

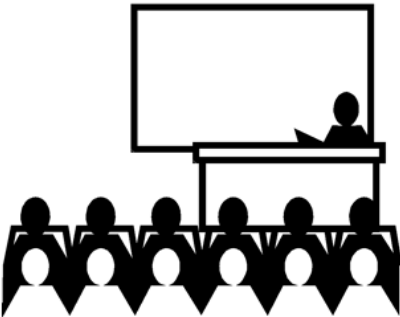
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Philosophy on Video: Boris Groys at apexart



by Gleb Sidorkin

[Boris Groys](#) is a well-known art critic, curator, philosopher, and a professor at NYU's Slavic department. In recent years, he has created a style of video in which a philosophical "lecture" is "illustrated" (I put those words in quotes because *lecture* and *illustration* are two concepts that Groys is insistent on questioning) by a variety of appropriated moving images, ranging from Hollywood films to obscure religious propaganda. Three of these videos are currently on display at ApexArt, and the [commentary](#) he has provided about his own work is also of interest to filmmakers. At a talk given on Feb. 29th, he described his entry into the world of filmmaking as something of an accident. On one hand, he was becoming frustrated with the act of 'lecturing'—something he has done very successfully for nearly thirty years but has found harder and harder to comprehend in objective terms. What exactly does one *do* when one lectures, and how is this practice related to other forms of cultural production?



A lecture is essentially a performance piece, or a work of theater. It is ephemeral, taking place within a university or at a conference, and almost immediately fading from memory. Often the only trace is a set of handwritten notes taken by a fastidious student. Sometimes the lecture also produces an article, but most scholarly articles are never read by more than a few people and quickly shunted off to a dusty shelf in a faculty office. More and more, students record the audio of a lecture, and listen to it later on their I-pod as they are jogging. The result is that the audio becomes detached from the physicality of the lecturer and the theatricality of the space in which the original lecture was staged. So part of Boris Groys's project is to see what else he can do with this medium in which he has worked for so long—the philosophical lecture. His reaction to the strange, ephemeral fate of his lectures is to fix them eternally within a video, thus maintaining control over the "flow of images" that constitutes the visual plane of the listener.

The other thing that pushed Groys into making films is a certain synergy within his dual role as an art critic and curator. Like many other theory-oriented art-world dignitaries, he is often invited to curate some portion of a major exhibition, as well as to contribute a theoretical text to be published in the exhibit's catalog. On one occasion, he was asked to curate some videos (documentaries, feature films, newsreels, youtube clips) for an exhibition on iconoclasm, as well as contribute an article. So he simply combined the two tasks. He made a recording of himself reading his theoretical text, and laid it over a loop of the moving images he had selected. The practice of the curator and the art-theorist are already present in the practice of the [film-essayist](#), but Groys seems to be the first to combine the two in a very explicit way. The result is a perverse and often baffling experience in which one has to constantly navigate the ambiguous relationships that arise between text and image.

Groys makes a lot of claims about how he is playing with the role of video in our culture, and about how his videos counteract the usual relationship between text and image that we are used to seeing (see his own detailed statement about these issues). He insists on the fact that what he is doing is not merely 'illustrating' a lecture, but rather probing into the ways that the image track and the information on the audio track engage with each other in playful, contradictory ways. But to me, the real power of this project lies elsewhere. It is a bold experiment in the use of appropriation, and a serious attempt to bring philosophy into the realm of the moving image.

The use of the audio track as a medium for 'lecture', combined with the free appropriation of every kind of image available (including valuable feature films, which Groys gets away with copying since he is exhibiting in a non-profit gallery) makes possible for very potent medium of commentary. There is a great untapped potential in using cinema to convey complex ideas—what Groys calls "pure discourse." We are, more than ever, a culture of moving-image producers and consumers, and those that wish to comment on our culture must learn to [write in cinema](#).

