Images: Video stills Mani Mehrvarz, Private Nostalgia, 2014.

INTERNACIONAL

OF PALIMPSESTIC MEMORY AND REVERSE MERGING: MANI MEHRVARZ, PRIVATE NOSTALGIA

The project consists of more than 140 pieces of video footage, looped randomly to compose a long narration.

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The project *Private Nostalgia* by Mani Mehrvarz consists of more than 140 pieces of video footage, looped randomly to compose a long narration. Among them there are visual episodes from the history of Iran, the artist's homeland, as well as excerpts from Mehrvarz's family home videos from the past. The content of the moving images, shown one after another with no preset order, varies from scenic landscapes to social turmoil, from wedding scenes to politically engaged speeches and from football games to war. The sequence of these visual samples is never the same, since Mani Mehrvarz designed the series of video footage as a database, out of which an algorithm chooses the succession of images. Therefore, a non-linear narrative is created, as the artist notices in the project's description.

If a randomly accessed database with its hidden structure of keywords driven by code may be a metaphor of contemporary culture, as Lev Manovich noted in his paper *Database as Symbolic Form* (1999), then *Private Nostalgia* pertains to this meaning. Due to the present-day networked culture, history changes its quality from a linear narrative to an open project in a form of a database which content can be altered, remodeled and added to as well as subtracted from. The omnipresent connectedness available by networked media brings on the heterarchy of culture and challenges the way we perceive history through the wiki-model of organizing knowledge. As a result, history becomes, in a way, multidimensional and cannot be narrated using traditional and linear ways of storytelling. At the same time, it does not mean the end of history as declared by Francis Fukuyama (1992). It is rather a suggestion that history becomes navigable and heterarchical, instead of being linear (with points of beginning and end) and hierarchical (including the notions of 'big history' and 'small histories').

While nostalgia is a side-effect of dealing with memory and looking back at one's individual history, it can be also affected by some private and – looking at it from a broader perspective – also common factors. Nostalgia, defined as a longing for
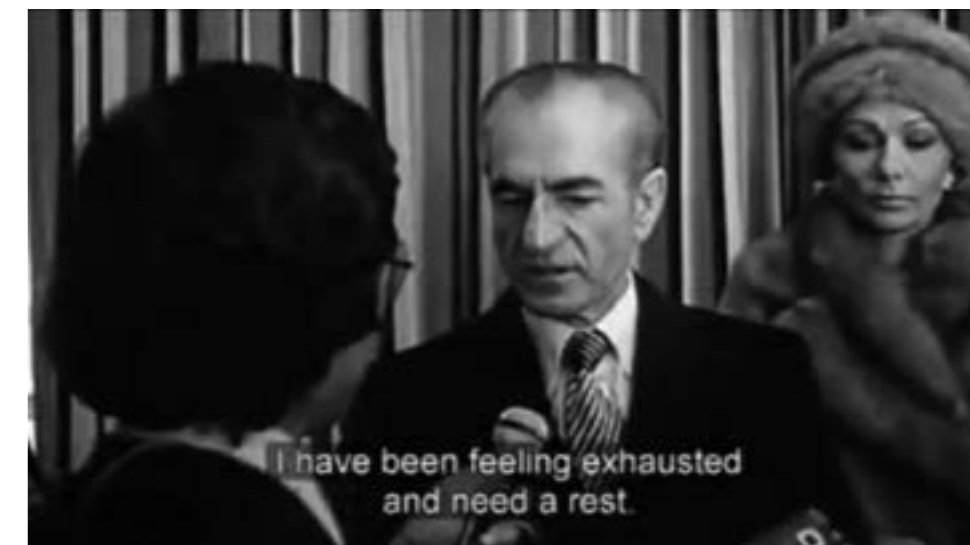
the past, sometimes one's own, but sometimes never experienced directly but only imagined as "those good old days", is a particular phenomenon, especially after the above-mentioned "end of history". Personal histories tend to be forgotten then recollected and re-lived in the process of storytelling. The individual history (the one "as I remember it") may be different from the one officially constructed. Common experiences may be often re-enacted in a form of a spectacle but they can also be altered and re-contextualized.

BACK IN HIS DAYS, WRITING ABOUT MONTAGE, WALTER BENJAMIN PREDICTED THE EMERGENCE OF ARTIFACTS SOMETIMES CREATED ALREADY WITH A POTENTIAL OF THEIR FURTHER ALTERATION...

Mani Mehrvarz's decision of taking on randomness and using historical video footage as variables, in a way reminds of so-called "Kuleshov effect" which proves that various scenes, once recorded, are prone to numerous interpretative possibilities because of montage. Back in his days, writing about montage, Walter Benjamin predicted the emergence of artifacts sometimes created already with a potential of their further alteration. Nowadays, it is remix that enables repetition and re-contextualization as a form of discourse with the past, its clichés and iconic images, while being open to future alterations. Therefore, remix in a way that is applied by Mani Mehrvarz in *Private Nostalgia* becomes not only a new form of narration but it is also deeply rooted in the very qualities

of contemporary media, particularly the way it shapes our perception and memory. As a result, memory becomes a palimpsest of images, some blurred while others quite vivid, some obviously meaningful, while others vague or even disturbing.

The "reverse merging" is a term from the field of economy, however it might be useful when applied to describe the process of remodeling history and memory through remix, as it happens with *Private Nostalgia*. In this way what's initially private (individual memory, affected by emotions and the Freudian "afterwardsness" – in a broader meaning as a knowledge of what happened next) becomes public, but at the same time the public factor (common imagination) is affected because we perceive it

differently. A common imagination as a repository of images and episodes is never the same; it changes due to the perspective of every narrator, projecting his or her psychological stance onto the viewed subject. That's why the images seem to be so haunting and the series of algorithm-driven episodes seems to be meaningful and surprising. The private merges with the public not only because of today's mediated perception, shaped by the constant online presence and access to decentralized knowledge. It is also because of remix as a main feature of contemporary culture that derives from various resources and plays with variables to reveal a multi-faceted set of meanings, as it happens with *Private Nostalgia* by Mani Mehrvarz.