Imaginary Motherland. Some Notes on The Sprawl (Propaganda About Propaganda) and a Google Doc Conversation with Metahaven

Founded by Vinca Kruk and Daniel van der Velden, Metahaven's practice spans art, filmmaking, and design to provoke new imaginaries that are equally bound to aesthetics, poetics, and politics. Recent solo presentations include Information Skies, Auto Italia, London (2016), and Mumbai Art Room, Bombay (2016); The Sprawl, YCBA, San Francisco (2015); Black Transparency, Future Gallery, Berlin (2014); Islands in the Cloud, MoMA PS1, New York (2013). Recent group exhibitions include Tamawuj, Sharjah Biennale 2017, Sharjah, UAE; Fear & Love, Design Museum, London (2016); Dream Out Loud, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam (2016), The Eighth Climate (What Does Art Do?), the 11th Gwangju Biennial (2016); All of This Belongs to You, Victoria & Albert Museum, London (2015); Private Settings: Art After the Internet, Museum of Modern Art Warsaw (2014); Frozen Lakes, Artists Space, New York (2013). Recent publications include Black Transparency (2015), Can Jokes Bring Down Governments? (2013), and Uncorporate Identity (2010). Music videos by Metahaven include Home (2014), and Interference (2015), both with musician, composer and artist Holly Herndon, as part of an ongoing collaboration. Metahaven's full-length documentary, The Sprawl (Propaganda about Propaganda), premiered at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2016. Its successor, a short film titled Information Skies, was shot and edited in 2016 and has been nominated for the 2017 European Film Awards. The short film Hometown, a successor to Information Skies, was shot in Beirut and Kiev in 2017.

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I found out about the crash of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 late in the evening when I got on a bus heading from Berlin to Warsaw and finally cared to check my Facebook news feed. It was bursting. The bus WiFi network was functioning decently, but the backrest of my seat was broken, and I had to keep it vertical by sitting awkwardly straight, otherwise it would land in the face of a person sitting behind me. This person happened to be a big blonde Lithuanian elderly lady who would knock violently on the backrest of my seat any time it tilted an extra couple of centimeters in her direction. I couldn't fall asleep anyway, so I ended up guarding her comfort by balancing my seat or leaning against window glass and reading, reading, reading through an endless flow of information on the crash of MH17. Once In Warsaw, I picked up a coffee at Starbucks, the only place that was already open this early, and walked all the way to the Ujazdowski Castle where I needed to pick up some stuff before heading to Frederic Chopin airport. I collapsed uncontrollably into one of the hammocks hanging around the park next to the Castle, and spent in it an hour and a half before the meeting I had there, letting my spine recover and listening to a group of kindergartners practice Spanish with a native-speaker nanny. I pretended to be reading a book in order to appear less suspicious, but I knew my brain was peacefully asleep, shredding half-consciously all the consumed media sensations, patriotic outcries, fits of grief and rage, waves of panic, and comic conspiracy theories that would never ever beat the contingency, grotesque, and maneuverability of actual

reality lurking in the glitches of the infinite scroll.

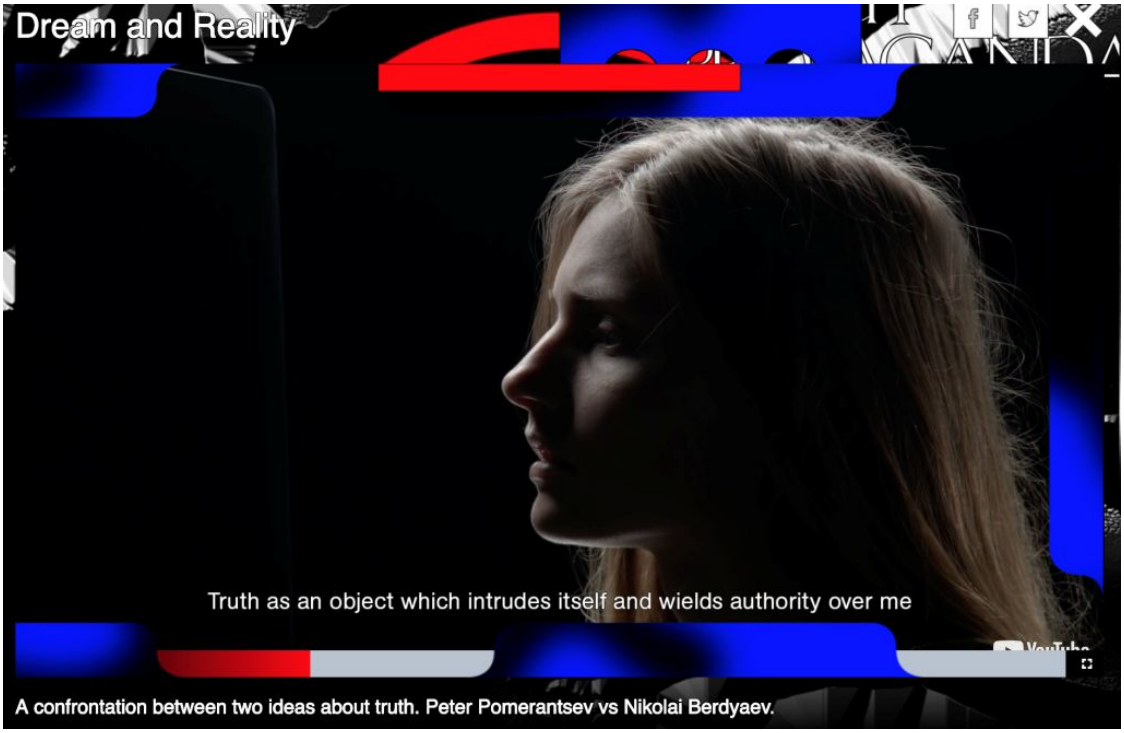
The Sprawl[1], say Metahaven. Sprawling in a hammock, I would close my eyes and watch the information sprawl. We will be witnessing the same processes again and again, learning painfully to navigate them, mastering a new language that has always been gradually inventing and establishing itself from shreds and scraps. This is the language in which a turquoise tube of mascara looted from the crash site of MH17 is not a fact but a trope. This language is described and studied in The Sprawl: when applied in the interests of particular power relations, it is called «propaganda». It embraces the loss of meaning and fuels fights for multiple shades of evasive truth, while taking good care of preserving the structural status quo, mobilizing «identities» and «values» as a promise of selective wellbeing. Such flow and rhythm of «propaganda» has been made apparent by digital tools and networks, but it's hardly a recent invention or a phenomenon that hasn't been described before. It's just that our attempts to face and grasp the language of «propaganda» are always being slowed down by its persuasive effects — and by the fear to be left alone and misunderstood in one's questioning of the states of affairs that define the subtlest aspects of our everyday life. At one time Socrates was sentenced to death for precisely this.

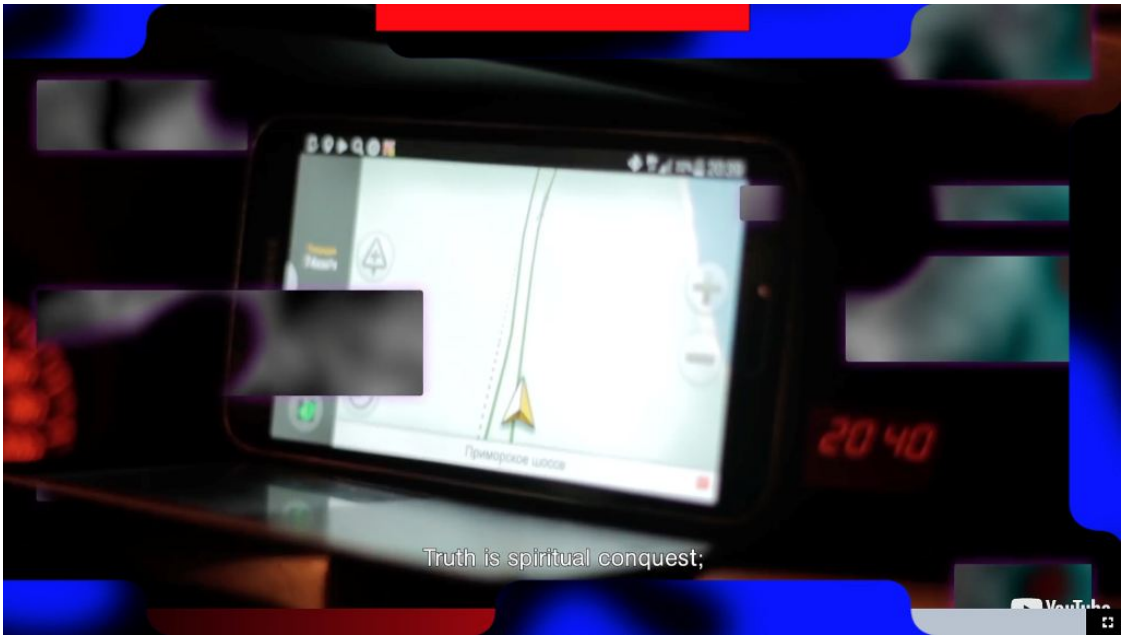
In his concise book The Three Ecologies first published in 1989, Félix Guattari wrote: «Now more than ever, nature cannot be separated by culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, the mechanosphere and the social and individual Universes of reference, we must learn to think «transversally». Just as monstrous and mutant algae invade the lagoon of Venice, so our television screens are populated, saturated, by «degenerate» images and statements

[énoncés]. In the field of social ecology men like Donald Trump are permitted to proliferate freely, like another species of algae, taking over entire districts of New York and Atlantic City; he «redevelops» by raising rents, thereby driving out tens of thousands of poor families, most of whom are condemned to homelessness, becoming the equivalent of the dead fish of environmental ecology»[2]. This passage illustrates beautifully the relations between information flows and material phenomena, which has only recently become a trendy yet still questionable issue in the discussions on the nexus between digital platforms and real life affairs — which both are, in the end, real life. Xenofeminism Manifesto has been one of the most prominent and prominently concise recent attempts to work on emancipatory tactics within this phenomenon: «Digital technologies are not separable from the material realities that underwrite them; they are connected so that each can be used to alter the other towards different ends.»[3] Metahaven manage to aestheticize on a large scale — and thus to playfully deconstruct — the proliferative qualities of the language of propaganda in these upgraded conditions. One of the stances of The Sprawl is «What happens when interfaces tell you what to think, and interfaces are about reality.»

Our communication with Daniel van der Velden and Vinca Kruk sprouted from a never completed group project, thanks to which, however, we ended up exchanging emails on absurdist poetry, advertising, AI, airport customs control experiences, and the like. At the moment Metahaven are working on a new film, shot in Beirut and Kiev — a sequel to Information Skies (2016)[4], a piece on virtual reality and the texture of truth in the digital world. The chosen settings are eloquent. Ukraine has been the ground for the most explicit, refined, and uncanny narrative collisions, vision

distortions, and logical failures. Its war on «propaganda» carried on with «propaganda» instruments — that is, defensive counter-narratives, restrictive value-based choice of allowed marketable discourse, and maladroit sterilization of history — is only a part of «the sprawl», the global proliferation of the phantom language of power, to be taken with food. The Sprawl gets inside this language, and uses design tools as formaldehyde to immerse and store its tropes in for further examination. Moreover, the specimens are immediately supplemented with analytical comments and poetic footnotes wrapped in stylized theatrical generalities — which does not necessarily aim at denunciation of particular cases and asserting any universally applicable optics, but definitely estranges, defamiliarizes (in the sense as coined by Viktor Shklovsky) and illuminates the inventive automatisms of present-day quicksilver propaganda. Its material manifestations come through as systemic aberrations — ultimately, not less real than the status quo that precedes them. That's the reality The Sprawl captures: «Oh, Novorossiya. Imaginary motherland, spiritual Rorschach.» It's fed by the language that appears to be fighting it, because there are no colours within quicksilver. It's rather amusing to expand the metaphor of quicksilver by recalling that it is the colloquial for the chemical element Mercury, and Mercury is a Roman god of financial gain, commerce, and communication. ISIS fighters eat M&M's — it's in The Sprawl, too.





The mentioned systemic aberrations are there not as the signs that a certain established system has to be fixed and retained. Largely, they are its own products, and the signs of stagnation of particular political languages that are willing to benefit from — but unable to contain — the rearrangements accounted for by information technologies. The Sprawl is about this stagnation. Benjamin H. Bratton, featured in the film, refers particularly to the «relationship between the sovereignty of state and the apparatus of planetary-scale computation». The changes in the notion of space brought, roughly speaking, by the internet, require and inevitably advance the transformation of political infrastructures and the evolution of corresponding languages. The longer and harder these changes get inhibited by reactionary stances — the more disastrous and stupefying are the ways the surface fails and breaks, the more of Guattarian «mutant algae» corrupt the possibilities of balance and new sense. But nonsense is also what sparks poetry — poetry as a transformative twist of language and reality. This is the deterritorialized area Metahaven offer one to enter.

LP: *The Sprawl (Propaganda About Propaganda) features the following text: «In 2014, a strange set of events unfolds. Without apparent plan or structure, they seem connected. Our views of the world are changing, as if we wake up from a dream. We no longer see the internet as a means of communication, but as a way to change the nature of reality itself». Which events in particular do you mean here? 2014 was indeed a very intense and exhausting year — what were the points you felt like connecting? What do you remember about it?*

MH: The project came into being as a kind of news feed, in which war in Ukraine, the rise of Islamic State (IS), and the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa were shared in the same media space. We asked ourselves in which ways such distinct developments are connected, and what it is about their being shared online that enhances that connection. The feeling was that of a boundless expansion of uncontrollable forces. Making the film was what we needed to do in order to understand what the film was about, if that makes sense. The film is about cognitive contagion, epistemic alarm. We went inside the contagion and began to inhabit it. Every piece of media, or propaganda, contains in its surface, its treatment, traces of the way in which it was made, produced. Every piece of propaganda contains in its mediatic texture, in the properties of the image and its surface, also a message about itself. So, the project had to become an embodiment of this idea, propaganda about propaganda. The film is, eventually, mostly about Russia and Ukraine, but the way in which it is about it differs from most other documentaries.

It feels as if many people in the West still experienced the events of 2014 as glitches. But what was happening was a falling apart of reality, a disintegration, into versions. Different versions, mutually

exclusive, yet overlapping the same space-time. For us as filmmakers, it is important to arrive at this idea without being overly analytical. There is emotion, even nostalgia, at work in this notion of versions, in which everyone is getting to have their own truth, and in which a winning power is defined in equal parts by the capacity to slide alternative versions of the same events into the bylines of history, as well as by a capacity to absolutely believe. Not just to believe in a particular version, but eventually, a capacity to believe at all. Thinking of one of the final scenes in Tarkovsky's Stalker (1979) here, in which the Stalker, finally home, complains about his former travel companions, the Writer and the Scientist. Both of them, he says, are unable to believe, which is why he despises them. The events that are covered in The Sprawl sustain a sense of epistemic uncertainty, in which the more attractive option for all sides becomes creating a totalizing sense of being politically and morally right. What disappears, increasingly, is an epistemic baseline against which to measure these claims, and, more importantly, a means of enforcement for such a baseline other than its amplification into the same spaces, often online, that also sustain all the other narratives. We hope this isn't too abstract!

LP: *Perhaps, the contradictions you are talking about that made themselves visible after a wave of what felt like the utmost emancipatory experiences point to structural and, in particular, infrastructural deadlocks and collapses. Mechanisms and practices that were justified by the common denominator of democracy and the nation state as its framework seem to be not only insufficient in dealing with the trouble, but also serving as a naturalized idea that obscures both the macroeconomic, market motivations sustaining the violence — and the everyday life of humans*

involved in these situations. Could we say that to change the nature of reality is to change this status quo and the distribution of power? Wouldn't it imply the moment of complete disavowal of power as well? The internet could be a means to observe how losing control and gaining control are interwoven in this process, but we absolutely can't predict where it takes us — although, letting it take us somewhere seems to be the biggest gain. In the first interview since her release from prison, Chelsea Manning said: «[...] the world's shaped me more than anything else. It's a feedback loop». By the way, I'm fond of the work you did in support of her. The print design saying «Infiltrate with Love» in particular, which also features the slogan — or brand — of «Paradise Politics». I'd like to think that this feedback loop is precisely what «Paradise Politics» stands for. What would you say?

MH: The t-shirts we designed in support of Chelsea Manning were part of a collaboration with Holly Herndon and Mat Dryhurst, and a fundraiser by CTM Festival and Transmediale. The term «Paradise Politics» was introduced by Holly and Mat around the album Platform (2015). And they, in turn, were drawing on the work of the theorist Guy Standing, who talks about a «politics of paradise.» In Paradise Politics, all binaries are dissolved into an ecstatic space where the formal distance or difference between bodies, political subjects, citizens, addressable units, becomes overruled by their fundamental connection, and by a capacity to dream about the future. In Holly's music the artistic rendering of these ideas is not a straight-up translation. It is never literal or one-to-one. There is an ecstatic emotion about layering, about getting there and arriving, rather than assuming to have already accomplished, which is very humbling and appropriate. What we recognize in Chelsea Manning's words, «the world's shaped me more than anything else,» is the concreteness of life. Life-changing events don't usually happen through vague abstractions, but in actual events, especially when still confused about their outcome.

It is important to create an analysis, cartography, or speculation, but even more important to tell from one's own perspective, which is somehow always situated, concrete, and therefore limited, within a super-uncertain reality. In his 1995 film Schnittstelle (Interface), Harun Farocki placed himself and his editing studio in-between various mediated realities, almost like a factory, transitioning from film to video. Farocki addressed the moment that the former Romanian dictator, Nicolae Ceaușescu, lost control of the media. Television cameras turned to the streets, where people were protesting. Farocki took his camera and started filming out of his window. What does this mean in the digital age, where there is neither film nor video anymore as an attestable material reality in the hands of a filmmaker, and images of protest, which are everywhere, are everywhere, but do not necessarily suspend disbelief? Farocki asserted that the digital image is competing with, and on the verge of defeating, the cinematic image. For Farocki, it was essential that the image sustained a relationship to its underlying materialism, and in Interface, he operated on the verge of its disjointment: he could still touch with his hands the celluloid film as it sled through his editing set, but he could no longer touch the videotape in the same way. Paradise Politics also faces this problem with regard to its media: that the material truth of that media is disconnected from the solidarity of bodies. That it exists in another realm, in which the conditions of that solidarity have already been negotiated away and merged with Google-space, Facebook-space, and so on. Mat (Dryhurst) has done interesting work on re-investing in self-owned or collectively managed platforms, comparing it to the rise of indie labels in music.

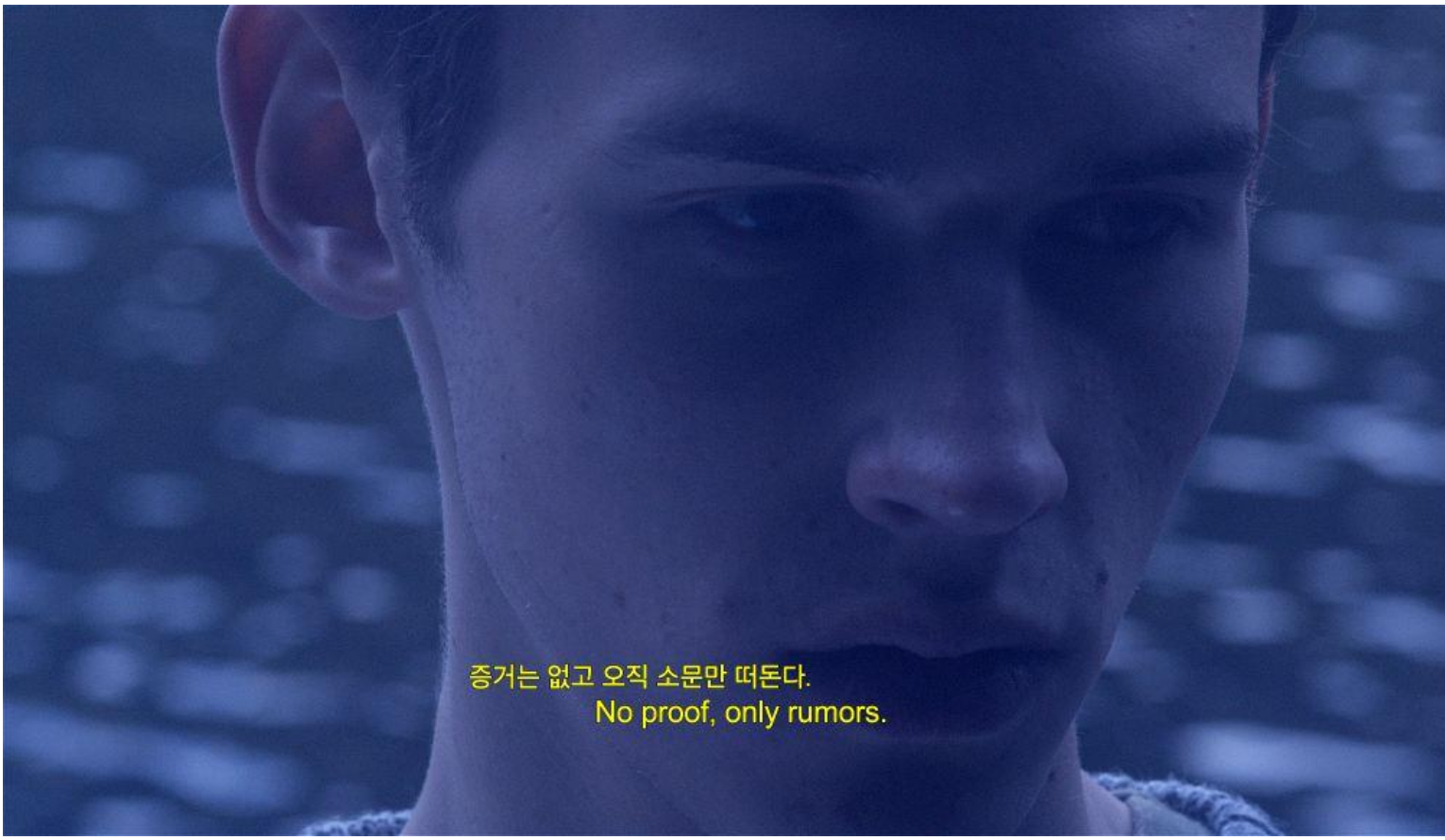
LP: *Technology, that is, the internet, has been changing our relations with language and information similar to how the invention of printing changed them, and, later, the invention of photography — and this inevitably implies transformations in the perception of time. Film, as a medium, is one of the ways to explore and manipulate time, which is, at the moment, a more appealing idea than ever. How do you treat temporality in your work?*

MH: Up to the 2010s, the internet's physical dislocation from political jurisdiction was seen as an important factor in its emancipatory capacity to produce political change. One can say that's very counter-Farocki; the materiality of protest was physically separate from the data. «The internet,» «online space,» in this stage, existed and acted on behalf of liberal democracy and was its most important agent after the free market. Twitter was in Iran, but it servers were not. WikiLeaks published documents, and no single government or company had the capacity to order their removal. Political change in this deterritorialized sphere of communication appeared as «liberal» to the West. The normless computational «outside» from which it was enacted onto particular authoritarian pockets was still an «everywhere and nowhere,» made out of Silicon Valley-built tools. Under Hillary Clinton's tenure as Secretary of State, «internet freedom» was elevated to a US foreign policy instrument that would advance American interests. Ironically, this was about idealizing the normlessness (in an ethical and legal sense) as long as it came from American-built, American-owned computational instruments vis-a-vis particular, and very textured, non-American realities. In realizing how the focus on technology has backfired, isn't it true that today talking about technology, including social media, is the same as avoiding to talk about our lives? There is too much fetishization going on. To see the former Web 2.0 being taken over by trolls, propaganda, and fake news—that are able to make a platform's measuring tools and analytics, in a purely quantitative sense, believe in their reality—is one way in which it becomes evident how this focus

on technology has backfired. As with the recent protests in Iran (2018), all the West still sees is their connection with the internet, a narrative which is continued by the Trump administration.

Let’s see the internet as one infrastructure among many others. One that was laid out initially by the military, but then was advanced as if it were the property of humankind. Then, it was the corpus of an overarching political version of all events triggered in its wake, just like the roads of the Roman Empire were, once, only supposed to carry Roman troops. To us it has become important to speak from the perspective of the inhabitant of the infrastructure, rather than its architect or map-maker. What is the taste of the vineyards next to the road after it was recently asphalted?

In our films, including Information Skies, but also in our new essay, Digital Tarkovsky—which is to be out soon with Strelka Press—we address duration or temporality. Andrei Tarkovsky and Aleksandr Sokurov are heroes of ours who used, and use, time as their primary instrument. But we want to look at this through the lens of platforms, and in the digital age (sorry for the term), where duration is associated with Facebook, Instagram addiction, and Netflix binge-watching. We are convinced that there is a cinematic core to our time spent on the smartphone—if only because it is banned from most movie theatres.

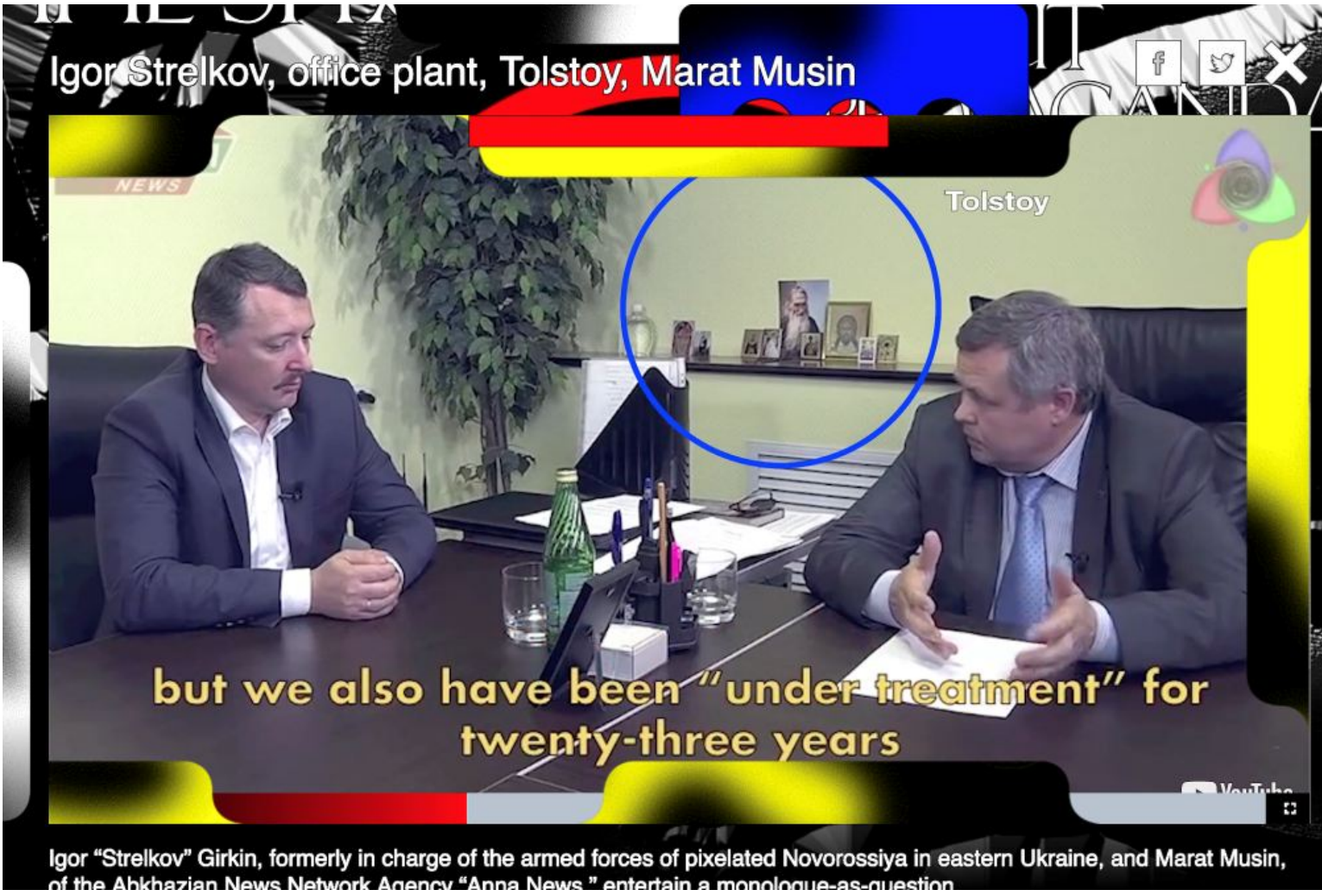


LP: *Your film Information Skies particularly embraces Tarkovsky's style, but also the sense of dislocation his story of time would bear. Apparently, this is one of the present-day motifs. Space is politically charged, marketed — along with that, it is ultimately ambiguous and inconsistent. It can be hacked, too. All the spaces of Information Skies are a non-place. At times, a romanticized non-place. Here we may recall the etymology of the term «dystopia». Displacement could be an emancipatory tactic, but it could also be a forced position, an upgraded prison — and one may be easily tricked into normalizing this condition: of course, it is fascinating and sedating. This is what Information Skies partly is about. What do you want to do with the space in your latest films — and how do you navigate it?*

MH: The suspension of disbelief happens at another level. The mountainous forest environment contrasts with the animation scenes, in which there are almost no concrete landscape elements visible, except for graphic shapes filled with graphic patterns of night sky, which we call the «steppe of pixels.» The combination of these cinematic naturalist shots and the abstracted anime sequences is important for what the film is, we think. When we shot Information Skies, cast and crew lived together for six days in a lodge near a lake in the Black Forest. To us, the concreteness of a shoot remains important, for many reasons, but there is no reason to stick to a «realistic» storyline that is built from a shoot. For our forthcoming film, Hometown, commissioned by Christine Tohmé through the Sharjah Art Foundation, we've been shooting in Beirut and Kyiv, and we are currently editing it. It is a sequel to Information Skies. We wanted to embody the idea of living with contradictions, and the idea of belonging with contradictions.

LP: *Why have you chosen to shoot your new film in Kyiv and Beirut? What does your poetic concept of Hometown stand for in this work?*

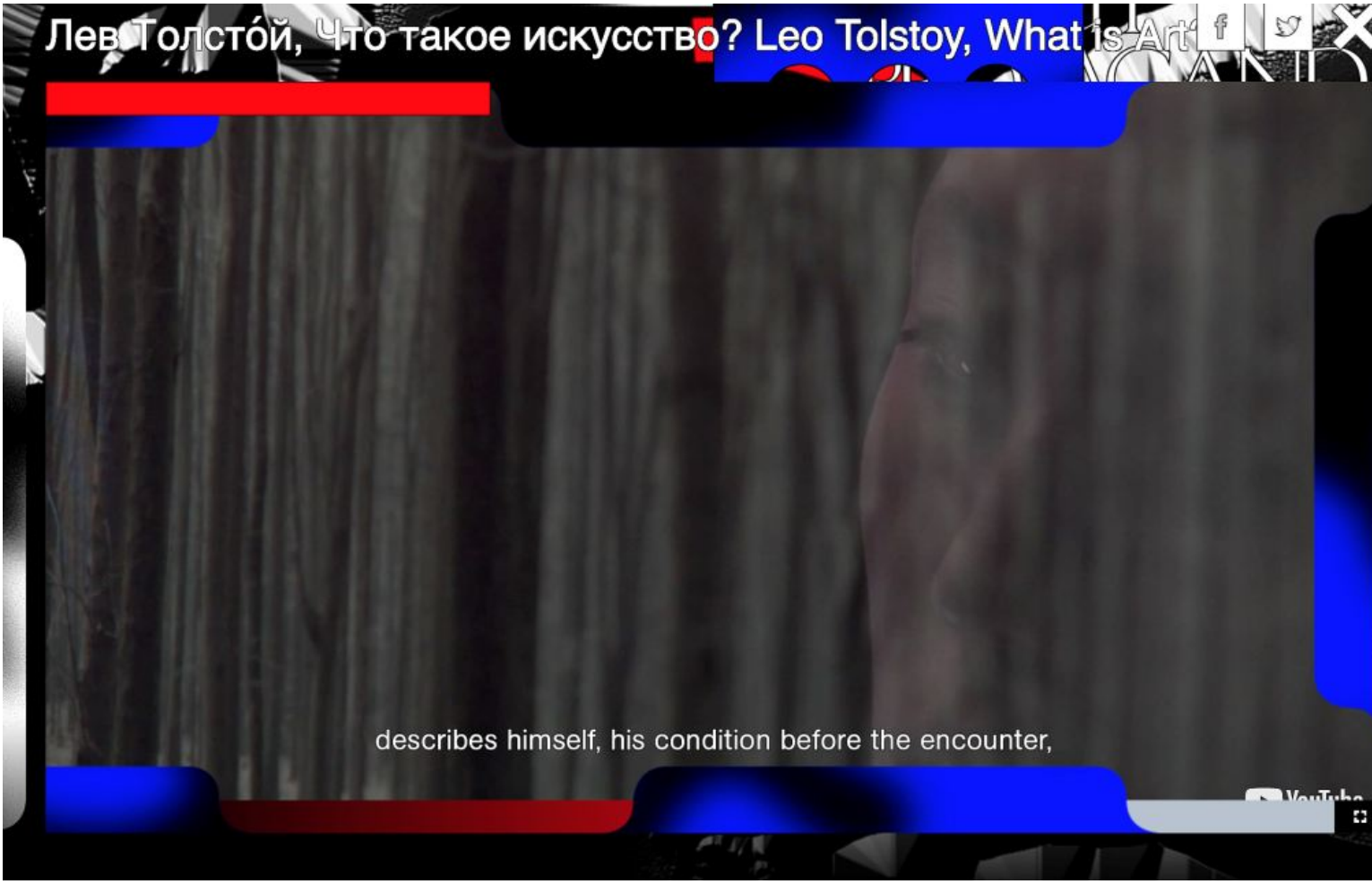
MH: We became quite influenced by the late writer and scholar Svetlana Boym. Somewhat in line with her work, Hometown is not a film about the cities in which it is shot. Kyiv and Beirut together form a new city, the «hometown,» which does not exist. Many of our films so far have been self-produced. We have to create our stories out of our circumstances. So it happened that in Spring 2017, we worked in Beirut with the arts organization Ashkal Alwan, and had the possibility to stay in this city for a period of time. We felt that Beirut was a place where the notion of contradiction, which we explore in the script, would resonate, and it did. For Information Skies, we had worked together with the fashion designer Yulia Yefimtchuk, who is based in Kyiv, and we also produced a printed piece together with her for Sleek. It felt like a good opportunity for a larger collaboration with Yulia and her colleague, Tania Monakhova. To shoot in Kyiv seemed logical. «Hometown» is not a concrete city but it is where we situate ourselves in spite of all that's vague and unpredictable. With melting ice cream and self-made currencies, without any certainties given by the clock, and nevertheless: hope.



LP: *It feels that the creation of Hometown has also had a lot to do with the ways you embed literature in your work, with the work of (spontaneous) instruments of narration. And well, this is where this deterritorialized projection or fiction of «hometown» is located — in discourse. There is a fragment in The Sprawl based on a quote from Leo Tolstoy's essay What Is Art? It seems to be relevant here too, in terms of projection. Besides, it is a text in which Tolstoy denounces «ecclesiastical and patriotic superstitions» carried in art, performing a certain «propaganda about*

propaganda» himself. How did you land at this reference?

MH: It’s quite impossible to overstate the influence that Tolstoy’s essay, What Is Art?, has had on us. Indeed, Tolstoy denounces art as an instrument of the state or the church, as well as a self-sustaining institution, which may be one reason why most curators don’t respond well to the essay. But it is exciting to see which works Tolstoy comes to see as art: «an anonymous story about a chicken, the singing of the peasant women on his estate to the banging of scythes, the most sentimental of genre paintings, doorknobs, china dolls,» in the words of Richard Pevear. Or the ritual in which members of a Mansi community in the Ural perform the hunting, wounding, and death of a deer, in which the roles of hunter, the mother deer, and the little deer are all played by humans. Art is not an object with this or that status; it is on the contrary the transfer of emotion from narrator to listener, and more importantly, the commonality that is created by this unity. The work speaks immediately, clearly, and absolutely. He denounces most official forms of art, including Wagner’s, Shakespeare’s, and his own. A nihilist logic, a didactic mindset, and a dismantling of poetics, and strong feelings of religion drive Tolstoy toward a rejection of all art that is clever, pleasing, or impressive. The text brings us upon art objects that do not have, or seek, status, but that directly seek a fundamental, shared emotion which for Tolstoy has important ethical overtones. What is Art? is truly ecstatic in its conclusions. And it’s had a profound impact on us. The part that is cited in The Sprawl is a definition of art as a transmission of feeling from one person to another. Tolstoy uses the example of a boy in the woods who encounters a wolf, and later recounts the story to someone else. If the story is told in such a way so that the listener experiences the same things as the boy did, this would be art. But if the boy invented the encounter and told someone about it, and the listener would feel the same, that also would be art. The work of art does not need to refer to something that actually happened; it may be invented, constructed, as long as there is the transfer, the sharing, that generates the reality of its feeling. For Tolstoy, what art transfers, what it communicates, is the Good, «the quality that can’t be defined, but that defines everything else.»



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1. Metahaven, The Sprawl (Propaganda About Propaganda), 2016

2. Félix Guattari, «The Three Ecologies», (London and New Brunswick, NJ: The Athlone Press, 2000).

3. Manifesto on Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation by Laboria Cuboniks, 2015.

4. See Rick Poynor, Metahaven's Information Skies – a new kind of film for the technosphere?, Creative Review, 2016; Aaron Santry, Highlights from the Rotterdam Film Festival, Frieze, 2017.