than in the opening to *The Hour of the Furnaces* and the inaugural images are more static. In the same vein as the 'third cinema' movement, however, Curtis is concerned with denouncing neocolonialism, violence, and inequality, as well as condemning liberal inaction in the face of these. Yet, unlike many of the 'third cinema' films, his work is not a revolutionary call to arms. As the Graeber quote illustrates, here, emphasis is placed on the transformative power of narrative rather than guns. In this sense, Curtis demonstrates a Foucauldian understanding of discourse: a belief in its power to shape the way people think and behave; and a commitment to ask questions of the present by revisiting and rewriting the narratives told about the past to form a better impression of how we have got here, and thus perhaps how to move forward.

This attitude towards the past and the way in which it informs our understanding of the present is visible in the following by Curtis in a recent interview about *Can't Get You Out of My Head*, from which I quote at length:

> In the past I've tended to follow one idea or one set of ideas and how that played out in the world. In this one, I wanted to show how there have been lots of tributaries, lots of streams that initially seemed to have nothing to do with each other, but have all flowed down to a sort of 'sea of now' that we are swimming in [...]. And in that sense, I was just trying to do a history of the roots of present-day desire for change and yet also fear and uncertainty about how to change, and a feeling that somehow everything is inevitable and you can't change it. There was this strange mix of our time and I just wanted to explain the roots of that, historically, by telling a number of different stories.[19]

Foucault likewise sees history as a 'profusion of entangled events', and in 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' he says:

> If the genealogist [...] listens to history, he finds that there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.[20]

Both Foucault and Curtis eschew a teleological vision of history, emphasising instead the role of contingency in bringing about events and circumstances.[21] In Episode Three, entitled 'Money Changes Everything', which focuses among other things on the climate crisis, Curtis begins with phone footage taken from a driver-view position in a car in Malibu in 2018 by a woman (credited as Rebecca Hackett) crying and praying as she drives through intense wildfires. This brings the viewer straight into the subject-position of someone experiencing the immediate effects of an extreme weather event. He then goes back in time to articulate that Cold War developments, including attempts to predict and control the weather, had unintended consequences which, by sequential association, can be seen as a contributing factor to the present climate emergency. In discussing atomic bomb creator John Von Neumann's use of an early computer to model the climate system

Curtis says: 'his aim was to use it to predict and manipulate the weather to use as a weapon with which to attack the Soviet Union, but what he began had another consequence'. Left as a cliff hanger, this is followed by the statement, 'In 1961 a scientist Edward Lorenz made a mistake that revealed something that astonished him'. Curtis goes on to describe the way a change in a fourth decimal point revealed to scientists, for the first time, the instability of the climate system: 'he began to wonder whether the world's climate was not the stable, self-correcting system that other scientists believed; that it was unstable, and that one tiny change somewhere in the world could tip the whole system from one state into another'.

Each of these climate-related vignettes contains an emphasis upon the inexplicable, unknown, or unintended consequences of events or actions. As Foucault says, the purpose of a genealogy is not a quest for origins because they will always prove to have been diffuse and contingent:

> To follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion; it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations — or conversely, the complete reversals — the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us; it is to discover that truth or being do not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents.[22]

Indeed, as described, Curtis attributes our knowledge of the danger of climate change to Lorenz's 'faulty calculation'. Those critics that accuse Curtis of fabricating conspiracies might argue that he is simply producing another 'grand narrative' to replace those that he challenges, since despite maintaining events in their dispersion, he does link them together through the would-be objective narrative voice, often taking strong political positions in doing so. Yet in a series such as *Can't Get You Out of My Head* that weaves together a vast number of different stories from multiple national contexts and about many different groups and individuals, it would be incredibly unlikely that any one viewer articulate the 'central thread' in the same way as any other. The sheer plurality and dispersion of images and themes is just one of the ways in which Curtis ultimately 'fails' to produce a grand narrative himself, yet, like Foucault, he is effective in explicitly challenging some of the powerful ideologies that have shaped the imaginations of millions before.

Emotional Histories and the Counter-Archival Uncanny's Challenge to Grand Narratives

The focus on the fear of the anonymous driving woman in the Californian wildfires reveals another aspect of Foucault's genealogical method from which Curtis derives inspiration. This is the revisionist approach to political events, refusing solely to focus on global events, the decisions of leaders, and privileged forms of 'traditional history'.[23] Instead, attention is often placed upon the stories of more peripheral historical figures: from Black Panther and Tupac Shakur's mother, Afeni Shakur, to Mao's wife Jiang Qing, and at other times relatively ordinary people, either through pre-existing documentaries or news footage and interviews. These are

rescued from the archive and visually and narratively fleshed out achieving a form of personalisation that helps the viewer to appreciate how individuals fit into wider historical moments. At other times, even more remote from power, footage of anonymous individuals or groups is used to create a space for the viewer to construct their own impression of what was thought or felt. As Foucault says, genealogy is concerned with 'sentiments, love, conscience, instincts'.[24] More concretely, Curtis describes his work as 'an emotional history', seeking to privilege inner thoughts and desires, as a crucial part of recording the mood or zeitgeist of a given time and the forces that shaped events. These personalised trajectories and emotional histories play an important part in counter-archivally challenging the grand narratives that support a certain understanding of the past as well as present realities that may be derived from them.

Two such grand narratives are those of Chinese communism and American individualism. Curtis undermines the notion of Chinese communism by showing how Mao's wife Jiang Qing was spurred on by a radical individualism and hunger for personal power, which helped to propel the Cultural Revolution into its most brutal and uncontrollable form. In the case of American individualism, he reveals how people's widespread isolation in suburbs led to alienation and mistrust manifesting paradoxically in communities such as the John Birch Society unifying around paranoia and conspiracy. In other words, both ideologies, which start from seemingly opposite positions (communism and individualism), seem to be haunted by their opposite principles.

The isolation, unease, and alienation of many ordinary people living in the suburbs is one of the recurring sites through which the visual uncanny erupts in the series, underscoring the notion of ghosts, haunting, and repression that Curtis also narratively discusses from the outset. For example, shortly after the focus on the fairly high-level climate science discussed previously, he lingers on a close-up shot of the face of a short-haired woman smoking in her suburban house, taken from the documentary *America: Democracy on Trial* (James Mossman, 1968). As she smokes and drinks coffee the shot lasts around forty seconds such that the viewer has time and space to imagine what she is thinking. Deep in thought, just towards the end, a worried look passes across her face and she bites her lip anxiously. As the close-up of her face fades, it becomes overlaid by a shot of a car driving past identical suburban houses suggesting that the same scene of preoccupied time-passing might be being repeated many times over in each of the domestic units (Figure 2.1). Curtis's narration follows:

> In America in the 1960s was a man who was convinced that there was something frightening hidden under the surface of the new modern suburbs; that behind what looked like a confident individualism rising up throughout America, there were really hidden fears eating away at people from inside. There were feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and emptiness, and he was convinced he could make a lot of money out of these feelings.

The extrapolation of the feeling of fear experienced by this woman is thus visually and narratively generalised to include hidden fears haunting the suburbs of America,

Fig. 2.1. Pensive woman in the American suburbs, still from James Mossman's 1968 *Democracy on Trial*, in *Can't Get You Out of My Head*, dir. by Adam Curtis (UK, 2021).

but then reparticularised through the story of this man, Arthur Sackler, who saw a capitalistic opportunity in this alienation.

This suggestion of haunting is in line with Derrida's formulation of the 'archive' as 'cleft, divided, contradictory [...] always dislocating itself because it is never one with itself'.[25] The archive contains a spectral version of every position, thus confirming none; for every example there will be a counter-example. In particular, the BBC archive lends itself well to counter-archival mining because, as a public broadcasting service, the BBC has always had an ambivalent relationship to power: it is in a privileged position to both establish hegemonic values (that may reflect the biases of society of the time) and also call other forms of (state or economic) power to account. The permanent contradiction within the archive is what Derrida called 'archive fever' and he describes this fever 'or disorder which we are experiencing today' as one manifested within 'modern history and historiography' including 'all the detestable revisionisms, as well as the most legitimate, necessary, and courageous rewritings of history'. In other words, rewritings of history, based on the archive, will always occur but some of them will be 'detestable' and others 'necessary, and courageous'. I argue that Curtis uses the BBC archive to unravel hegemonic discourses and engage in the courageous rewritings that seek to reveal the damaging operations of power and, as Derrida puts it, the 'unstable limit between public and private, between the family, the society, and the State, between the family and an intimacy even more private than the family, between oneself and oneself'.[26]

For the next few vignettes there is a particular gender dimension to Curtis's investigation, potentially locating women as most emblematic of this 'unstable limit between public and private, between the family, the society and the State' that Derrida describes. Curtis reports:

> The new wave of feminists pointed out that many more women than men were taking Valium. They said the drug was being used to blot out the feeling that millions of women were having that there was something badly wrong with their lives. That when they did what they were supposed to do it didn't bring the happiness they had been promised.

Set against a clip of a young girl being presented as a debutante in society, this is followed by a jumbled testimony of a fatigued-sounding woman:

> There's got to be a better way for me, and I went about it in the way that I wanted to, regardless of what society was saying. And then it all kind of caved in on me. And I just figured, well, you know, what's the use? And so I ended up in the state hospital [...]. I found if I... I don't think there is a solution because if I act the way society tells me to act, and do abide by the rules, my life is fine and everybody's happy.

This focus upon the expectations that society constructs and the way that individuals feel beholden to these expectations is an example of what Foucault identifies as the process of self-disciplining that operates hand in hand with the 'examination' operating in all medical and educational institutions since the end of the eighteenth century and the obligation to conform to what psychiatric power defines as 'normal'.[27] With the mediation of capital, the pharmaceutical industry in the twentieth century turns to drugs to control 'abnormal' tendencies and mask the fact that the aspirations produced by capitalism are far from fulfilling.

Biopower, Necropower, and Psychopower

The mass-prescription of addictive anti-depressant medication is just one form of control, in this case facilitated by the medical-pharmaceutical establishment in an effort to make money and turn individuals into docile and productive citizen-consumers. Curtis's series visually distinguishes between a number of different types of power that Foucault and his successors identify and theorise in their work, beginning with the enduring legacy of colonialism that, through its racial stratification, causes forms of necropolitical power to endure long past the end of the public 'torture' era of punishment that faded out towards the beginning of the nineteenth century.[28] In Achille Mbembe's scheme, 'politics' is theorised as a function of 'the work of death' and 'sovereignty', 'the right to kill' and, at the very outset of the series (giving it particular prominence) Curtis explores this with reference to the then British colony of Kenya.[29] The narrative introduction proceeds thus: 'In the late 1950s, as the British Empire was falling apart, there was a growing sense that something was badly wrong under the surface'. The 'old forms of power' that Curtis begins to describe (and the corruption and violence that characterise them) are represented initially in a visual register of City of London bankers, who 'had been at the very heart of the Empire'. Amongst them, Lord Kindersly and William Keswick, we are told, were accused of using insider information to make themselves millions of pounds. They dismiss the charges saying, 'it is difficult to remember conversations one had whilst shooting on a

grouse moor'. They are declared innocent by the government. This is emblematic of the scenario which has been common throughout history in which the poor are disproportionally criminalised, whilst the rich (especially financiers) get away with (figuratively and often literally) murder. Indeed, Mbembe argues that by no means have we seen the completion of the passage from punitive power to a form of sovereignty experienced as 'the production of general norms by a body (the demos) made up of free and equal men and women', in other words Foucault's disciplinary society.[30] In this first sequence we see that at the heart of British 'democracy' the elites already rig the system to ensure that they maintain disproportionate power and wealth. Curtis proceeds, structurally, to link this power and wealth to atrocities in the colony.

This revelation of banker corruption precipitates a narrative turn-of-phrase that becomes a common linking device throughout the series: 'At the same time'. In this case, at the same time, 'reports had started to come back from one of the last parts of the Empire — Kenya — that seemed to show that those in charge had gone out of control'. An image of an immobile Kenyan child on the ground with a group of white and black men standing over them (seemingly trying to identify whether they are dead) is followed by a cut to the 'psychological adjustment' camps established as part of the fight against the Kenyan liberation movements, such as the Mau Mau. Here, whatever forms of 're-education' may be initially intended, mass torture and killing ensue. Mbembe's stated concerns are precisely these figures of sovereignty still very much operating 'the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations' that, he argues, 'constitute the *nomos* of the political space in which we still live'. He identifies that 'the colony represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where "peace" is more likely to take the face of a "war without end"'. For him, it is the 'state of exception and the relation of enmity' that have 'become the normative basis of the right to kill'.[31] In this case, the 'state of exception' is, precisely, the potential fissure of empire; and thus violence is constructed as necessary to subordinate the Mau Mau group at the forefront of the fight for independence.

Curtis's representation visualises what Mbembe describes as a 'peculiar terror formation' within the colony that represents a 'concatenation of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege'.[32] In the first camp shot we see rows of Kenyan men facing in different directions and a woman with a baby on her back being marched down the aisle by a white woman in a colonial uniform (Figure 2.2). The mass of people ordered in such a way demonstrates the biopolitical effort to control, or what the narration describes as 'manipulate [...] the African mind', yet the obvious impermanence of the camp-like situation evokes the 'state of exception/siege', and accordingly the narration confirms, 'but then what happened in the camps turned into a frenzied madness. The British used mass killing and torture as they desperately tried to hold on to power'. Mbembe describes this operation thus, 'Here [in the colony] we see the first syntheses between massacre and bureaucracy, that incarnation of Western rationality'.[33] Visually, correspondingly, we see an
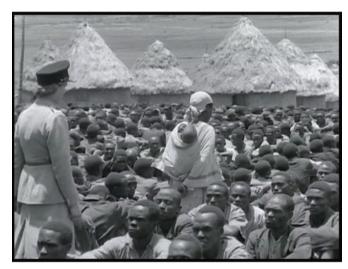
FIG. 2.2. Prisoners at a British 'psychological adjustment' camp in Kenya, still from
Can't Get You Out of My Head, dir. by Curtis (UK, 2021).

administrator in a van holding some papers whilst cuddling up to a figure covered
entirely in a white sheet with eye holes cut out, looking ominously like a figure
of the Ku Klux Klan, producing an uncanny effect due to the displacement of this
figure familiar in one context (the southern United States at successive times in the
nineteenth and twentieth centuries) to the British colony. Thus, the Kenyan camps
sequence clearly demonstrates Mbembe's thesis that 'power [...] continuously refers
and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy', in
this case the Mau Mau.[34] It is, furthermore, clearly racism, as Foucault diagnosed
and Mbembe underscores, that facilitates the split between 'those who must live
and those who must die'.[35]

Whilst earlier works of Foucault such as *Discipline and Punish* relied on historical
periodisation to chart changes in regimes of sovereignty, in 'The Mesh of Power'
Foucault is clear about the need to speak of 'a hierarchy of different powers' at
work at any one time that need to be appreciated in their 'historic and geographic
specificity'.[36] Curtis, through visual and narrative juxtaposition, as well as larger
structural associations, is adept at conveying the coexistence of disciplinary power
with other forms of 'necropower' and punitive 'anatomo-politics', the enacting
of full control over the body that institutions such as prisons still aim to achieve,
and that are also heavily practiced along racialised lines. Later in the series in a
disturbing sequence dealing with the 'new world of mass incarceration in America',
we see predominantly non-white inmates being forced to crawl along the floor
to their dorms, full body to the ground, some of them naked, as they are verbally
abused by guards in a form of humiliation and dehumanisation reminiscent of the
treatment of prisoners of war (Figure 2.3).

Racism, back in the metropolis, is the next site of Curtis's exploration in the first
episode, chronologically following the Kenyan camps, and introducing the first

FIG. 2.3. Dehumanising treatment of prisoners at an unnamed United States penal facility, still from *Can't Get You Out of My Head*, dir. by Curtis (UK, 2021).

personal case study of the series, that of Trinidadian intellectual and 'revolutionary but also a vicious gangster', Michael de Freitas.[37] De Freitas, as characterised in this phrase by Curtis, is emblematic of the tensions and contradictions inherent to the archive and arguably every human being, discussed above with reference to Derrida's 'Archive Fever'. Whilst, as the series reveals, de Freitas later went on to commit morally reprehensible actions such as exploitation and murder, we can still learn from his story and appreciate that, at other times and in other circumstances, he may have had noble intentions. In the first instance, de Freitas's account, presented in interview footage, reveals the disjuncture felt by those who travel from the colonies and ex-colonies to the so-called 'motherland' only to find an anxious and fearful society that rejects them. In other terms the fearful society could be characterised as experiencing a form of sublimated 'colonial/postcolonial guilt', but Curtis denominates this particular phenomenon 'Englishism', defined as 'an anger and a melancholy that came from the loss of empire'. In a classically arrogant and patronising vein the television interviewer asks, 'you see this is the great mystery, see when you came here you say you found you weren't wanted, why then did you stay? Why did you choose to stay here?'. This is a problematic formulation of the discourse that assumes that Britain is superior and therefore people choose to come in large numbers, and thus they ought to be grateful for the opportunity, despite the social ostracism and hostility they face; the atrocious 'why don't you just go back to where you came from' narrative expressed starkly in public broadcasting. In another sequence, in the same episode, we see a South Asian man, fitted with a microphone by a journalist, entering a barber's shop only to be told 'No' by a well-to-do sounding voice (presumably the barber). When he insists, following more flat 'no's without explanation, the barber says the shop is closed, while it clearly is not. As such, the initial vignettes move from the continued punitive and genocidal control

waged under the name of empire in Kenya into the metropolis which still upholds racial hierarchy in discourse as well as its own forms of dehumanising practices.

In other case studies from the series, Otherness in more than just racial terms is shown to be an object of discursive and material disciplinary policing. As Foucault writes at the end of *The Will to Knowledge* (1976), the 'formidable power of death', that had reached new heights of genocide and war since the nineteenth century, was a paradoxical counterpart to the new forms of control that sought 'a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations'. This form of power was related to 'the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity'. This is what Foucault terms 'the biopolitics of the population'.[38] One of the pillars of this 'technology of power' developed to achieve 'the regulation of the social body' was sexuality. Accordingly, this aspect of Foucault's analysis is revealed in another of Curtis's vignettes when we learn of the case of the trans woman Julia Grant, who faced incredible barriers to fulfilling her desire to transition to the body she wanted, erected by medical and psychological gatekeepers.

In the attitude of the authoritarian, patriarchal psychiatrist, we see the same logics underpinning the rise of 'biopolitical' power, whereby reproduction and the family were placed at the heart of state productivity, and forms of unproductive sexual desire were stigmatised and policed. In fact, the psychiatrist is such a patronising representative of the medical establishment, and its pretensions to be the guardian of norms, whilst withdrawing people's control over their own bodies, that it almost comes across as a parody of Foucault's argument. In a room with three additional observers with clipboards, the psychiatrist begins by asking, 'What do you mean by "being a woman"?', to which Julia replies, 'I tend to reject my masculine body'. The psychiatrist asks, 'You know it to be masculine?', to which Julia replies, 'I identify it as masculine because society identifies it as masculine', and the psychiatrist callously says, 'It's not a matter of society, it's a matter of anatomy'. When Julia, frustrated with the process, decides to have breast implants privately, the psychiatrist scolds her:

> It is a medical matter it isn't a personal choice. I like to be informed. See, once again you're overstepping the mark and I don't like it one bit [...] you're not arranging this affair in a manner that fits our protocol [...] and I don't like people who step out of line.

The bureaucratic language of 'protocol' in this system supersedes bodily and mental autonomy and the freedom to choose (and even pay for) one's own outcomes. The fully tragic consequences of this bullying and forestalling attitude to Julia's transition are revealed when we see her seek a privatised sex change operation. When complications arise from the surgery she is taken into hospital and, because the surgery was unrecorded on her medical file, the authorities do what they can to stop the bleeding but leave her unable to have orgasms. At the end of her story, we see her frustrated, depressed, and alone.

The working of Foucault's 'biopolitical power' is evident in this scenario when regulation of bodies becomes the purview of the state. However, in his post-Foucauldian work, Byung Chul Han shows that under neoliberalism there is a shift and a new regime of power adds to this dynamic: 'Biopolitics is the governmental technology of disciplinary power. However, this approach proved altogether unsuited to the neoliberal regime, which exploits the psyche above all'.[39] Biopolitics is taken one step further when 'big data are used to control people at a pre-reflexive level in what Han has termed 'digital psychopolitics'. Big data are determined by Han to represent 'a highly efficient psychopolitical instrument that makes it possible to achieve comprehensive knowledge of the dynamics of social communication'.[40] In the final episode, mirroring this trajectory of increased control over bodies and minds on a mass scale, Curtis reveals some of the workings of different societies that exploit this in varied ways: China, the United States, and the United Kingdom. As with the vignettes deconstructing the opposition between American individualism and Chinese communism, discussed earlier, Curtis visually and narratively deconstructs the dichotomy between perceived social control under Chinese communism and ostensible freedom in 'the West', revealing that both are subject to the neoliberal 'Dictatorship of Capital'.

The 'Dictatorship of Capital' is visually established in the opening sequence of the very first episode of the series including images of London's Canary Wharf, emblematic of global financial capitalism, structurally linked through a jump cut to a burning car in a low-income area, followed by an advancing wall of riot police in the USA, linked in the same way to a triumphant Biden just being elected, and succeeded by a room full of computer servers. In this visual narrative capitalism, as Han argues, has achieved the status of a 'new transcendency' under which circumstance 'politics lapses into servitude [...]. It becomes the handmaiden of Capital'.[41] These images are revisited at the beginning of a vignette in which, in the United Kingdom, the polemic figure of Dominic Cummings is presented as key in spreading the belief among politicians of the need to use large-scale data analytics to examine 'underlying patterns in modern society'. Over a visual sequence of Chinese hostesses being trained for the Olympics, followed by other shots of busy streets and people on public transport in China, the narrator says: 'But Cummings was not alone. Across the world there was a growing feeling that politics had completely lost touch with the people and was therefore losing its power to hold society together'. Shortly afterwards, a police bureaucrat of the city of Guiyang proudly explains, and demonstrates, the way in which individual citizens are marked and tracked in all of their social interactions in the offline world, as well as in the online. Good behaviour is rewarded with 'social credits' and the failure to submit to this form of conditioning over time leads to confinement and so-called 're-education'.

Quoting Karl Marx's *Gundrisse*, Han reminds us that 'it is not the individuals who are set free by free competition; it is, rather, capital which is set free'.[42] The lack of freedom for individuals and neutralisation of resistance to this situation in the USA is mirrored in visuals that pan down a big glass skyscraper from a low camera angle, to see the American and Texas flags reflected in it. This cuts to a low-angle

view of a similar looking skyscraper from inside the opposite glass building (giving the effect of a cage) which pans down and across to take in a man in a suit coming up the escalator. Interspersed with interview footage of him, Tupak Shakur says:

> You know those little things that they have for the mice, where they go through around in a circle and there's little blocks for it and everything, well society is like that. They'll let you go as far as you want but as soon as you start asking questions and you're ready to change — boom.

Through examining these different forms of control, from the base punitive anatomo-political, to the biopolitical control of people's lives and its final evolution into the digital psycho-political, Curtis demonstrates that many of these technologies of control overlap and enhance each other. It is only through the counter-archival examination all of these different 'tributaries' that make up the 'sea of now' that we can apprehend what the future may hold, and work to imagine it differently.

Conclusion

The counter-archival, uncanny effects produced by Curtis's citational return to the archive, as well as the call to imagine the future differently, remind us of Derrida's figuration of the archive as, crucially, 'a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow'.[43] In the final episode Curtis touches on the eruption of Covid-19 into the already chaotic global reality:

> In the past, the shock of catastrophes has often led to a radical reorganisation of societies. And it may be that even in the gross uncertainty of these days, that same impulse to imagine other kinds of future will emerge.

He proceeds to speculate upon three possible futures: first, one that builds upon the Chinese model of the mass prediction and control of human behaviour that we have seen; the second is that 'the future will be like the past', which is visualised by scenes of Joe Biden coming out and waving to a crowd, implying that his election represents the continuation of the same old problematic system; and finally, 'the third possibility is to try to imagine genuinely new kinds of futures, ones that have never existed before'. This ends the series on a hopeful note, with a re-assertion of the power of the imagination, in this case prompted by Curtis's counter-archive, to shape the future differently.

As discussed, Curtis can be understood to be one of the *archons* of Derrida's 'Archive Fever'. He is afforded, by the BBC, 'the hermeneutic right... the power to interpret the archive', of which they are the guardians.[44] In a footnote to 'Archive Fever' Derrida states that 'there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory'. Furthermore, '[e]ffective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitutions, and its interpretation'.[45] In a recent interview Curtis discusses the fact of the series being released straight to BBC iPlayer, rather than being shown on terrestrial television. In a podcast interview with journalist David Chambers, Curtis is clear about the very different opportunities that making films

for the Internet, as opposed to television, have afforded him. Specifically, he talks about the added complexity obtainable when you are not 'explaining everything to everyone'. In this case, 'you know that they can stop and start and go and find things out'. As a result, 'it becomes a much looser and a much more respectful relationship with the audience because you just assume that they're going to do what they want to do rather than just being my prisoner for an hour'.[46] This proves that, despite the ostensibly didactic tone of the narration discussed in the Introduction, Curtis is well aware that he does not have control over the meanings made in the minds of the viewers.

By presenting his interpretation of the archive to the public, and by leaving them space to further make meaning of it for themselves, Curtis plays a crucial part in democratising the 'information' held in the archive. The word 'information' itself comes from the Latin noun *informatio*, 'outline, concept, idea' or the verb *informare*, 'to train, instruct, educate, shape'; thus, in a relevant sense, 'information' is not a fully-fledged piece of knowledge being transferred, as implied by current usage, but is by nature only an outline or idea expressed by the transmitter that is *in formation* into an idea or concept in the mind of the viewer.[47] Thus, Curtis democratises information and creates a counter-archive on multiple different levels: he uncovers stories from the archive that would otherwise remain hidden; he provides a narrative framework to contextualise the material historically in ways that disrupt the hegemonic and monoglossic discourses of power; and, through creative juxtapositions, dissonance, and lingering (often on the inexplicable), he conjures a form of the uncanny that successfully 'haunts' his visual ordering of the archive, crucially leaving space for the viewer to form their own understanding of themselves, the world they inhabit, and the possible futures that lie ahead.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that Curtis sets out to give a genealogical account of the present. In the same vein as Foucault, he understands discourse to be something that has shaped, and can shape, the world. The account he constructs provides an important counter-narrative to hegemonic and monoglossic discourses of (the British) empire, Chinese communism, the Cold War, the American Dream, and liberalism (among others), as well as mistakes and problematic legacies of the medical, mathematical, and psychological sciences. The establishment, late capitalism, and forms of techno- and psycho-power are all in the firing line of his verbal-visual weaponry. However, instead of just replacing one narrative with another, I argue that he encourages viewers to co-construct knowledge as the films progress. By democratising long-since-forgotten elements of the archive, Curtis creates continuity with the past in ways that can only be interpreted and forged in the mind of each individual viewer. There is much that is left unexplained and even where there is explanation the totalising tone of his narrative voice is inevitably and deliberately undermined by 'archive fever', the tendency of the archive to contradict itself and reveal the uncanny and inexplicable elements of the human experience.

Notes to Chapter 2

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23. Ibid., p. 153.
24. Ibid., p. 139.
25. Derrida, 'Archive Fever', p. 53.
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27. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 184–86; and *Psychiatric Power: Lecture at the Collège de France 1973–74*, trans. by Graham Burchell, ed. by Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 202.
28. Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', pp. 8–10.
29. Ibid., p. 16.
30. Ibid., p. 13.

31. Ibid., pp. 14, 23, 16.
32. Ibid., p. 22.
33. Ibid, p. 23.
34. Ibid., p. 16. Incidentally members of the Mau Mau ended up bringing a legal case against the British government in 2009 that led to a partial acknowledgement of the atrocities perpetrated against them but sadly not a recognition of the systematic torture, nor the liability of the British government. See 'Mau Mau Case: UK Government Accepts Abuse Took Place', *BBC News*, 17 July 2012 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18874040> [accessed 13 July 2023].
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