

Taking Stock: An Analysis of the Artbeats Digital Film Library

Archive of the Future Conference, University of Rochester, April 6, 2007

I. Introduction

Today I would like to talk about the stock digital video archive through the study of a company by the name of Artbeats Software, Incorporated. Before I dive into the details of Artbeats however, let me first begin with a quote by Derrida. From his introduction to *Archive Fever*, he writes:

Arkhē, we recall, names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence*— physical, historical, or ontological principle— but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given— nomological principle.¹

Anyone who has ever watched films, videos or television within the last quarter century is familiar with the genre of moving images known as *stock footage*. Stock film and video, portraying simultaneous idealized and banal projections of life lived, filter out into our daily visual language. We've all seen the stuff before— in infomercials played on late-night television or in spots shown on closed-circuit monitors during a mass transit ride, we are shown the 'relaxed vacationer,' the 'conscientious employee' and the 'stable family practicing financial responsibility.' These images belong to an ever-growing archive, one begun in the spirit of the Enlightenment Project's rational attempt to 'catalog the world' and also one available for immediate utilization. Yet stock material is not necessarily recognized *as belonging to the archive*. More often, stock imagery is experienced as 'final image,' already 'programmed,' its use part of a grander intention to reinforce meaning for a particular message by those who have an interest in doing so. But Derrida's etymology suggests that this archive, one often conjured under

the auspices of neutrality, is consummated and maintained with authoritative bias. Here questions arise: how do we understand the ‘look of law’ within the contemporary commercial stock footage archive? What social and political structures give it shape, give it its nomological principle, allow for archetypal imagery, allow for stereotypical imagery?

In the hopes of a better understanding of the possibilities of the digital video archive, this essay will examine specifically the *Digital Film Library* of the aforementioned Artbeats. I would like to place the company within an historical context, and then move into examining specific clips from its libraries. I aim to first critique the ‘look of law’ in them initially through the lens of classic Althusserian analysis of *ideology*. I will then try to nuance my argument by way of using concepts of *hegemony*, both in the Gramscian sense of the term as well as in more contemporary articulations. The latter will finally help provide a framework within which I can speak of the particularly *digital* nature of the commercial video archive and then forecast a trajectory for it. But before speaking of its future, I should say something about where a company like Artbeats is situated presently.

Artbeats is one of several companies at the forefront of the digital stock video industry. The roots of stock video houses can be traced back to the analog world of film, where the term ‘stock footage’ denoted *celluloid* stock measured in physical *feet*. So as to avoid having to go back out on location and film any missing scenes (which would require lugging bulky camera equipment around, and thus more time, energy and an increased budget), film producers would often use out-take or B-roll footage to fill any gaps in their shot list. In this way a need for ‘extra’ or ‘stock’ footage emerged, and can be seen today with Artbeats’ extensive catalog of landscape video clips, much of which is still shot on 35mm film but distributed digitally online. Here is a still frame from their *Southwest Cliff Aerials* collection.² And here is clip number 217 from their

Cloud Fly-Thrus 2 collection.³ Artbeats has many different types of footage in its libraries, but it, like many stock video companies, has also taken on the content model put into place through the 80s and 90s during the desktop publishing revolution and its affects on advertising: that is the model of stock *still* photography, and its use of human models depicting various ‘life situations.’ Here for example is a picture I pulled from Getty Images, and here is a scan of some promotional literature from Washington Mutual Bank, where I do my banking.⁴ It is this type of people-portrayal within Artbeats’ video libraries that will be my focus. I shall now use Althusser’s notion of the “imaginary” to talk of the latent ideological content of this type of imagery.

II. Ideology and the Imaginary

In his formulation of the Ideological State Apparatuses (or ISAs for short), Althusser states that “it is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their *relationship* to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there.”⁵ He posits this in the context of the modern-era worker, unable to fully comprehend the real, material, and alienating conditions of his day-to-day existence and therefore a prime candidate for ‘interpellation,’ the process by which an individual becomes, in Althusser’s critique, a submissive subject further under control of the ruling class. I might think of my own situation, having had some less-than-stellar jobs, and likewise having dreamed of ‘better times’ ahead and therefore being all the more receptive to various ideologically infused content that reflects back to me how I imagine myself to be. In our context here, I am pointing to Artbeats’ small doses of seemingly innocuous imagery as potential purveyors of such content, content that forms, on the most basic of levels, the naturalized, ‘common sense’ of visual culture.

The following, for example, is clip 134 from the *Family Life* collection.⁶ In it we have the all-American husband and wife on a lazy afternoon, sipping lemonade on the front porch. The man is well-built and clean-cut, almost as if either just out of, or just going into, the military. The woman is slim and attractive, the high school prom queen all grown up. The swing on which they sit, together with the overall size of their house, suggest not only them having a family, but also being financially secure enough to do so properly. Their body language tell the viewer they are emotionally healthy, and make for not just a good couple but also parents. This is the imaginary of the well-to-do American nuclear family. Yet this type of imaginary is not necessarily based on conceptions of class— it can also be traced to race and gender as well.

Here is clip 101, also from the *Family Life* collection.⁷ We can see that any gains in improving race relations and minority status historically within this country are manifested in this video of a pleasant backyard barbecue. In whatever way a couple or family, of any color, might imagine themselves as successful, the important thing here is that, in both this clip as well as the last, the aesthetic is a homogenizing one.⁸ Notice the same kissing gesture found in this clip when compared to the previous one, and the use of the soft edges to convey a nostalgic, ‘warm fuzzy’ feeling. In their homogeneity, the clips seek omnipresence.

Ideology operates on self-worth not only through the construction of a common imaginary but also through reinforcing difference and lack. In other words ideological messages foster a way to gauge one’s own imaginary ‘status’ both through what one envisions him or herself to be as well as through what one envisions him or herself *not* to be. We might understand this through a contrasting pair of Artbeats collections that take the theme of ‘children.’ *Children of the World 1* portrays, according to Artbeats, videos of “Children of all ages from around the world.” Here is a composite of still frames from the collection.⁹ After further reading, one learns

that the videos are of children from Thailand, Peru, Ecuador, Tanzania, Samoa, India and Fiji. The clips, in plainly lighted but objectively sharp and crisp detail, appear to document kids in developing parts of the world. This is clip 129 of the collection.¹⁰ Artbeats has chosen for us shots where the children confront the camera head-on, looking directly into it as if in a state of despondency. There are some exceptions to this format within the collection, and Artbeats, in its promotional literature, asserts that the children “all have one thing in common - they act like kids!”¹¹ Yet, whether these children laugh and play or not, the viewer is nevertheless more or less presented imagery that suggests conditions in non-Westernized parts of the world aren't as good as those in a country like the United States, and that their young inhabitants are none too pleased about it. Artbeats' representations of the other in this case align with the eye of the modern, technologically endowed subject, framing how ‘children of all ages from around the world’ appear to the mass media consumer: not up to the lifestyle standards set forth by those with privilege, or with the imaginary of privilege itself.

This subject-object relationship takes on a more ominous tone when one contrasts *Children of the World I* with the collection *Childhood Scenarios*. In it, an assortment of clips are presented: “bath time scenes, kids in the classroom and youngsters playing.” Here are some stills.¹² We see that *Childhood Scenarios* is populated only with imagery of Caucasian American kids. The videos are poetically lighted, soft in focus and compositionally more dynamic. The children, most often not acknowledging the camera, go about their business of ‘being kids.’ Overall the videos convey warmth and intimacy, however constructed, affording a sense of security that seems to say: being young should be fun, worry-free, not like it is in those clips in the *Children of the World I* collection. Ultimately, Artbeats' shooting and selection processes across both collections perform their ideological roles: the benefits of growing up with light skin in a civilized or prosperous environment and the uncertainty of growing up with darker skin in

an environment of questionable stability are naturalized, internalized. Social class hierarchies are maintained. These are the neutral starting points from which Artbeats customers may choose, in order to fashion in their own projects, decidedly more pointed messages.

On a note about these two collections, one can't help make a comparison between them and Steichen's controversial 1955 *Family of Man* Exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art.¹³ Steichen was subsequently criticized for 'universalizing' and likewise flattening the obvious cultural differences of people around the world, specifically through his western subjectivity. The desired effect, so I gather, was a depoliticizing one, a celebration of the status quo. It's somewhat unfortunate to witness that, while the format and delivery methods may have changed, the embrace of Steichen-esque aesthetics, here now in overt commercial capacities, has not.

Within the canon of critical theory Althusser's writings on ideology and class domination are of great importance. Yet, in the spirit of keeping our own critical faculties sharp, we should interrogate his 'either/or' and 'top-down' theorization of ideology. When he states that ideological state apparatuses are erected as tools used by the ruling class to, in the last case, exploit the lower classes, it becomes difficult to transpose his understanding of bourgeoisie/proletariat state relations onto our own current social structures. In short, which classes does he mean? His stricter definitions of them have today been complicated over the last several decades with their theoretical re-articulation. Daniel Bell's post-industrial society, post-fordism and the emergence of a professional middle class, along with today's so-called *information age* go mostly unaccounted for in Althusser's theories of imaginary and the ISAs. Moreover, far from being a behemoth, 'Big Brother' type of enterprise in the business of 'duping the masses,' Artbeats is in fact a relatively small company based in Oregon. Its structure is a very decentralized one, employing mostly American, freelance videographers of varying

subjectivities, work ethics, technical savvy and degrees of rapport with those they videograph. In briefly meeting them, representatives of Artbeats' internal staff seemed themselves comprised of people not unlike those in its *Family Life* collections. Perhaps it makes sense then to pursue a more flexible model of ideology and power relations with which to understand the visual codes of the stock video archive. To do this let us employ one related to but different from Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses. I am referring here to hegemony and its articulation by Gramsci.

III. The Give-and-Take of Hegemony

Hegemony in the most basic sense is the domination of one particular social formation over another. Gramsci theorizes that in order to sustain an *expansive* hegemonic relation, the group in power must, perhaps more than manipulate a mass imaginary, cater to the sensitivities of subaltern groups. Not just a top-down ideological project, the *dialogue between* the hegemon and the potentially hegemonized takes form through the ruling group's absorption of the subaltern's interests into its own ideological agenda, insofar as the interests do not hamper the reproduction of the agenda itself. This includes not only attending to the imaginary but also to the 'real' conditions in which the subalterns live.¹⁴ Their concerns become, to an extent, those also of the dominant power. In time the boundaries of the hegemonic bloc's own ideological parameters begin to blur, and continue to do so as it seeks to hegemonize still other groups. If we acquiesce that our stock video archive is elementally ideological, that it contains a 'look of law,' it is perhaps then a multi-faceted and assimilating look. It is also *consoling* look, one that can *instruct*, but also *listen*.

Teens on the Edge is the collection Artbeats offers as its address of juvenile delinquency and related dysfunction.¹⁵ This is a still from clip 116. Its young teenage subject, either

contemplating a drug overdose or having just committed the act, is represented to the viewer in a somber setting. Its cold palette asks for sympathy rather than judgment. This is clip 110; it contains, I would opine for the worse, stereotypical minority tokenism.¹⁶ It does however also connote to the viewer that “from the points of view of both state and civil society, whatever the illegality or immorality of this type of activity may be, it is nonetheless a routine experience for many kids, one whose depiction ought not be repressed outright, but rather transmitted, towards more informed decision-making.” These types of transmissions could be understood as potentially serving to secure hegemonic positioning (we might imagine these clips used in a state-sponsored ‘No to Drugs’ campaign) through an adoption and appeal to the sensibilities of various groups, each having their own way of approaching substance abuse issues. Just as this last clip suggests an underlying obedience to authority, its message also conveys an openness to dialogue, the key to expansive hegemony.

IV. Irreducibility and a Challenge for the Digital Video Archive

Today, it could be argued that the project of dialogue itself, and its small but sometimes significant ‘wars of position’—to use a Gramscian term—has never been more in question. On electronic fronts, the birth of the blogosphere and the rise of amateur-produced political video point to this. I will speak on the latter shortly but first let me conclude thoughts on Gramsci. Contemporary thinkers, in attempts to account for the multiplicity of political voices today, take as a point of departure Gramsci’s ‘mono-hegemonic’ model. Although it allows a way to understand power relations beyond a strict dominant class program, it still conceives of sustained control ultimately by one primary group through the continued consensus of subaltern groups. This preoccupation with final resolution, for theorists like Mouffe and Laclau, makes little sense in a world consisting of groups with increasingly articulated political positions that cross

conventionally understood class boundaries. They designate the acceptance of the seemingly irreducible nature of certain political conflict and the promotion of sustained political expression as *pluralistic agonism*. I would like to advance the idea that this type of expressions often finds its articulations aesthetically within electronic media, specifically digital video. The lowering of the barrier to entry to produce and distribute digital video, and its potential ideological impact on social groups of all types, is indeed enticing. Here we might think of Artbeats' digital video libraries, and commercial stock archives in general, using a balance-model, between this pluralism and mass appeal towards the hegemonic but also counter-hegemonic.

With the rapid growth of internet video, podcasting and personal media players over just the last four years, it would appear the potential markets for a company like Artbeats have expanded significantly. While their primary revenue source may still be professionals working in television and film, the increasing number and type of rich media channels, representing a range of now global entrepreneurial and institutional programming, bodes well for the future of the stock video archive. It will grow, no doubt, but in what manner? As Artbeats' staff agree upon the marketability of ever-specific product collections, those meant to reflect back to us our social formations, it takes on a challenge. On the one hand it must find newer and further articulated aesthetics for a more and more particular subject matter, while on the other, treat the distinctions in such a way as to give them an appealing normalcy, in hopes of capturing the imaginary of other, similar interests.

I end here with an admission. I had planned on using Artbeats' *Worship* collection as an example for part of this essay.¹⁷ Though it does not mention any specific religious affiliation in its description, the collection might be more appropriately titled "Christian Reformed Worship." Yet just a few weeks ago, while working on that section of this paper, I received an email

announcement from Artbeats, offering a glimpse of two new upcoming collections: *Protestants* and *Catholics*.¹⁸ I chuckled to myself, and wondered if, and under what circumstances (perhaps in web 3.0? 4.0?) might I encounter a “Wahhabist Islam” collection or an “Agnostic” collection, and what sorts of video clips they might contain.

Thank you.

Notes

1. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.

2. This essay was originally presented at the *Archive of the Future* conference, University of Rochester, New York, April 6, 2007. The images and videos mentioned throughout the essay were displayed to the Rochester audience during the presentation. They were taken from the Artbeats web site, where they may still be viewed. For the *Southwest Cliff Aerials* example image, see <http://www.artbeats.com/prod/clipinfo.php?id=14313&fr=product&pg=1> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

3. For the cloud image see <http://www.artbeats.com/prod/clipinfo.php?id=1415&fr=search&pg=1&kw=CF217&ct=&fm=> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

4. The visual aids I used here were taken directly from my local Washington Mutual branch. Similar imagery can be found on their web site. See <http://www.wamu.com> (last accessed April 5, 2007). See also <http://www.gettyimages.com> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

5. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 111 (my emphasis).

6. For the image of the lemonade-sipping couple see <http://www.artbeats.com/prod/clipinfo.php?id=6183&fr=search&pg=1&kw=FL134&ct=&fm=> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

7. For the family barbecue video, see <http://www.artbeats.com/prod/clipinfo.php?id=6150&fr=search&pg=1&kw=FL101&ct=&fm=> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

8. See Oscar Barbarin, "Characteristics of African American Families," http://ssw.unc.edu/RTI/presentation/PDFs/aa_families.pdf (last accessed March 30, 2007).

9. For images and videos from the *Children of the World* collection, see <http://www.artbeats.com/prod/product.php?pg=1&id=464> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

10. For Clip 129 see
<http://www.artbeats.com/prod/clipinfo.php?id=10986&fr=product&pg=3> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

11. For product synopsis, see
<http://www.artbeats.com/prod/prodinfo.php?id=464> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

12. For video stills, see
<http://www.artbeats.com/prod/product.php?pg=1&id=401> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

13. For a general historical overview of the *Family of Man* exhibit, see
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_of_Man (last accessed April 5, 2007). See also the exhibition's publication, Edward Steichen and Carl Sandburg, *The Family of Man* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, reissue edition, 2002).

14. 'Real' conditions would include proper health care, a decent wage, and a general respect for human dignity among other things.

15. For clip 116, see
<http://www.artbeats.com/prod/clipinfo.php?id=10622&fr=search&pg=1&kw=TE116&ct=&fm=>
(last accessed April 5, 2007).

16. For clip 110, see
<http://www.artbeats.com/prod/clipinfo.php?id=10616&fr=search&pg=1&kw=TE110&ct=&fm=>
(last accessed April 5, 2007).

17. For images and information on the *Worship* collection, see
<http://www.artbeats.com/prod/prodinfo.php?id=378> (last accessed April 5, 2007).

18. For more on the *Protestants* collections, see
<http://www.artbeats.com/prod/prodinfo.php?id=597> (last accessed April 5, 2007). For more on the *Catholics* collection, see <http://www.artbeats.com/prod/prodinfo.php?id=603> (last accessed April 5, 2007).