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*The Festival of Life: 'Chicago 1968' Through the Lens of Post-Truth*

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# The Festival of Life: 'Chicago 1968' Through the Lens of Post-Truth

## Abstract

In the film *HyperNormalisation* by British documentary maker Adam Curtis, there is a section on Vladimir Putin's purported puppet master, Vladislav Surkov who has also become known as 'Putin's Rasputin'. His central role in keeping Putin in power in Russia is documented by Curtis through collages of archival BBC footage and newsreels, and some scenes shot for the film. It is accompanied by Curtis' bold and highly distinctive commentary. Surkov's background in *avant-garde* theatre is highlighted and portrayed as reaching right into the heart Russian politics by turning politics into a strange theatre where nobody knows what is true and what is fake any longer. Reality can be manipulated and shaped into anything you want it to be.

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## The Festival of Life:

### 'Chicago 1968' Through the Lens of Post-Truth

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In the film *HyperNormalisation*<sup>1</sup> by British documentary maker Adam Curtis, there is a section on Vladimir Putin's purported puppet master, Vladislav Surkov who has also become known as 'Putin's Rasputin'. His central role in keeping Putin in power in Russia is documented by Curtis through collages of archival BBC footage and newsreels, and some scenes shot for the film. It is accompanied by Curtis' bold and highly distinctive commentary. Surkov's background in *avant-garde* theatre is highlighted and portrayed as reaching right into the heart Russian politics by turning politics into a

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Curtis, *HyperNormalisation*, film, 2016, 2 hours and 46 minutes. Available URL:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p04b183c>

strange theatre where nobody knows what is true and what is fake any longer. Reality can be manipulated and shaped into anything you want it to be. Curtis quotes an editorial about Surkov from the *London Review of Books*:

In contemporary Russia...the stage is constantly changing: the country is a dictatorship in the morning, a democracy at lunch, an oligarchy by supertime, while, backstage, oil companies are expropriated, journalists killed, billions siphoned away. Surkov is at the centre of the show, sponsoring nationalist skinheads one moment, backing human rights groups the next. It's a strategy of power based on keeping any opposition there may be constantly confused, a ceaseless shape-shifting that is unstoppable because it's indefinable.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth mentioning, given our focus on the sixties, that in his spare time, Surkov apparently writes about conceptual art and composes lyrics for rock groups.

Notably, the documentary *Hypernormalisation* was released in 2016 before Trump was elected. However, the shadow of such a possibility falls on every frame of this remarkable film. In reference to some of Surkov's stage-managed media spectacles and theatrical antics, Curtis argues that, of course, real power is elsewhere in Russia, out of sight and behind the scenes. What is crucial is the fact that Surkov is quite open about what he is doing and lets everyone know he is backing left-wing opponents to Putin one day, and neo-Nazis on another. He seems to openly relish his role in spreading bewilderment about what is real and what is fake.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Pomerantsev, 'Putin's Rasputin', *London Review of Books*, vol. 33, no. 20, October 2011, pp.3-6.

Whether Surkov is a yippie or was influenced by the antics of Abbie Hoffman or Jerry Rubin is not my question here. However, there is a lot of commentary (popular and scholarly, some very problematic and some more persuasive) about the countercultural roots of the alt-right in the US, the far right in Germany, Sweden and France and countercultural elements in various right-wing on-line subcultures. It is a connection that is tenuous at best and needs to be challenged. There is always a politics about cultural memory and forgetting. The legacy of 1968 appears to be as highly contested now as it has ever been. Todd Gitlin has recently used the phrase 'the undead sixties' to describe these never-ending efforts to reclaim or refute this legacy.

My question here is about the lens we use when we look back and conduct retrospective analyses of 1968. As such, this is also a question about the politics of memory. If we look through the lens of 'post-truth', what comes to light, if anything, about the countercultural carnival that was planned as the lead up to the Democratic Party Convention in Chicago in 1968, the Yippie orchestrated and named 'Festival of Life' to counter the Convention of Death that was the Democratic Party?

Before discussing the festival aspect of Chicago 1968, as opposed to the police violence that occurred and by which Chicago '68 is usually remembered and recounted, and before outlining the various rumours deliberately circulated by the Yippies in the lead up to the convention, it is important to attempt to define 'post-truth'. While we might be tempted to think of post-truth simply as lying, as in the phrase 'fake news', the term and practice has come to work on a much more subterranean and affective level. In the words of political theorist John Keane, post-truth interrupts the background noise of conventional politics and public life: it may involve lying, it may also include buffoonery, theatrics, jokes, absurdist exaggeration and various tactics of distraction and destabilisation with the

aim of spreading confusion and the sense that 'reality' is multiple and mutable.<sup>3</sup> In our affect-oriented media landscape and digitised environment, emotional responses and their residues remain long after a spectacle is superseded or shown to be based on a lie. An example would be the doctored video that the White House shared of a CNN journalist Jim Acosta apparently chopping down on the arm of an intern. As we came to learn, the video was altered by speeding up an image of Acosta's arm reaching in front of the intern for the microphone and deleting his polite apology of "Pardon me, ma'am."<sup>4</sup> The doctoring was done by a far-right conspiracy group and it was circulated on their website called *Infowars* and then re-circulated by the White House. Importantly, in a post-truth political landscape, subsequent knowledge that the video was fake does not necessarily cancel out its intended emotional effect: the general impression that the press cannot be trusted, that they are rude and aggressive (and the 'enemy of the people') remains. Both the truth and the lie seem to sit side by side, leaving an unease about our own perceptions and the sense that any knowledge can be on stable foundations. The lack of any sense of shame about this manipulation and distortion of fact, or any embarrassment or apology by the White House just adds to the sense of destabilisation.

So, let's turn back to 1968 and the Yippies and the way key figures in the group, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, Paul Krassner, Stew Albert and others experimented with spectacle while critiquing it at

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<sup>3</sup> See John Keane, 'Post-Truth Politics and Why the Antidote Isn't Simply "Fact Checking" and Truth,' *The Conversation*, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018. Available URL: <https://theconversation.com/post-truth-politics-and-why-the-antidote-isnt-simply-fact-checking-and-truth-87364>

<sup>4</sup> Available URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/11/08/white-house-shares-doctored-video-support-punishment-journalist-jim-acosta/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.c42f26fb97b2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/11/08/white-house-shares-doctored-video-support-punishment-journalist-jim-acosta/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.c42f26fb97b2)

the same time. The Yippies referred to themselves as psychedelic Bolsheviks and as I argued in *Anti-Disciplinary Protest* (1998), they developed a distinctive language of protest that distinguished itself from both the Old Left and from the New Left. Their activist strategies resisted the always problematic division between what is considered political or cultural radicalism. In my book, written in the 1990s and published 20 years ago, I identified some of the features of an anti-disciplinary language of protest.<sup>5</sup> This included a rejection of hierarchy, leadership and conventional political organization, much like the New Left critiques of bureaucracy. But the Yippies (and similar groups) went further by challenging the idea that radicalism should involve political commitment, seriousness and sacrifice, and that having strategies, plans, coherent aims, and even comprehensibility needed to be abandoned: in short, a rejection of the discipline of politics. Abbie Hoffman summed this up with the phrase: “Confusion is mightier than the sword!”<sup>6</sup>

The Festival of Life, August 25<sup>th</sup> - 30<sup>th</sup> in Chicago 1968 was meant to be a cultural gathering standing in opposition to the Vietnam war and militarism and prefiguring alternative values and an alternative vision of political protest. Yippies promoted a form of pranksterism and theatricality where the symbolic became as important as actual events at the Convention. About the infamous pig for President campaign, Hoffman points out that the ‘myth of the pig’, became just as important, tactically speaking, as the actual pig called Pigasus. Apart from the logistical problems of managing more than one large pig in the streets of Chicago, a Yippie faction purportedly demanded a much meaner pig (signalling in Hoffman’s words that the real pig became superseded by the myth). He

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<sup>5</sup> Julie Stephens, *Anti-Disciplinary Protest: Sixties Radicalism and Postmodernism*, Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.24-48.

<sup>6</sup> Abbie Hoffman, *Revolution for the Hell of It*, New York, Dial Press, 1968, p. 26.

writes: "I dropped the hint that we were considering running a lion. In the end, thousands of pigs were used, real pigs, pig buttons, nice pigs like Mr and Mrs Pig and bad pigs like the cops, Daley and Humphrey and the politicians. It was shades of Animal Farm."<sup>7</sup>

On YouTube, there is a short recording and film of Abbie Hoffman discussing Yippie guerrilla theatre tactics in advance of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. In answer to a question from a young, like minded looking man about whether demonstrating in Chicago was a risk, and wouldn't it be like protestors herding themselves into a stockade', Hoffman reassures him by saying if you act crazy enough, they can't touch you. He gives the example of how in the lead up to the Levitation of the Pentagon in 1967, anti-war protestors became very concerned about the possible use and effects of MACE (a chemical tear gas) by the police. So, we invented our own drug spray called LACE, a made-up chemical of our own. We organised a press conference and squirted coloured water in water pistol at couple who immediately started to have sex in front of the journalists. We threatened we would use LACE on the National Guard at the Pentagon demonstration. As Hoffman boasts, this complete fabrication, called LACE, was later reported in in Time Magazine, as [quote] "a fact, no hoax no quotes, nothing, LACE."<sup>8</sup>

A range of similar threats were made by the Yippies in the lead up to the Democratic Party convention (their so-called warm up events) and these were all duly reported as 'truth' by the mainstream and underground press of the day: there was the proposal to pick up Democratic party delegates at the airport in phoney taxis and to drop them off miles away in Wisconsin; to take over the Chicago biscuit company and distribute bread and cookies to the masses; to stage a mass nude-in at Lake Michigan;

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<sup>7</sup> Abbie Hoffman, *Revolution*, p.94.

<sup>8</sup> Available URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oujcg\\_Tifw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2oujcg_Tifw)

to take cherry and apples pies and present them to the Chicago police and of course to put LSD in the public water supply. A huge free rock festival was planned and theatre groups from around the country had pledged to come to Chicago. Workshops were also intended to be held to cover commune development, draft resisting, guerrilla theatre and how to establish an underground press. Accounts of what actually happened at the Festival of Life, varied, with Jerry Rubin later, unsurprisingly perhaps, contesting Hoffman's version of events. However, in keeping with the concept of the 'Society of the Spectacle', the truth was not what mattered. Indeed, there was a recognition that the Yippies were simply a reflection of a distortion of reality that was occurring in mainstream America:

The United States political system was proving more insane than Yippie! Reality and unreality had in six months switched sides. It was America that was on a trip; we were just standing still. How could we pull our pants down. America was already naked. What could we disrupt? America was falling apart at the seams.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, the term post-truth sits uneasily with other ways of remembering the Festival of Life and its aftermath and more generally, remembering the sixties counterculture. While in 1968 the Yippies explored the political uses of 'fake news', they retained the belief (mistaken as it turned out) that this gave them a wider platform from which to convey their more revolutionary and radical ideas.

The Yippie idea that the media could be easily manipulated to the advantage of radicals was challenged by those who identified more with the New Left. Tom Hayden thought it was a dangerous strategy and that the media always needed to be treated with caution. He saw the media as the enemy of the anti-war movement. Todd Gitlin identified, at the time, a growing alliance between the

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<sup>9</sup> Abbie Hoffman, *Revolution*, p.105.

media and liberals where opposition to the war became respectable at the expense of more structural analyses of fundamental problems in American society. There were suggestions that Yippie antics put other protestors at risk of violence in certain demonstrations and perhaps the most conventional view was that the Yippies were clown-like and therefore non-threatening.

Interestingly, this was one of the perspectives that Abbie Hoffman's lawyer exploited to defend Hoffman against the charges of conspiracy, the charges of planning and organising a riot in Chicago in 1968 in the infamous Chicago 8 and later Chicago 7 trials. Despite attempts to turn the trial into just a media spectacle, the idea that reality could be manipulated and shaped into anything you want it to be (if you like a post-truth notion of endless malleability) was shown to have its limits. As Nick Sharman has documented in his study of the media reportage and the trial transcripts, Abbie Hoffman spent a significant and clearly observable time outlining the details of his political philosophy, his extensive political work in the civil rights movement and the political and philosophically coherent nature of his nonviolent plans for the convention.<sup>10</sup> Notably, this did not receive any significant coverage by the *New York Times* during the trial. The *New York Times* was much more interested in and indeed comfortable with reporting on the costumes worn by Hoffman, his mockery of the conventions of the court system and the politics of theatre rather than the theatre of Yippie politics. In fact, we could see this as a metaphor for the simplified way the counterculture has often been viewed by later commentators. As we know, the dominant cultural memory of the sixties is one that focusses on costume and style, mere frivolity, rather than the substantial and far-

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<sup>10</sup> Nick Sharman, *The Chicago Conspiracy Trials and the Press*, New York, Palgrave, 2016, pp.104-105.

reaching rejection of militarism and consumer capitalism that was expressed, broadcast and enacted, over and over again at the time.

To return to the opening of this paper, Vladimir Surkov apparently uses post-truth tactics of destabilisation to maintain the status quo in Russia today with the aim to quell or neutralise opposition. In my view, the Yippies used the logic of post-truth in a very different way. They used post-truth tactics to spread and fuel opposition and dissent. And according to Yippie and activist Stew Albert, in an interview with Nick Sharman in 2005, they also aimed to make young people feel braver and safer about mobilising against the war in Vietnam and the injustices of capitalist society.<sup>11</sup> In 1968, Hoffman outlined his aims as “nothing short of destroying Amerika and its institutions of racism, imperialism, capitalism and the protestant ethic.”<sup>12</sup> Other enemies he identified were [to quote] corporate America, Xerox, corporate liberalism, Harvard University, Robert Kennedy and The *New York Times* among a host of other symbols of liberal America.<sup>13</sup>

To my surprise, on rereading the 1970 introduction to his book *Revolution for the Hell of It* (the revised introduction was written two years after the original text and two years after the Festival of Life in Chicago), Hoffman challenges the prevailing notions of activism (including his own) by recognising the following: “Women’s liberation, more than any other movement in the to emerge in the last two years forces us to examine our style of living. To enter the twenty-first century, to have revolution in our lifetime, male supremacy must be smashed, *including the chauvinism in this book*”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Sharman, *Chicago*, pp.89-91.

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman, *Revolution*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Hoffman, *Revolution*, p. 65.

<sup>14</sup> Abbie Hoffman, *Revolution for the Hell of It*, Pocket Book Edition, 1970, p 3.

Certainly, what was considered to be “truth” in 1968 was put into question by the Yippies in their celebration of what they called “pure imagery.” As Hoffman wrote in 1968, “pure imagery in the end was truth”. Yet in an interview in 1987, two years before Abbie Hoffman took his own life, he described himself (contrarily perhaps) as essentially a leftist. I believe in the redistribution of wealth and power in the world. I believe in universal hospital care for everyone. I believe that we should not have a single homeless person in the richest country in the world.

So if we look back at the Chicago Festival of Life, what ‘undead sixties’ survives or to use another phrase from Todd Gitlin, what “shadow presence of ‘68”<sup>15</sup> can we detect? The Yippies have been the model for the expressive politics of many subsequent social movements. For example, the direct acts of theatre by ACT-UP in the late 80’s and early 90’s, the guerilla communication of anti-consumerist culture jamming groups (90s and 2000’s), the impersonator duo, the *Yes Men* who are noted for their radical disruption and political parody of corporate events, the anti-globalisation movement that combined protest and festivals in “protestivals”, and to follow references to Russia, Pussy Riot (that so bravely challenge the politics of a Surkov or Putin) is another notable illustration. Also, in my view, so is the maternalist feminist peace activism of a group like Code Pink today.<sup>16</sup> These developments are important to remember, particularly when we hear that the alt-right has roots in the counterculture or when other ‘blame the sixties narratives’ or rewritings of anti-disciplinary forms of protest continue to gain such traction.

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<sup>15</sup> Sasha Abramsky, ‘The Siege of Chicago at 50: Todd Gitlin Remembers’, *The Nation*, August 1, 2018. Available URL: <https://www.thenation.com/article/siege-chicago-50-todd-gitlin-remembers/>

<sup>16</sup> See Julie Stephens, *Confronting Postmaternal Thinking; Feminism, Memory and Care*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, pp. 114-116.