

BORIS GROYS: THINKING IN LOOP

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Since Boris Groys first published his seminal *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1988; and in translation as *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 1994), he has done much to extend his thinking beyond the confines of academia, even going so far as to become a member of the International Association of Art Critics. However *Thinking in Loop: Three Videos on Iconoclasm, Ritual and Immortality*, an exhibition of three video compilations accompanied by a voiceover of Groys reading short theoretical texts he himself has written, is the first time to my knowledge that this aesthetic theorist has decided to inhabit more fully the role (of artist) and produce the (art) works that have so often served as the objects of his attention.

Each of Groys's three texts meditates on one significant philosophical theme – iconoclasm, religion, immortality – but does so with an eye to the privileged modes by which those themes find embodiment in our current 'post-enlightenment' moment. Thus religion, defined as the 'suspension of all opinion', finds its most contemporary expression through the mass media, which reveals it, in Groys's terms, as the pure 'mediality of humanity' and so as 'the avant-garde of our present world'. The vampire and the zombie become figures for that very secular immortality that lies at the root of modern medical science. And iconoclasm takes up residence in nothing other than the moving image itself, which Groys conceives of both as the storehouse for all our fantasies of self-annihilation and as the very medium by which such annihilation, in the form of audience passivity and cognitive submission, may be enacted over and over again.

Importantly, Groys notes that it is only when the moving image enters the exhibition space, or the space of everyday life, that its temporal

flows, and so its control over 'our time', may be either 'interrupted' or 'overlooked'. Hence Groys's move into the space of the gallery, and to video as a means of multiplying the texts he offers to the audience. The idea here, of course, is not to illustrate the philosophical rumination with visual aids but to 'interrupt' or perhaps to 'jam' the transmission. So for example in the *Immortal Bodies* video text (2006) we see footage of the story of the golem, of Gunther von Hagens's *Body Worlds* exhibition, and of George Romero's classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The montage of *Iconoclastic Delights* (2002) includes footage from *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), *Mars Attacks!* (1996) and *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979).

The only problem here is that Groys's texts do indeed – and are no doubt meant to – stand on their own as philosophical sketches (that they may be downloaded from the Apex website and are available in printed form in the gallery only attests to this fact), leaving their subjection to the video mixes seem rather contingent. Of course this kind of rough open-endedness is a stance coveted by art in general, but there remains some question as to whether it is effective, or strategic, or productive when crossed with the sharp edge of critical thought (and Groys's is sharper than most). That it is merely different is not, in itself, enough.

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Iconoclastic Delights
(still), 2006, video,
20 min. Courtesy Apex
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