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# A Cut, or Television-Makers' Revenge

On January 16, 1989, in a report for the late evening news program *Tagesthemen*, an ambiguous cut was shown, one which used the simplest of means to convey complex meaning and which both stimulated the senses and promoted knowledge of the facts.

The scene: military planes in formation fly an arc and then cross the runway at low height, coming from the left and at an acute angle to the camera. A single plane then approaches from the right bearing down on the formation. At this point, just before the inevitable convergence of the planes, there is a cut and something else is shown: men stepping up to the microphones at a press conference in Bonn. The first time the Ramstein air show was broadcast, the viewer was meant to expect the single plane coming from the right to fly through the formation from the right ("Incredible, how close they fly past one another!") and was confronted with the collision ("Incredible, how close the camera can get!"). On January 16, after numerous repetitions had made the scene familiar, the viewer would have expected to see the collision once again, only to be surprised by the cut of the censor. Political censorship: images are not there to satisfy curiosity, but to help focus attention on political processes.

Much beautiful cinema has been born from the circumstance that someone was not allowed to show something and therefore replaced an illustration with an illusion, using omission as a means of allowing room for imagination. (The cut of January 16 had the direct effect of compelling the viewer to complete the interrupted scene in his imagination.) If one first looks at a light-colored symbol and then immediately afterwards at a black surface, a phantom image lingers for a moment – a physiological after-image. Rather than opening up room for imagination, cutting away the collision had the effect of producing an after-image.

By sequencing the images so that the press conference provided a background for the after-images of the air show, the montage belittles

the image of politics in Bonn, secretly and effectively. This show of contempt is television-makers' revenge against the business of politics which forces them to use their recording and editing equipment to deal with doorplates, office corridors, official cars, porters' lodges, or staged pseudo-events like press conferences. Television-makers permanently have the task of translating facts into events. On January 16, the set of facts was as tangled as usual: a commission appointed by the secretary of armed forces had met and concluded that air shows should continue to be held albeit without aerobatics. Facts such as these can only be put into the overall picture askew. No set of facts is translatable into an event.

Steinhoff, the military air veteran who was the speaker at the press conference, has a face terribly disfigured by fire during World War II, so the ambiguous cut made a connection between airplanes just about to collide and begin to burn, showering the curious onlookers with burning gasoline with the image of a face distorted by fire. It is an old-fashioned form of montage which went out with silent movies: the use of thematic transitions like rich/poor or dog/cat. Whoever made the report of January 16 was not perhaps able to see the idea which the cut brought into play. Steinhoff's face disfigured by war had been used in politics in West Germany for decades. What was the intention behind showing this face? Was it that war is dreadful, but unavoidable? Or that the generals too held their necks out? Or that German soldiers were victims of the war? This ambiguous usage has taken away all meaning.