

MOVING IMAGE SOURCE

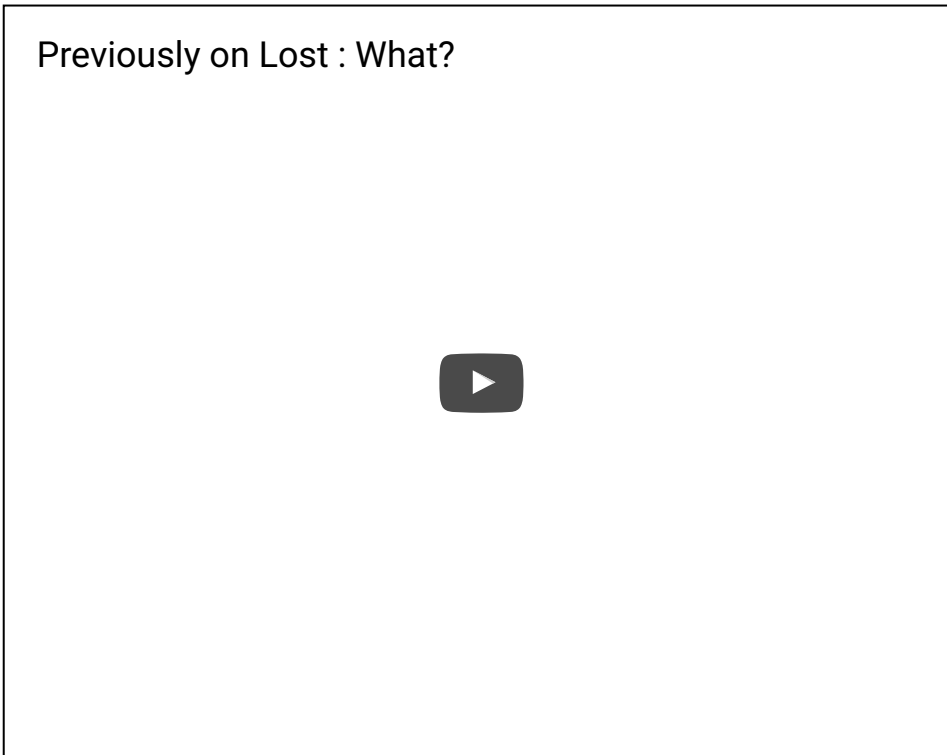
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Compilation Nation

The history and the rise of the supercut

by Tom McCormack posted April 25, 2011

According to Know Your Meme—an increasingly important database of meme histories that recently sold for an undisclosed seven-figure sum to Cheezburger Networks, a company that, despite or perhaps because of its absurd name, is starting to gain a lot of power on the Internet—the term *supercut* was first used by blogger Andy Baio in April 2008. Baio's post ruminates on this montage created from ABC's *Lost*:



Wrote Baio:

This insane montage of (nearly) every instance of "What?" from the LOST series started me thinking about this genre of video meme, where some obsessive-compulsive superfan collects every phrase/action/cliche from an episode (or entire series) of their favorite show/film/game into a single massive video montage.

For lack of a better name, let's call them supercuts.

The post was prescient. Know Your Meme also says that the first supercut to go super-viral, Rich Juzwiak's *I'm Not Here to Make Friends*, went up in June 2008, after Baio's post. Juzwiak, who maintains the popular entertainment blog *fourfour*, stitched together a full 3 minutes and 20 seconds of reality show contestants exclaiming, "I'm not here to make friends" or variations thereof. The compendium simultaneously draws attention to the proliferation of the generic expression while highlighting minor differences between iterations. We laugh at the ridiculous banality of Juzwiak's video even as we become connoisseurs; by the end we notice the idiosyncrasies in attitude, pacing, setting. The repeated phrase creates Steinian cadences, losing significance and turning into pure sound before reversing course and gaining a surplus of mysterious meaning. Halfway through, the characters become self-aware: "That is so typical, so cliché of an answer," "I mean, I don't want to be a cliché, but..." The chasm between subject and viewer opened up by our ironizing mockery collapses; there's a joke, and the contestants seem as aware of it as we are, or more so.

A lot of found-footage moving-image work can be seen as an attempt to take heterogeneous material and devise or discover new ways to organize it. Surrealist dream-logic provides one model for divining or creating patterns that weren't previously apparent. Marxist historiography provides another. Feminist theories of viewership a third. Some of the most ambitious found-footage works in recent memory have taken a staggeringly syncretic approach; Jean-Luc Godard's Histoire(s) du Cinéma (1998), an epic meta-history of all of cinema and all of the 20th century, is perhaps the most staggering and most syncretic. The supercut represents a peculiarly systematic approach to found footage moviemaking, but it's not without precedent.

Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958), an early example of found-footage cinema, climaxes with interwoven footage of disasters: sinking ships, falling bridges, crashing cars, exploding blimps. Not only could it be considered an early version of a supercut, but an early version of a particular genre of supercut, one that predates the other kinds: Epic Fail compilations. These compilations themselves grew out of early YouTube PWNAGE videos, which were the Internet continuation of those VHS tapes released out of basement operations in the '80s and '90s that collected clips of disaster footage and that circulated at off-the-beaten-track music stores and garage sales and other places you didn't want your daughter frequenting. Conner's *A Movie* was laced with clues for various readings, comprising a hodgepodge of American foundation myths set against a titanic battle between eros and thanatos. Fail vids aren't quite as ambitious, but they do have this striking formal predecessor.

The first section of Dara Birnbaum's Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman (1978-'79)—an early example of recycled video as opposed to film—is structured around various clips taken from the *Wonder Woman* TV show, in which Lynda Carter miraculously changes in an electric instant from Diana Prince into the superhero. In a 2009 conversation with Birnbaum in *Artforum*, artist Cory Arcangel made the connection to supercuts blatant:

You anticipated the way people would express themselves today through technology. In fact, if you look on YouTube, one of the most popular genres is called "super cuts"—where people take a television show and edit together all the similar parts. It's so common now, because every ten-year-old kid has iMovie, but the format...is predicted by your work.

There are also foreshadowers in the other arts. Ed Ruscha's artist's books make for a striking parallel. Books like Twenty-six Gasoline Stations (1962) and Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966) compile clichés not from the media but from the material world. Ruscha's works insist on clichés until they start to fascinate; they're simultaneously critical and admiring and so bear more than just a superficial resemblance to many supercuts.

Certain literary works presage the trend. The appearance of multiple epigraphs often signals that we're in the land of the proto-supercut. The "extracts" that open *Moby-Dick* can be seen as constituting a supercut of whale-related asides. Some of the less cryptically montaged sections of Walter Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project* read, in their current form, like supercuts of 19th century ideas. The literary Web journal *The New Inquiry*, a site dedicated to bringing criticism into the Internet age, has picked up on this trend and run with it; their regular feature "Variations on a Theme" consists solely of collections of interrelated quotes.

The most unmistakable forerunners of the supercut come from the end of the 20th and start of the 21st century. For *Home Stories* (1990), Matthias Müller fashioned an elliptical narrative out of a host of very similar scenes from Hollywood melodramas. Pastel-decked women linger in large, well-ornamented rooms, all lying down, throwing their heads back and forth, hearing something, turning on a lamp, looking shocked, slamming doors. Funny in their sameness, the women also unearth a disturbed core to the gilded dreams of '50s America. Müller would continue this kind of genre revisionism with *The Phoenix Tapes*, his 1999 collaboration with Christoph Girardet, which took 40 Alfred Hitchcock films and rearranged them to bring out parallels and reflections. Mothers are called for frequently, pendants grasped; elaborately choreographed kissing bounces around and women are dipped in every direction. Müller and Girardet's formal strategies are in line with the hyper-auteurist approach academics and critics often take regarding Hitchcock's work, seeing it as a complex database of visual mannerisms and types from which one can divine psychic patterns.

Made after *Home Stories* but before *The Phoenix Tapes*, Christian Marclay's *Telephones* (1995) edits together phone conversations from a wide array of movies; legendary stars and bygone era B-listers rush to pick up the call, chat, and hang up. Most impressive is the middle section, a montage of one-sided conversations in which every character could conceivably be chatting with every other character but no one actually seems to be really talking to anyone else. *Telephones* could be seen as a wry re-imagining of the "Telephone Hour" sequence from *Bye Bye Birdie* (1960). But where "Telephone Hour" is a hymn to interconnectedness, showing modern technology knitting together a band of suburban youth, *Telephones*'s vibe is more anomic. As the conversational threads break apart, Marclay's montage presages what's become the standard critique of the Internet age: that the networks supposedly looping us together may in fact be isolating us, that we're all doing the same thing at the same time but in separate worlds, with only the illusion of connectivity.

Telephones



An art-world standby, *Telephones* spread through the blogosphere in 2007 when Apple released an iPhone commercial seemingly based on it. It turned out Apple had contacted Marclay to get permission, but when he said no, went ahead and made it anyway. (Marclay said he decided not to sue because he finds the culture too litigious.)

Apple "Hello" iPhone Commercial



A bit after Marclay's piece, around the time Jon Stewart took over *The Daily Show* in 1999, the series began frequently editing together politicians repeating catch phrases or speaking on similar issues and contradicting themselves. The device proved to be so popular, and such an effective way of dealing with the mediation of politics, that it was soon being used by more official news sources. While archive fever was sweeping the art world, *The Daily Show's* edits illustrate that the impulses guiding much of this art were by no means purely the product of hermetic academic games—as the explosion of user-generated content on the Web would further prove.

Artist Chuck Jones's series *Four Isolation Studies* (1998-2002) is some kind of milestone in the development of the supercut. *NPR Inhale* (1998) consists of "16 seconds of audible breathing from one hour's worth of 'All Things Considered.'" *Buffies (First Season)* (2002) compiles "Every utterance of the word 'Buffy' made during the first season of 'Buffy The Vampire Slayer,' totaling nearly one minute."

With a headier twist, Candice's Breitz's *Soliloquy* (2000) is composed of three separate videos that, respectively, take Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (1992), Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* (1971), and Jack Nicholson in *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) and sequentially piece together only the parts where the star is talking. What results in each case is an elliptical monologue full of digressions, dangling questions, and half-finished thoughts. Stone reminisces: "Games are fun"/"Boxing was fun 'til Manny died"/"I loved him, it hurt"/"I felt like someone had read my book and was playing a game, no"/"That's right"/"You still get the pleasure." Some of Breitz's subsequent works develop along this path and provide fascinating echoes of contemporaneous developments on the Internet.

While Jones and Breitz were making their collages, artist team Jennifer and Kevin McCoy were making a series of works along similar lines. For *Every Anvil* (2001), the McCoys isolated every shot from 50 *Looney Tunes* episodes and categorized them. The viewer of the work can choose which category to watch; "every monster," "every wafting odor," "every pounding," etc. Similarly, *Every Shot, Every Episode* (2001) is a database of every shot from 20 episodes of *Starsky and Hutch*, arranged according to formal, visual, and narrative considerations. By taking apart pre-existing material and giving the viewer freedom in rearranging it, the McCoys predicted not only the form of the Web-based supercut but the conditions of its reception.

No pre-history of the supercut would be complete without mention of Thom Andersen's video essay *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003). Composed in part of a series of self-contained supercuts that combine into a monster supercut, *Los Angeles Plays Itself* is a history of Los Angeles in the movies, as both setting and shooting location. Individual scenes

edit together various uses of the Bradbury Building or the Ennis House, showing how they've been used differently throughout genres and periods. Andersen's erudite voiceover shapes the movie's more obvious formal pleasures into a meditation on the meaning these places have accrued through their often-unnoticed injection into our cultural consciousness.

Within the world of appropriation, the supercut is a kind of anti-readymade. It telegraphs work and time investment, even a sort of mastery. The more discursive the supercut, the more impressive it is in this regard. It's pleasing to people on the very terms that appropriative media often piss them off.

As a vehicle for social critique, though, the supercut as such may have limited potential. Mostly the form translates a cliché into an experience of duration; the best supercuts are indeed durational affairs, offering a way of knowing that can only be achieved through time. But often the movies fail from obviousness. *He Didn't Make It* (2010), *You Look Like Shit* (2010), *It's Showtime* (2011) and others offer the bare pleasures of rhythm and symmetry but little else. Some cuts focus on repetitions we were meant to notice in the first place. *One video* collects every time Jeff Bridges says "dude" in *The Big Lebowski*, *another* collects the line "That's what she said" from *The Office*.¹ These videos testify to nerd cred and offer a chance for superfans to relive aspects of their beloved object, but probably have a small life outside of the initiated. The most engaging supercuts tend to stretch the form, moving beyond obvious tropes and into stranger territory.

Jacob Bricca's *Pure* (2008)—which played at a number of film festivals, including the Berlinale—groups together a slew of visual cues from action movies, creating a kind of auto-critical futurist paean to maximum velocity. The shots he finds are so similar that the effect is often like watching the same exact thing from multiple angles, which is formally reminiscent of Müller's *Home Stories* (notice also how, at 1:14, he keeps a four-shot sequence from *The Limey* (1999) intact because Steven Soderbergh's neo-new wave editing in that film predicts *Pure's* own dealings with space):

In a different vein, *Boom!* (2006) illustrates Steve Jobs's love affair with the eponymous exclamation, and it also becomes a meditation on the culture's constant promises of technological dynamism. Something of a counterpoint, *Bill Gates Says Uh* (2008) makes the billionaire a stammering buffoon whose relaxed posture and hand gestures nonetheless telegraph self-confidence.

Creepier and more haunting is *Palin's Breath* (2011), which creates a brief musical composition out of all the awkward pauses in Palin's crazed video response to the 2011 Arizona shootings. *Palin's Breath* not only recalls Jones's *NPR Inhale* but also early postmodernist poets' belief that breath was the route to poetry's somatic ideal, articulated in Charles

Olson's manifesto "Projective Verse." ("The verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath.")

Supercuts like this, which focus on a single celebrity, immediately recall para-surrealist Joseph Cornell's masterpiece Rose Hobart (1936). Cornell was certainly a proto-fanboy, in the sense of being both intensely dedicated to various celebrities and seemingly stuck in a pre-adolescent latency period. In *Rose Hobart*, Cornell took the film *East of Borneo* (1931) and re-edited it into an abstract meditation on its lead actress, presaging a wide variety of fan behaviors.

Mike Eisenberg's Natalie Portman Cries a Lot (2011) veers away from worship and toward mockery. The sonically cheerful sounds of Aerosmith undercut Portman's performances and render them histrionic. Less funny is Leonardo DiCaprio Freaks Out (2011), 4 minutes and 33 seconds of the actor screaming, crying, and berating; DiCaprio's acting never seems histrionic and remains remarkably believable, making the whole thing slightly disturbing.

Internet auteur Harry Hanrahan has made a number of interesting celebrity-focused cuts. His video Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit (2010) shows the actor's diatribes to be more unnerving in aggregate, his self-consciously campy performances modifying one another into seriousness, making a fugue of lunacy. But Hanrahan's *160 Greatest Arnold Schwarzenegger Quotes* (2010) might be his greatest work. Clocking in at 10 minutes and consisting of Schwarzenegger's supposed zingers from throughout his storied career, the cut at some point reaches the ridiculous sublime. The Governor's tabula rasa delivery has a dissociating effect, robbing everything of significance and making one wonder if the English language will ever be meaningful again. Lines cluster into confused poetry ("Listen to me very carefully"/"You are not you, you are me"/"No shit"/"You know who I am?"/"I've seen you before, you're the asshole on TV") or break off into Zen koans ("I did nothing, the pavement was his enemy"; "If it bleeds, we can kill it"). When, four minutes in, Schwarzenegger seems to be arguing in gibberish, the nonsense only recapitulates the whole video.

160 Greatest Arnold Schwarzenegger Quotes



Hanrahan's Cage and Schwarzenegger videos make for a fruitful comparison not only with Candice Breitz's aforementioned *Soliloquy* but with her newer installation *Him + Her* (2008). *Him + Her* consists of two sets of seven monitors; the *Him* set builds a schizophrenic play out of Jack Nicholson's various roles, the *Her* set out of Meryl Streep's. Breitz isolates the characters from their surroundings, throwing them against a black background and stranding them in an interior world of unending Beckettian voice. Nicholson: "Tell us about yourself"/"I used to be somebody else, but I traded him in"/"Stop this cheap bullshit"/"Um, is there supposed to be any way to reverse this metamorphosis?" Streep: "He never wrote to me, he never called"/"I saw that I had been an amusement for him"/"And nothing since then?"/"And nothing more"/"Nothing since then?" With its title, *Him + Her* places itself in the world of gender deconstruction; Nicholson's split self seems obsessed with its own unification, Streep's with marriage, children, sex, divorce.

There's a literary richness to Breitz's work often lacking in Internet supercuts. But there are reasons to believe the genre still has untapped potential. Curt Hanks's *Star Wars: Chewbacca Supercut* (2011) is an epic supercut composed of every shot from the three original *Star Wars* movies that features Chewbacca. The stoic animal usually lingers near the edge of the frame or in the background, an onlooker, or sometimes performs a menial task under orders from Han. The rebels battle the Empire; Han and Leia fight; Luke comes of age; decisions are made; but Chewbacca merely observes and does what he's told. *Chewbacca Supercut* is a bizarre visual analogue to Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966); both focus our attention on minor characters from major cultural touchstones in order to explore the postmodern feeling of narrative powerlessness. Chewbacca, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is not history's actor. Using the blunt tools of the supercut, Hanks opens it up in new directions.

Star Wars - A New Hope Chewbacca Supercut



1. The latter suggests another strange ancestor of the supercut: the sitcom clip episode, structured around flashbacks. Developed out of recap chapters of old film serials, shows are sometimes formally isomorphic with supercuts, but the intended emotional effect is inverted. Clip shows are meant to reify the universe of the narrative, reassuring viewers that the characters and situations contained therein have integrity and are thus real. As the tools to make such things became widely available, the strategy was put to quite different use. ■

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