

MoMA PS1

Greater New York 2010 catalog essay

TOMMY HARTUNG

b. 1979

Exploring the didactic potential of the moving image, Tommy Hartung's videos analyze the creation and dissemination of cultural narratives through entertainment. Often taking the major themes of modernism as his subject matter, his work has addressed colonial expansion and exploration, evolution, conquest, and innovation. Drawing upon a diverse range of sources, including *Anna Karenina*, the Gnostic gospels, and the 1967 classic coming-of-age novel *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, Hartung experiments with the history of film and video and the conventions of narrative, fragmenting and deconstructing his source material.

Many of Hartung's videos use the 1973 BBC documentary *The Ascent of Man* as a point of departure, a 13-part television miniseries written and narrated by noted British scientist and historian Jacob Bronowski. Conceived as a companion to art historian Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* (1969), which addressed the history of Western culture through art and architecture, *The Ascent of Man* traced the emergence and evolution of humanity through the scientific, mathematical, and technological developments that have shaped civilization. Focusing upon the democratic potential of technology, the program was groundbreaking in the history of television, part of a series of documentaries that merged educational content with a medium associated with popular entertainment.

Utilizing a variety of traditional lighting, staging and filmmaking techniques, Hartung appropriates footage from *The Ascent of Man*, combining it with his own video recordings and stop-motion animations to create chaotic, surreal scenes that juxtapose incongruous imagery. Abandoning any sense of temporal specificity, Hartung's videos contrast with the strictly linear, evolutionary narrative of Bronowski's documentary; moreover, the videos point to the complexity of historical and literary narratives and their inability to be contained within narrow frameworks. Alluding to colonialism, objectification, exploitation, and conquest, works such as *Stay Golden Ponyboy* (2008) and *The Ascent of Man* (2009) are simultaneously critical, comic, and nostalgic. Displaying his videos with sculptures and personal artifacts, Hartung contrasts the sweeping arcs of historical progress with reminders of the intimate, the personal, and the handmade.