

Recycled Images



by William C. Wees

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Introduction

Due to the great number and variety of found footage films in existence, I should at least indicate the parameters within which I propose to discuss the subject. Although I make a few references to European films, the bulk of my examples come from North America, not only because they are the films I know best, but because I assume they are more likely to be known to my readers — or at least to those readers who are familiar with found footage work at all. For those who are not, I hope to provide a suitable introduction in the next section of this essay. Readers should be warned, however, that I have used a relatively small number of films to exemplify a very large and diverse body of work. And while my division of found footage films into three broad categories is intended to provide a reasonable overview of the field, it cannot do justice to the variety of ways creative filmmakers have recycled found footage. That variety is adequately represented, I believe, in the Filmography at the end of this publication.

Furthermore, there are many films with found footage that are not, strictly speaking, found footage films. Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, Bruce Baillie's *Quixote*, Robert Nelson's *Bleu Shut*, and Yvonne Rainer's *The Man Who Envied Women* (to mention a few of many possible examples), are films with found footage, and each in its own way makes significant use of that footage, but the films

as a whole are not based on found footage, nor are they "about" found footage. On the other hand, Bruce Conner's *A Movie*, Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*, Ken Jacobs' *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son*, Abigail Child's *Prefaces and Mercy*, and Craig Baldwin's *RocketKitKongoKit and Tribulation 99* (to mention, again, a few of many relevant examples) are not only composed of found footage, but highlight that fact and make it one of the film's principle points of interest. While I have no strict rule for calculating how much found footage a film must have in order to be a bona fide found footage film, I think more than intuition or arbitrariness leads me to include some films with a fair amount of original footage such as Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, Mary Filippio's *Who Do You Think You Are*, Gunvor Nelson's and Dorothy Wiley's *Schmeerguntz*, and Mike Hoolboom's *Eat* — while excluding the films listed at the beginning of this paragraph. Clearly, it is not a question of merit, but of emphasis.

Similarly, although I offer a survey of found footage filmmaking, my emphasis falls on films constructed according to the principles of montage or collage (a term of equal relevance, as I will try to show). There are other valid strategies for recycling found footage, of course, but montage/collage seems to me the most effective means of exposing the social and political implications of found footage while, at the same time, adapting it to the demands of the "quintessential twentieth century art form," namely, collage.¹

Finally, and perhaps it goes without saying, the

privileged realm of filmmaking for this project is experimental or avant-garde film, where the most interesting, aesthetically satisfying, critically informed, and politically challenging uses of found footage are to be found. Or so it seems to me.

Surveying the Field

Recycling found footage may require nothing more than finding it and showing it to someone who appreciates it. "A lot of film is perfect left alone, perfectly revealing in its un- or semi-conscious form," Ken Jacobs writes in a note on his *Perfect Film* (1986).² That film, which is composed of unedited interviews, location shots and other material gathered for television news reports on the assassination of Malcolm X, is distributed (with only a slight adjustment to the soundtrack) exactly as Jacobs found it "in a Canal Street bin."³ Similarly, Brian Goldberg's and Jackie Goss' *Perfect Video* (1989) reproduces on film a discarded video tape containing degraded, jumbled and repeated images of John Hinckley's attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan. In both cases, a haphazard assemblage of newscast left-overs yields unintentional insights into the media's handling of violent public events. (By contrast, the treatment of the Kennedy assassination in Bruce Conner's *Report [1967]* — a film to which *Perfect Film* and

Perfect Video invite comparison — clearly derives from Conner's own montage of radio reports and found footage. His film's sources are found, but its form is constructed by the filmmaker and communicates an individual's conscious intention — which is precisely what is absent from *Perfect Film* and *Perfect Video*.)

Jacobs' *Urban Peasants* (1975) and Hollis Frampton's *Works and Days* (1969) offer other examples of found footage that seems "perfect left alone." Simply by connecting 100-foot rolls of 16mm home movies shot by his wife's aunt in the 1930s and '40s, Jacobs permits the original footage to be seen as its maker and her family and friends saw it. However, the passage of time has invested it with nostalgia, historical and sociological interest, and an aesthetic value that is apparent only because Jacobs left the footage intact, rather than re-editing it to suit his own formal and thematic concerns. (The latter practice is much more common among avant-garde filmmakers, as exemplified by such works as Alan Berliner's *Family Album* [1986], Ron Finner's *People Near Here* [1969], Noll Brinkmann's *Der Vater* [1986], and Abigail Child's *Covert Action* [1984]). In a similar vein, Frampton's *Works and Days* reproduces an early documentary of a man and woman methodically planting their vegetable garden, to which Frampton added nothing but the title and his logo. Because the title is the same as that of Hesiod's ancient almanac and agricultural handbook (c. 700 B.C.), it encourages viewers to be aware of traditional patterns and rituals in the seemingly

mundane activities of two anonymous gardeners, and Frampton's logo implicitly acknowledges the aesthetic accomplishments of the equally anonymous camera operator and editor. Frampton said that he placed his logo at the end of the film "in the spirit of the Chinese connoisseurs who affixed their vermilion seals to paintings as a mark of admiration."⁴

In the same spirit of nonintervention — but not necessarily admiration — Craig Baldwin includes found footage in the avant-garde film series he regularly presents in a store front gallery in San Francisco's Mission District. In the fall of 1991, for example, he offered a program entitled "The Return of Industrials Amok!" which he advertised as follows:

Like a bad habit, our perverse fascination with the time-warped informational films of the '50s and '60s finds us with Frank Capra's propaganda "pièce de résistance" *Your Job in Germany*, followed by *Civil Defense* clips, *Alcatraz Escape* bulletins, and *Mob and Riot Control* trainers. Also unspooling unashamedly is the nudist review *The Raw Ones*, the bohemian-beduddled religious kinescope *Delinquent, Hipster and Square* (with music performed by Max Roach), a *Censorship* lesson for kids, slo-mo *Crash Tests*, and other Indictious left-overs.⁵

If these "left-overs" are also "perfect left alone," it is not because they are unrecognized gems of cinematic art, but because their very artlessness exposes them to more critical — and more amusing — readings than their original makers in-

tended or their original audiences were likely to produce.

In most cases, however, filmmakers do not assume that found footage only needs to be shown to be appreciated. The more common practice is to rework the footage in some way, so that its richer implications become more apparent. In Ernie Gehr's *Eureka* (1974), for example, a five-minute film shot from the front of a tram descending San Francisco's Market Street in the early 1900s, is step printed and stretched into a 30-minute tapestry of cluttered street life in an American city at the turn of the century. For *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* (1969), Ken Jacobs refilmed a short, 1905 version of the well-known nursery rhyme, and by stretching its action, repeating movements, and blowing up details of its mise-en-scene, he "revently examines" the original film for nearly two hours.⁶ Jacobs' "Nervous System" presentations (which require specially designed equipment operated by Jacobs at each performance) also use short segments of found footage to make lengthy forays into unfamiliar and often baffling realms of perception.

Equally unfamiliar are some of the perceived movements in Martin Arnold's *Pièce Touchée* (1989), in which the frames of a mere 18 seconds of found footage are rearranged in extremely complex variations on a two-steps-forward-one-step-back progression. The result is a bizarre 15-minute exposé of "the hesitation and discomfort in a Hollywood B-movie couple heading towards a kiss."⁷ A very different, mirage-like effect results

from the slow, frame-to-frame dissolves in David Rimmer's *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970). A brief clip of two ships passing on the River Thames becomes an eight-minute exploration of texture, color, and barely discernable shifts in the relationship of forms in space. In several other films, Rimmer uses a technique favored by a number of filmmakers: looping found footage to make the same sequence of frames appear over and over again. In *The Dance* (1970), for example, Rimmer looped a brief shot of two ballroom dancers spinning rapidly as they execute a large circle at the front of a band stand. With just a little "jump" where the ends of the loop meet, the same movement continues for five minutes in an ingenious isomorphism of form, content and technique: circles within circles within circles.

By simply changing the order of shots, filmmakers have found other ways of opening found footage to new, unexpected readings. For *Rose Hobart* (1939), Joseph Cornell rearranged a comparatively small number of shots from a 1931 feature film, *East of Borneo*. His "re-make" celebrates the beauty and cinematic allure of the film's star, Rose Hobart, at the same time as it produces a surreal narrative of unmotivated gestures, unexplained confrontations, and unconnected spaces and temporal relationships. It is a work that both savors and wryly deconstructs many familiar conventions of Hollywood narrative cinema. In *The Doctor's Dream* (1978), Ken Jacobs turns a sentimental, cliché-ridden TV movie into an oddly ambiguous psychodrama by begin-

ning in the middle of the original film, alternating shots from progressively earlier and later points in the narrative, and finishing with the original film's opening and closing shots cut next to each other. Donna Cameron's *Dracula and the Baby Sitter* (1986) derives its disjointed, dream-like narrative from the re-editing of a movie about gambling addiction, and in *The Falcon* (1987), Cameron introduces only a few changes in a documentary about falconry in Kuwait to make a sardonic commentary on the politics of leisure among wealthy Arabs. Pushing the re-editing process still further, Daniel Barnett rearranged and repeated shots from a trailer for a James Bond movie. His *Pull Out/Fall Out* (1974) comically deconstructs the contrived excitement of all trailers for action-thriller films. Nina Fonoroff carries the deconstructive process further still in *Some Phases of an Empire* (1984), by rearranging, repeating, reversing, and cropping shots from the Hollywood spectacular, *Quo Vadis*.

A few other noteworthy examples of re-cutting and repeating shots from a single film are also worth mentioning. Sharon Sandusky's *C'Mon Babe (Danke Schoen)* (1988) which is both a black comedy about compulsive and self-destructive behavior and a sly critique of manipulative "nature films," comes from a Disney documentary about Lemmings' suicidal journey to the sea. Charles Levine's *Bessie Smith* (1968) uses repeated shots from a 1929 film, *Saint Louis Blues*, to celebrate the great blues singer and, at the same time, to criticize some of the stereotypes imposed

on images of black women. Bruce Conner's *Marilyn Times Five* (1973), an homage/critique of a different sort, comes from a tawdry little film of a teen-aged Marilyn Monroe (or someone looking very much like her) awkwardly adopting a series of peep show poses. Looped again and again, Monroe's inept gestures are almost graceful, yet their mechanical repetition undercuts their playfulness and naive simulation of erotic pleasure. They become increasingly artificial and anti-erotic. Despite its stag movie and pin-up girl clichés, the film reneges on its initial invitation to the voyeur. Instead of a closer, more intimate view of a woman's body, the repetition of shots and the extreme graininess of the film increasingly draw attention to the body of the film itself, to the film's own image-ness.

And that, I would argue, is the effect of all found footage films. Whether they preserve the footage in its original form or present it in new and different ways, they invite us to recognize it *as* found footage, *as* recycled images, and due to that self-referentiality, they encourage a more analytical reading (which does not necessarily exclude a greater aesthetic appreciation) than the footage originally received.

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So far, it should be noted, my examples have come from films based principally or entirely on images taken from one source, be it a feature-length movie or a fragment of a single shot. In a

great many found footage films, however, the images come from a variety of sources and are juxtaposed in montage constructions that invest them with new or previously unrecognized implications. As Chick Strand has put it: "Nothing is sacred. You just rip it out of one context — or leave a couple of the little sub-contextual things in it — and mix up the whole thing with something else entirely: make up a context."⁸ Or, in Craig Baldwin's words: "You can go in any direction. That's the nature of found footage ... I like that proliferation and multiplication — opening out, and a kind of complexity and layering, layering, layering."⁹

The nature and degree of "complexity and layering" depend upon two factors: the kinds of images found by the filmmaker and the way those images are juxtaposed. Newsreels, documentaries, propaganda films, educational films, industrial films, travelogues, stock shots, archival footage, cartoons, pornographic films, early silent films, Hollywood feature films, TV ads, game shows, news programs, and the rest of the detritus of the film and television industries supply the images for montage constructions that range from loose strings of comic metaphors and analogies, to off-beat narratives, to surreal visual poems, to formal experiments in graphic and rhythmic relationships, to critiques of the media's visual codes and the myths and ideologies that sustain them. In every case, the film's montage exploits discrepancies between the image's original and present functions. That is to say, it does not disguise the

fact that the shots come from different sources; yet, at the same time, it prompts us to recognize an appropriateness in their juxtaposition. In their new setting, even individual shots may have implications that their original contexts suppressed, as when Bruce Conner exposes a phallocentric subtext in the famous shot of the U.S. Marines planting the American flag at Iwo Jima (in *Cosmic Ray* [1961]), or Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley bring out the trivialization of women in beauty contest footage (in *Schmeerguntz* [1966]).

Although Bruce Conner is probably the best known filmmaker to mix and match fragments of found footage, there are many others who have transformed found footage through similar montage techniques. Among Conner's contemporaries, the most productive have been Arthur Lipsett, Standish Lawder, Chick Strand, and Stan Vanderbeek, but one might also mention Jerry Abrams, Stan Brakhage, Louis Brigante, Charles Gagnon, Adolfo Mekas, Paul Morrissey, and Raymond Sarnoff among older filmmakers whose found footage films have been — with the exception of Brakhage's *Murder Psalm* (1981) — overlooked, underrated, or forgotten. Among the younger generation, Craig Baldwin, Alan Berliner, Jean-Claude Bustros, Abigail Child, Mary Filippio, Heather McAdams, Julie Murray, Jay Rosenblatt, Greta Snider, and Michael Wallin are a few of the many filmmakers who have kept the tradition alive by adapting it to their own interests and skills. Whatever their individual differences, all of these filmmakers — young and old — have one

thing in common: the ability to make others' images serve their own purposes through the transformative power of montage.

Investing disparate shots with a kind of pseudo-continuity is one way of transforming found footage, as Bruce Conner demonstrates in a well known sequence of *A Movie* (1958): a submarine captain seems to see a scantily dressed woman through his periscope and responds by firing a torpedo which produces a nuclear explosion followed by huge waves ridden by surfboard riders. In *Short of Breath* (1990), Jay Rosenblatt recreates the Freudian "primal scene" with a shot of a young boy getting out of bed, walking down a hall, and looking through a partially open door. This is followed by a shot of sexual intercourse (obviously taken from a pornographic film), and then another shot of the boy standing in the hallway with an ambiguous expression on his face (for which the classic Kuleshov effect supplies the appropriate emotion). In *Loose Ends* (1979) Chick Strand concocts a somewhat more complex narrative out of shots of a boy running about in a field, a man firing a double-barrelled shotgun, the boy falling, and a woman suddenly looking up from her ironing board and hurrying out of the room. After more shots of the gunman and the boy, the sequence continues as the abandoned iron sets the ironing board on fire; smoke and flames billow upward; the panic-stricken woman runs out of a smoky room and up a flight of stairs; flames appear superimposed over several standing figures; and finally a long pan reveals fields dotted

with burning haystacks as far as the eye can see. It is Strand's montage that spreads the fire from an ironing board to acres of farmland.

This pseudo-narrative is part of a broader theme of violence, death and disaster, which is introduced early in the film with footage of a question mark superimposed over flames and smoke. Subsequently, there are shots of a horse being slaughtered (from Franju's *Blood of the Beasts*), and people starving to death in India (taken, I would guess, from Paul Rotha's 1947 compilation film, *The World Is Rich*). Similar images of starvation and death return at the end of the film, where they take on an hallucinatory quality through step printing and a soundtrack taken from the meaning dering inventory of architectural details at the beginning of *Last Year at Marienbad*.

The examples I have cited so far illustrate two kinds of associative processes characteristic of found footage montage. The less common one is immediate shot-to-shot associations that produce (however improbably) narrative continuity: a boy leaving his bedroom accidentally sees his parents making love; a man shoots a child whose mother hears the gunshot and rushes out, leaving her iron to start a fire that spreads to the surrounding countryside; a submarine officer sees a sexy woman through his periscope and excitedly fires a torpedo which sets off a nuclear explosion that creates huge waves for surfers to ride on.

The other, more common process of association links shots conceptually, metaphorically, and thematically. As each shot contributes to a reading of

the one next to it, so the accumulated readings produce thematic categories or paradigms in which most if not all of the film's images fit, no matter how unrelated their original contexts might have been. I have already noted this associative process in *A Movie* and *Loose Ends*, but I would like to draw upon two other films — Arthur Lipsett's *Fluxes* and Abigail Child's *Mercy* — for examples of thematic unity in found footage that is not linked by implied (if obviously impossible) cause-effect relationships.

Fluxes (1967) includes the following sequence of shots: a monkey in a laboratory touching glass panels as they light up, a man placidly sitting with electrodes taped to his bare chest, a disk and cam turning and pumping back and forth, and Adolph Eichmann, behind the bullet-proof glass of the witness stand, testifying at his war crimes trial in Israel. Humans and other animals reduced to subjects of conditioning, testing, measuring; living beings as machines; one of the human gears in the terrible machinery of genocide now caught in a machine of retribution and placed in a glass cage like a rat in a laboratory experiment. Other viewers might make different associations and find different ways of characterizing the sequence's theme of dehumanization (for lack of a better word), but so strong is the mind's inclination to turn juxtaposed images into something meaningful (which is, as Eisenstein always insisted, the psychological basis of montage), that every alert viewer will find some way of associating and thematizing these images, even as he or she recog-

nizes that they were never intended to be seen together.

Moreover, as is often the case with found footage films, the meaning derived from viewing *Fluxes* depends not only on its montage of images but also on the soundtrack's accompanying montage of "found sounds." As Eichmann takes the witness stand, for example, an anonymous voice barks, "Are you kidding?" A guard hands Eichmann a book (presumably a Bible) as a different voice explains, "And if you don't touch this box while you're doin' it ..." Still another voice then asks, "Are there any clues?" Loud audience laughter follows as Eichmann refuses to take the book and pushes it away. Such inanities and clichés on the soundtrack, juxtaposed with the stiff, formal solemnity of the trial (and with everything that an image of Eichmann on trial brings to mind), produce an ironic tone and anxious, dark humor that is characteristic of the film as a whole — indeed is characteristic of Lipsett's films in general. For that matter, most found footage films assembled from seemingly incongruous pieces of found footage engender an ironic view of their images and the world those images depict.

Abigail Child's *Mercy* (1989) fits these generalizations as well, but it also shows that in addition to thematic development, found footage montage can produce rigorous formal designs with graphic and rhythmic relationships between shots, complex alignments of image and sound, and subtle variations of tempo. A characteristic passage begins with a man in his undershirt breathing

through a tube attached to a measuring device of some sort. An enthusiastic male voice on the soundtrack begins to recite, "It's colorless, it's odorless," and continues, "and if you could drink it, it would be tasteless!" over a brief shot of a dark shadow advancing along a railroad track (accompanied by a rattling sound and strong bow strokes on a cello), an equally brief and ambiguous image of water or steam flowing behind rocks or metal, and a longer shot of a man's bare arm bending and flexing its muscles (synchronized to the sound of a creaking board). A cacophonous mix of sounds dominated by a pulsing rhythm on the cello coincides with the arm opening again and then dissolving to a schematic drawing of the arm's muscles and tendons. That sound continues over another ambiguous and very brief shot of two large disks or wheels turning on what may be a ship's deck, followed by an even briefer shot of a machine-driven hammer striking red hot metal. A strong stroke of the cello's bow is synchronized with a cut from the fiery blow of the hammer to an aerial view of many simultaneous explosions along the edge of a large quarry. Through Child's editing, the impact of the hammer "sets off" the explosions; its downward action "produces" an upward reaction and a release of the mounting tension of the sequence. That tension, generated by the tempo of the montage as well as by energetic movement within the shots, is thus temporarily released in the explosions: a spectacular image of destruction for constructive ends. That image and the sequence as a whole embody the film's princi-

pal theme: the domination of nature and human beings by science and technology — though it must be added immediately that the film's wit and the liveliness of its rhythms prevent it from being as heavy handed and didactic as my restatement of its theme might seem to imply.

The bursts of energy that carry this montage sequence to its explosive climax call to mind Eisenstein's comparison of montage to "the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine, driving forward its automobile or tractor; for, similarly," Eisenstein continues, "the dynamics of montage serve as impulses driving forward the total film."¹⁰ As Eisenstein knew and demonstrated in his own practice, however, strong montage does not carry the film forward in equal, evenly spaced impulses, but in unequal thrusts and surges, interrupted by pauses and counter-thrusts that retard and even momentarily reverse the film's momentum. This is how Child's montage works, and while it is notable for its intricate, jazz-like rhythms, it is like the montage of most found footage films in its creation of a thematic connection between diverse and dissimilar sounds and images.

As both *Mercy* and *Fluxes* illustrate, found footage films frequently include a playful and ironic "vertical montage," as Eisenstein called the moment-by-moment juxtaposition of a film's sound and image tracks. At the very least (with the exception of a few films with no sound at all, such as Stan Brakhage's *Murder Psalm* [1981], and Chuck Hudina's *Nigeria* [1989]) music accompa-

nies the images and influences the way we are likely to read them (as a soft, lyrical passage of Respighi's "Pines and Fountains of Rome" produces an oddly peaceful counter-point to the images of the submarine-to-nuclear-explosion sequence in *A Movie*).

More frequently, filmmakers influence a shot's signification by introducing "inappropriate" sound effects (laughter with a shot of Eichmann, a note on a cello synchronized with a hammer blow and an explosion), or by adding brief comments and sound bites obviously taken from other contexts. A few examples of the latter strategy, chosen more or less at random, include: the saccharine voice of a TV commentator at a Miss America pageant saying, "A beautiful girl, isn't she, John? And certainly a lovely representative of our country," as two women contestants in a roller derby fight in front of an American flag hanging prominently on the wall behind them (in Nelson and Wiley's *Schmeerguntz*); the voice of Lyndon Johnson intoning, "This is a time for decision. You are the generation that must decide," as two sky divers descend in free fall (in Stan Vanderbeck's *Panels for the Walls of the World* [c. 1966]); a series of "Good Evenings" by TV news anchor persons synchronized with shots of people sneezing, and later in the same film a shot of an African woman breast feeding her baby accompanied by applause and an anchor woman saying cheerfully, "Now that's scary!" (in Laurie Dunphy's *Journalism Conducts A Tour* [1989]). While examples of this sort are endless, the underlying tactic remains

essentially the same: the incongruity of sound and image expose, satirize, and produce new readings of the banalities, clichés and conventional modes of discourse — verbal and visual — that are endemic to the mass media.

Some filmmakers attach more extended verbal statements to their montage of found images. On the soundtrack of Mike Hoolboom's *Eat* (1989), for example, a woman describes her symptoms of anorexia nervosa; then as the images of the first half of the film appear again (with a few variations), a man tells an extravagant story of overeating. In *Better Be Careful* (1986), Heather McAdams makes wry comments about herself and her world by scratching words in the emulsion of her found footage. And in Daniel Eisenberg's *Displaced Person* (1981), extracts from a talk by Claude Levi-Strauss, mixed with a Beethoven string quartet, accompany footage from a documentary on Hitler and repeated shots of two boys on a bicycle in what appears to be a Jewish ghetto somewhere in Europe. While there is no indication that Levi-Strauss is referring specifically to Hitler or to the events of World War II, his elegant, thoughtful comments on the relationship of the individual to culture and history deepen the meaning of the footage (some of which is cropped, looped, and step printed to augment its visual and emotional intensity). Together, the words, music and images make a moving meditation on the relationship between a particular historical catastrophe and, in Levi-Strauss' words, "the question of meaning without order."

In addition to thematic contexts, extended voice-over narration can introduce a more subjective point of view than is common in most found footage films. In the first section of Greta Snider's *Futility* (1989), a woman's voice listing synonyms for *futility* introduces sexual connotations (the synonyms include flaccid, impotent, and infertile) which become explicit in the second and third sections of the film. In the second, the woman recounts a first person narrative about becoming pregnant and getting an abortion, and in the third section she reads an ambivalently aggressive letter from a woman to her lover. In Michael Wallin's *Decodings* (1983) a male voice recounts three anecdotes with overlapping themes of isolation, alienation, friendship, and male bonding, and like *Futility*, Wallin's film includes a wide diversity of found footage to illustrate (albeit indirectly, allusively, and sometimes ironically) the stories told on the soundtrack.

In *She's Just Growing Up, Dear* (1992), Julia Tell draws upon a few shots from a sex education film of the 1950s as accompaniment to a series of diary entries recounting events in a woman's life after she dreams that her father sexually abused her when she was very young. Similarly, in *Remembrance* (1990), Jerry Tartaglia reproduces a few images from Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve*, interspersed with some home movie footage of a big family gathering, as he describes his admiration for, and identification with, the strength, independence and bitchiness of Margo Channing, the character played by Bette Davis in

that film. Less indirect and metaphoric than *Futility* and *Decodings*, the films of Tell and Tartaglia also depend less on montage. In fact, they are more like *Bessie Smith* or *Marilyn Times Five* in their use of repetitions, freeze frames, looping, and other manipulations of a comparatively small amount of found footage. But like Snider's and Wallin's films, they show how extended verbal commentary can turn mass produced public images into components of individual and even autobiographical statements.

For Craig Baldwin, voice-over narration serves a more political and polemic purpose. In *Rocket-KitKongoKit* (1986) and *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1991), Baldwin creates a distinctive form of pseudo-documentary that parodies the voice-over narration and compilation montage of conventional documentary films. While purporting to document elaborate conspiracies between governments, multi-national corporations and (in *Tribulation 99*) extraterrestrials, his films are funny, satiric, anarchic ("underground" and "punk" are terms Baldwin likes to use in talking about his own work), and astute critiques of the visual and verbal rhetoric of the mass media.

Baldwin not only steals images from the media, he appropriates modes of discourse used by the media to authenticate their information and envelop themselves in an aura of authority and omniscience. In both films, Baldwin parodies the familiar tactic of using solemn, fact-filled commentary to make unrelated shots seem related to

each other, as well as relevant to an overriding narrative or thesis. For instance, a sequence in *RocketKitKongoKit* cuts from a shot of business executives sitting around a conference table, to Captain Kirk and his crew also sitting around a conference table in a scene from *Star Trek*, to Mobutu Sese Seko speaking on television, while an earnest voice-over describes the efforts of a German-based "Orbital Transport Rocket Corporation" to build secret rocket bases in Zaire. In *Tribulation 99* Baldwin neatly parodies the mass media's propensity for making images of politicians suit prevailing public opinion. The most memorable example occurs when the narrator remarks, "Our good friend Noriega is suddenly replaced by a grotesque voodoo-spouting freak," as the face of Hollywood's Wolf Man undergoes its famous transformation from human to canine features.

Baldwin shares with many other filmmakers an alienated, antagonistic McLuhanism that takes the omnipresence of the media for granted, but is determined to expose the silliness, numbing redundancy, and ideological conformity with which the media represent the world to a more or less acquiescent public. Although they lack Baldwin's inspired mimicry of media exposés, films like Stan Vanderbeck's *Panels for the Walls of the World* and *Newsreel of Dreams* (1964), Bruce Conner's *Report* (1967), Alan Berliner's *City Edition* (1980), Al Razutis' *The Wild West Show* (1980), and Laurie Dunphy's *Journalism Conducts A Tour* imitate, parody, and to varying degrees ridicule

the media through montages of the media's own words and images. Also like Baldwin's films, they occupy an interestingly ambiguous position vis à vis the media, since their methods of organization mirror, at the same time as they mock, the formal strategies of the media themselves.

That is to say, television, movies, radio and the popular press already use montage to give their discrete units of information some semblance of formal coherence. Baldwin, Vanderbeck, Conner and others pull the media's montages apart and put them back together in ways that make their montage structure more apparent and their coherence (and claims to accurate representations of the world) more problematic. Furthermore, our total communication environment — McLuhan's "global village" — is a macro-montage of all the media; so the micro-montage of every found footage film implicitly reflects the experience of living in a media-dominated world. Just as all found footage films are self-referential, so they are all media-referential as well. They cannot avoid calling attention to the "mediascape" from which they come, especially when they also share the media's formal and rhetorical strategies of montage.

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If "perfect" films, entire and untouched, occupy one end of the found footage spectrum, and montages of found footage occupy the middle, then at the other end are films with footage that has been

scratched, scraped, perforated, painted, dyed, bleached, chemically-altered, or subjected to various techniques of optical printing that radically change its appearance. The content of the original footage may continue to be recognizable, but its impact depends principally on its new visual aspect, and in the most extreme cases only hints or fragments of the original images may remain within a kind of filmic palimpsest created by the filmmaker's erasures and additions.

An early, classic example of graphically enhanced found footage is Len Lyc's *Trade Tattoo* (1937), which combines painting on film with special optical effects applied to out-takes from documentary footage of factories, docks, ships, trains, workers, etc. With its strong, poster-like colors and lively rhythms, Lyc's film celebrates modern labor and industry while advertising the services of the film's sponsor, the General Post Office of Great Britain. Chick Strand adopts many of Lyc's techniques (except painting on film) for her short film, *Waterfall* (1967), and Pat O'Neill produces a virtual catalogue of optical printing effects applied to found footage in *Runs Good* (1971). O'Neill often loops and superimposes shots in collage-like compositions that not only play with formal relationships of color, scale, spacial arrangements, and movement, but comment ironically on the repetitive structures and stereotyped images of the mass media. Similarly, in Scott Bartlett's *Heavy Metal* (1978), footage from gangster films goes through a number of optical permutations which are not only striking in their own

right, but highlight — at the same time as they begin to deconstruct — some of the clichés of the genre: prison escapes, shoot outs, anguished girlfriends and stoic, unexpressive men.

The ambivalent relationship between celebrating and deconstructing found footage is even more apparent in Al Razutis' *Sequels in Transfigured Time* (1976), *Ghost: Image* (1979), and *For Artaud* (1982): three of the six virtuoso performances on the optical printer that constitute Razutis' *Visual Essays* series (1973-84). The source of *Sequels* is footage from films of Georges Méliès, which Razutis reprinted on color stock bipped with high contrast black and white negative. The combination results in mysteriously beautiful images that look like elaborate tableaux etched in metal or translucent glass. Freeze frames and step printing slow down the pace of the original films and reveal, in the filmmaker's words, "Méliès' invisible cuts — where he turns an omnibus into a hearse or midgets into puffs of smoke. I wanted to show how he's making these transformations."¹¹ The footage for *Ghost: Image* comes from Dadaist, Surrealist, and German Expressionist films. Razutis flipped the images and superimposed them so that a profile facing left is symmetrically balanced by the same profile facing right, a figure moving in one direction splits into two identical figures moving in opposite directions, and so forth. The effect is strangely hallucinatory, and at the same time evokes the libidinous energies and macabre, gothic fantasies through which the original films engaged their audience's imagina-

tion. In *For Artaud* a few images from Carl Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* (in which Antonin Artaud played a small but significant role) occasionally and only barely show through a midnight-blue ground filled with sparkling grains of blue-white light. Although Razutis has referred to the film as "an essay in expressionism and the tradition of Gothic horror,"¹² I would suggest that it is equally illustrative of the mutability of the film image itself.

A similar trope of mutability appears in David Rimmer's *Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper* (1970). The film is based on a loop of black and white footage (taken from a National Film Board of Canada documentary), in which a woman in a factory raises and lowers a large sheet of cellophane. As the woman repeats the gesture over and over again, the image undergoes a series of subtle but increasingly dramatic transformations. Due to various combinations of negative, high contrast and color effects introduced through optical printing, the conventional photographic representation at the beginning of the film gradually metamorphoses into abstract patterns of pulsing colored light at the end. What begins as a clever image of repetitiveness in factory work, becomes increasingly rich aesthetically, and more than that, offers viewers an unusual opportunity to experience shifting relationships between perception and cognition as the footage works its way from documentary realism to painterly abstraction.

More direct methods of working on film (scratching, drawing, painting, etc.) can be equally effective

tive in changing the appearance and significance of found footage. At its simplest and most playful, this approach appears in Heather McAdams' *Scratchman II* (1982) with its graffiti-like lines, circles, arrows and other rudimentary shapes scratched into footage of an earnest, executive type speaking directly to the camera (though what we hear is a tinny repetitive tune produced by what sounds like a cheap music box). In Victor Faccinto's *Book of Dead* (1978), devil's tails, horns, slithering snake-like shapes, triangle noses and hats, and other more or less representational forms are drawn on footage that includes a dead body floating in a river, cowboys driving cattle, a wife being told that her husband has been killed, a woman adjusting her bikini and other scenes on a beach. Although simple in technique, the effect is strangely disturbing, as if some mischievous, demonic spirit were playing tricks and mocking proprieties while people go on about their business, oblivious to this sly, derisive presence in their midst.

As methods of modifying found footage become more complex, the viewer's attention increasingly shifts from the photographic content of the found footage to the textures, colors and rhythms created by the filmmaker's methods of effacement and erasure. The strip of film itself becomes the principal object of interest. An early and fairly primitive example is Walter Ungerer's *Meet Me, Jesus* (1966), in which ink, paint and scratches partially obscure a loose montage of found footage taken from a variety of sources. More sophisticated applications of the same techniques (elabo-

rated and intensified by optical printing) appear in Hy Hirsh's *Scratch Pad* (1960) and *La Couleur de la forme* (1961) and Jane Conger's *Odds and Ends* (c. 1950s). These films have an off-the-cuff, improvisatory appearance — suitable for a “scratch pad” or collection of “odds and ends” — that makes them seem more like studies and experiments than fully developed and organically unified works. In Mark Street's *Winter Wheat* (1989), on the other hand, the predominantly orange tones painted on the film, the bleached and intricately scratched emulsion, and the limited set of images taken from an educational film on farming, produce a work with greater formal unity and “a quiet but persistent theme of destruction [that] winds its way through the film.”¹³ The most obvious destruction occurs on the surface of the film itself, as Street removes portions of the emulsion and the images embedded in it.

The process of obscuring the content of found footage is carried much further in films by Caroline Avery, Cécile Fontaine and Phil Solomon. In *Big Brother* (1983), *Midweekend* (1985) and *Simulated Experience* (1989), Avery uses short lengths of found footage that have been scratched, painted, split, cut into small pieces, and reassembled in collage-like constructions reminiscent of both Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism. Fontaine not only bleaches, scratches and paints found footage, but for films like *Two Made for TV Films* (1986) and *Cruises* (1989), she soaked strips of film to loosen the emulsion and rearrange or layer it on other strips of film. The shifting, overlapping

images constantly appear on the verge of total disintegration. In Phil Solomon's *The Secret Garden* (1986), the chemically treated and rephotographed images taken from children's films, including *The Wizard of Oz*, virtually disappear in a rich texture of prismatic light that flickers and flows in rhythmic patterns suggestive of fire or reflections on water. Occasionally, recognizable shapes emerge like mirages or fragments of hypnagogic vision, only to be reabsorbed into an undifferentiated figure/ground which Paul Arthur has aptly characterized as “granular, reticulated clumps at the edge of abstraction.”¹⁴

With abstraction comes a whole new set of aesthetic and critical concerns that have nothing to do with found footage as such. Yet, even films with little direct evidence of their origins as found footage differ significantly from purely abstract films made with similar techniques. Clearly, the films of Solomon, Fontaine, Avery, Street, et al have a good deal in common with the abstract animation of Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Harry Smith, and others who scratch, draw, and paint on clear or black leader. However, when a film's starting point is neutral, imageless leader, the emphasis falls entirely on the dance of lines, shapes, textures and colors created “out of nothing” by the filmmaker. When the filmmaker works on found footage, something different happens. In addition to their innate interest as gestures of personal expression, the visual effects added by the filmmaker assert the individual filmmaker's power to reclaim the terrain of public images for

personal use. Thus even the most painterly and abstract found footage films offer an implicit critique of the film industry's conventional, standardized representations of the world, and like other kinds of found footage films, they interrupt the endless recirculation and unreflective reception of mass media images.

In the Domain of Montage: Compilation, Collage, Appropriation

I have been arguing that the recycled images of found footage films have more in common than simply their origins in footage that was found by the filmmaker. Whatever the filmmaker may do to them — including nothing more than reproduce them exactly as he or she found them — recycled images call attention to themselves as images, as products of the image-producing industries of film and television, and therefore as pieces of the vast and intricate mosaic of information, entertainment, and persuasion that constitute the media-saturated environment of modern — or many would say, postmodern — life. By reminding us that we are seeing images produced and disseminated by the media, found footage films open the door to a critical examination of the methods and motives underlying the media's use of images.

To open the door is one thing; to go through it and confront the media on their own ground — the manipulation of images — is another thing, and the filmmakers most likely to take this further step are those who draw most heavily on the resources of montage. Therefore I want to elaborate on my previous discussion of montage in found footage films, not only because I think its critical — and ultimately political — implications are especially noteworthy, but also because the conjunction of montage and found footage also appears in other, more widely recognized forms, such as conventional compilation films and, at the opposite extreme, an increasing number of music videos. Montage, in other words, has many applications, and to more fully appreciate its function in films by experimental and avant-garde filmmakers, I want to take into account these comparable forms of film and video designed for mass audiences.

For the purposes of the following discussion, then, I propose to distinguish between three kinds of found footage montage, which I have labelled *compilation*, *collage*, and *appropriation*, and I will try to show why collage (as I define it below) has the greatest potential to criticize, challenge, and possibly subvert the power of images produced by, and distributed through, the corporate media.

Since compilation, collage and appropriation have a variety of meanings, some of which overlap to a considerable degree, I will distinguish between the three methodologies along the lines suggested in the following model or conceptual grid of

relationships between signifier and signified (signification), modes of cultural production (exemplary genre), and broad sets of aesthetic premises and practices embracing all the arts (aesthetic bias):

METHODOLOGY	SIGNIFICATION	EXEMPLARY GENRE	AESTHETIC BIAS
compilation	reality	documentary film	realism
collage	image	avant-garde film	modernism
appropriation	simulacrum	music video	postmodernism

Of course these are broad categories employed in a highly schematic way, and will require further explanation in due course. Their only value, at this point, is to suggest that different methods of using found footage are related to different paradigms of artistic practice and cultural theory. These paradigmatic relationships help to explain why a montage of found footage does not automatically raise politically charged questions about the origin of the images and the ways they have been used in the mass media. Everything depends on the methodology and related contexts governing the work's reception.

* * *

The practice of making new films from pieces of earlier films is nearly as old as the institution of cinema itself. As early as 1898, a French distributor concocted an account of the Dreyfus case with

previously existing shots of an officer leading some French troops on parade, a Parisian street scene including a large building, a tug boat sailing toward a barge, and the delta of the Nile River. Accompanied by oral commentary, this sequence of shots apparently convinced audiences of the day that they were seeing "Dreyfus before his arrest, the Palais de Justice where Dreyfus was court-marshalled, Dreyfus being taken to the battlement, and Devil's Island."¹⁵ Here, in a nutshell, are the principal characteristics of nearly all compilation films: shots taken from films that have no necessary relationship to each other; a concept (theme, argument, story) that motivates the selection of the shots and the order in which they appear; and a verbal accompaniment (voice-over or text on the screen or both) that yokes the shots to the concept.

With varying degrees of subtlety and sophistication, these characteristics are to be found in virtually all compilation films from the pioneering efforts of Esther Schub in *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* and *The Great Road* (both released in 1927), to Walter Ruttmann's *The Melody of the World* (1929), to Stuart Legg's *The World In Action* series (1941-45) for the National Film Board of Canada, to Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1943-44) for the U.S. War Department, to the critical portraits of American politics by Emile De Antonio in films like *Point of Order* (1964) and *Year of the Pig* (1969), to the innumerable television specials that "look back" at significant historical events. There is, in other words, a long and distinguished tradition of using archival material

to make documentary films of the type Jay Leyda was the first to call compilation films in his survey of the genre, *Films Beget Films*.

Leyda also supplies the clearest description and strongest justification for compilation films when he writes, "Any means by which the spectator is compelled to look at familiar shots as if he had not seen them before, or by which the spectator's mind is made more alert to the broader meanings of old materials — this is the aim of the correct compilation."¹⁶ Compilation films may reinterpret images taken from film and television archives, but generally speaking, they do not challenge the representational nature of the images themselves. That is, they still operate on the assumption that there is a direct correspondence between the images and their profilmic sources in the real world. Moreover, they do not treat the compilation process itself as problematic. Their montage may make spectators "more alert to the broader meanings of old materials," but as a rule they do not make them more alert to montage as a method of composition and (more or less explicit) argument. As Leyda himself says, "the manipulation of actuality ... usually tries to hide itself so that the spectator sees only 'reality' — that is, the especially *arranged* reality that suits the film-maker's purpose."¹⁷

The methods of compilation films are so familiar they hardly need illustration here, but I want to offer one concrete example from a film that comes close to crossing the border between compilation and collage — which is one of the reasons I have

chosen it. The other reason is that it shares one extremely significant image with my examples of collage and appropriation: the familiar mushroom shaped cloud of a nuclear explosion. *The Atomic Cafe* (1982) includes a sequence devoted to the U.S. nuclear test at the Bikini atoll in 1946. It begins with part of a documentary showing the inhabitants readily agreeing to leave the island that has been selected as the site of the test. On the soundtrack the local people sing "You Are My Sunshine" in their native language, while the islanders carry their possessions onto large open boats provided by the U.S. Navy, and wave happily as the boats head out to sea. The singing fades out with shots of planes in the air and observers anxiously awaiting the explosion. We hear an on-the-spot radio reporter describing the final preparations, mixed with a voice-over count down, as we see an aerial shot of the island, ocean, and ships anchored around the tiny island below. When the count down reaches zero, a hissing *whoosh!* accompanies an aerial shot of the nuclear explosion. This is followed by a shot of the explosion taken at sea level (and a louder concussion on the soundtrack), and then a third shot taken from a closer position at sea level (synchronized with another resonant *boom!*). The last shot offers an awesome view of the massive column of water and steam rising into a canopy of clouds over the ships anchored in the vicinity of the blast. Then blaring, dramatic music introduces a Paramount Newsreel, "1947: The Year of Division," and in the urgent tone characteristic of newsreels, a voice-

over recounts the beginning of the Cold War, while the film presents maps, animated graphics, shots of Stalin, troops parading in Red Square, and American and Russian troops shaking hands on the banks of the Elbe River.

Unlike traditional compilation films, *The Atomic Cafe* does not provide its own voice-over to guide viewers through its archival material and tell them how they should think about it (though, one might argue, the ironic use of "You Are My Sunshine" is a subtler way of doing the same thing). On the other hand, in the convention of most compilation films, it follows a clear, linear development, and does not continually question the representational nature of the images it uses. While the film implies that the shots of the local people happily leaving their island were staged for American propaganda purposes, its images of the actual explosion are presented as straight fact: *this* is what the explosion looked like, *these* are signifiers of an event solidly grounded in reality and contextualized by other real, historical events such as the beginning of the Cold War.

The kinds of representation that compilation films tend to take for granted are precisely the kind collage films call into question. To emphasize this point, I want to take a closer look at the particularly memorable sequence from Bruce Conner's *A Movie* referred to earlier in this essay. Four brief shots of a submarine submerging conclude with only the sub's periscope slicing through choppy waves. *Cut to* an officer staring into a periscope and turning it to look in a different direction, *cut*

to a scantily clad model (strongly resembling a very young Marilyn Monroe) lying back in a provocative pose; *cut to* the submarine officer reacting to what he has seen in the periscope. He turns, and shouts an order, *cut to* a close up of a hand pressing a button, *cut to* a torpedo speeding through murky water, *cut to* a sea level shot of a nuclear explosion, *cut to* an aerial shot of the explosion, *cut to* another sea level view of the explosion, *cut to* a closer view from sea level, showing the lower edge of the cloud of steam and gases beginning to sink downwards while a huge white wall of vapor engulfs a battleship, *cut to* a large wave carrying a surf board rider who jumps off his board and is covered by the water, *cut to* another surfer paddling his board up a rising wave.

The formal ingenuity of the sequence is matched by its thematic complexity and critique of representation. At a formal level, one notes such things as the four shots of the submerging submarine matched by four shots of the mushroom cloud rising from the sea and spreading across the sky; the momentum of the explosion continuing in the waves ridden by the surfers; and the introduction of a water/disaster motif that continues through a number of subsequent shots and is "resolved" at the end of the film with shots of a diver descending into the hold of a sunken ship. Thematically, Conner's collage of shots from at least four different sources not only produces a series of visual gags and metaphoric links between sexual desire and military aggressiveness, between orgasm and annihilation, it also deconstructs conventional

editing strategies that link one shot with the next through implied cause and effect relationships. Like Eisenstein's "intellectual montage," the obviously contrived connections between shots in *A Movie* not only call attention to the montage technique itself, but provoke a self-conscious and critical viewing of cinematic representations, especially when they are representations that were originally intended to be seen as unmediated signifiers of reality.

The methodology I have labelled appropriation also capitalizes on the manipulations of montage and the equivocal nature of cinematic representations, but it lacks the deconstructive strategies and critical point of view characteristic of collage films. My example of appropriation comes from Michael Jackson's music video, *The Man in the Mirror* (1987), and centers on the image of a nuclear explosion, which marks the emotional and thematic turning point of the whole video. The first half of the video presents images of poverty, famine, and violence, culminating in the following sequence of shots: an explosion in the middle of a Middle-East city, marching soldiers, a throng of Blacks running down a wide city street, P.W. Botha making a speech, Blacks holding up anti-racism placards, a "For Sale" sign in front of a farm, grim looking farmers at a meeting, people carrying a banner saying "Farms Not Arms," a crowd burning an American flag, a parade of tanks with rockets mounted on them, bombs falling from a large jet bomber, a nuclear explosion at sea. Meanwhile, Michael Jackson, backed by a large

choir, sings:

I'm starting with the man in the mirror.
I'm asking him to change his ways.
And no message could'a been any clearer:
If you want to make the world a better place,
Take a look at yourself and make a change.

The last word, sung by the choir in a dramatic, inspirational change of key, is synchronized with the nuclear explosion. Immediately following, are shots of world leaders expressing joy: Begin, Sadat and Carter shaking hands, Reagan and Gorbachev shaking hands, Lech Walesa and his supporters celebrating the victory of Solidarity, Bishop Desmond Tutu smiling and clapping his hands. Then a shot of a relief worker slipping a shirt on a painfully thin (but smiling!) Black child leads into many images of people accomplishing various sorts of good works — the kind of "feel good" images that the media like to use as counterweights to their images of despair and disaster (from which the first half of the music video draws its imagery).

With its accumulation of more or less familiar images culled from the news media, *The Man in the Mirror* is very much like a traditional compilation film. In its rapid juxtaposition of extremely divergent images, however, it may seem more like a collage film. Yet, in at least one crucial way, it is like neither. To understand why this is so — and

to gain some insight into the kind of appropriation that permits the representation of a nuclear explosion to signify a change for the *better* — we need to pursue the related issues of montage and representation in found footage films a little further.

* * *

A good place to begin is with Walter Benjamin's comment that, "To write history ... means to *quote* history. But the concept of quotation implies that any given historical object must be ripped out of its context."¹⁸ Compilation films are composed of visual quotations of history (or more precisely, selected moments of historical "reality") that have been ripped out of context and placed end to end according to the filmmaker's theme or argument. In such cases, quotation and representation are synonymous. They offer, in the words of Allan Sekula, "the appearance of *history itself*." Sekula is speaking of photographs, rather than films, but the same principle applies, just as it does when he says, "Not only are the pictures in archives often *literally* for sale, but their meanings are up for grabs."¹⁹

One way of conceptualizing the relationship between archival representations of history and the meanings they acquire in compilation films is offered by Emile Benveniste's categories of history and discourse. The anonymous footage in film archives is very much like the kinds of utterances Benveniste calls history: "There is no longer a narrator. The events are set forth chronologically,

as they occurred. No one speaks here; the events seem to narrate themselves." On the other hand, when the filmed representations of events are taken from the archives and made to serve the purposes of a particular filmmaker, they enter the plane of discourse, in Benveniste's sense. They are used by an identifiable "speaker" (in my analogy: the filmmaker) with "the intention of influencing the other (in this case: the viewer) in some way."²⁰ Ester Schub's *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, for example, draws upon bland, anonymous archival footage of public events and political figures (some of which was shot by the czar's own "home movie" cinematographer) to produce a trenchant discourse on the evils of the czarist regime. In the hands of a czarist editor (or screened uncut for the czar and his family), the same footage would say something quite different.

The same is true of archival shots of nuclear explosions, many of which were made by cameras that were not even operated by human beings during the time the film was being exposed, and which lack even the minimal narrative of a countdown and climactic *boom* — until they are taken out of the archives and inserted into discourses designed by particular addressers for their intended addressees. In *The Atomic Cafe* they are put at the service of an ironic discourse on the mendacity and foolishness of American responses to the threat of atomic warfare in the years immediately following the Second World War. In *A Movie* they serve a wittier and more complex discourse on desire and destruction; in *The Man in*

the Mirror the one shot of the Bikini test marks the absurdly optimistic turn in the music video's visual discourse. In the latter, the representation of a nuclear explosion signifies *hope*; in the former it signifies just the opposite; in *The Atomic Cafe* it signifies the bomb's actual, destructiveness which profoundly influenced the mentality of politicians and ordinary people alike. Yet, in the archive, it is pure, impersonal history, the representation of an event that "narrates itself."²¹

Returning, then, to the crucial difference between representation in works of appropriation and in other methods of presenting found footage, I would begin by stressing the basic difference between compilation and appropriation. In compilation films, an archival shot is presumed to have concrete, historical referents that ground the film's discourse in reality, and lend credence to its overall argument. Clearly, the makers of *The Atomic Cafe* made this assumption when they inserted shots of various thermonuclear explosions, including the ones taken at Bikini. But, there is nothing except the emotional appeal of Michael Jackson's music to associate the Bikini test with a "change" that reduced Arab-Israeli tensions, or led to the success of the Solidarity movement in Poland, or contributed to the weakening of apartheid in South Africa. In other words, the shot of a nuclear explosion in Michael Jackson's music video is simply one image in a stream of recycled images presented with little, if any, concern for their historical specificity — let alone logical or even chronological connection. With *The Man in*

the Mirror we enter the postmodern world of (in the words of Fredric Jameson) "representations that have no truth content, [and] are, in this sense, sheer surface or superficiality."²² The object or event in history has been superseded by — or in Baudrillard's terms, preceded by — simulacra, by representations of other representations produced and preserved by the mass media.

If compilation films "quote history," *The Man in the Mirror* quotes the media, which have replaced history and virtually abolished historicity. In the context of Benjamin's remark that "the concept of quotation implies that any given historical object must be ripped out of its context," I would say that for works of appropriation like Michael Jackson's music video, the context is the media, from which the quotations have been ripped and into which they have been reinserted without regard for their "truth content," as Jameson puts it. The simulacra produced by postmodernist "superficiality" occupy the opposite end of the spectrum from the representations of reality that are essential to compilation films and their aesthetic bias toward realism.

* * *

Between compilation and appropriation lies the terrain of collage, to which I want to return in order make explicit some of the assumptions about collage that have remained implicit up to this point.

Starting with the experiments of Braque and

Picasso in 1912, and rapidly spreading to all art forms, collage proved to be the avant-garde's most effective means of challenging traditional assumptions about the nature of representation in art. Indeed, one could argue that collage became an essential weapon in the modernist assault on realism in all the arts. By incorporating disparate materials found, rather than made, by the artist, and by dispensing with long-respected principles of coherence and organic unity in art, collage changed the basic rules of artistic representation — or what Marjorie Perloff calls referentiality: "The question of referentiality inherent in collage thus leads to the replacement of the signified, the objects to be imitated, by a new set of signifiers calling attention to themselves as real objects in the real world."²³ Note that Perloff is not talking about the *representation* of "real objects," but the literal presence of objects from "the real world" in the work of art itself.

To apply this argument to film, one must recognize that "the real world" for found footage filmmakers is the mass media with their endless supply of images waiting to be ripped from their context and reinserted in collage films where they will be recognized as fragments still bearing the marks of their media reality. Again, collage and appropriation have something in common, but as in the case of their responses to the equivocal nature of photographic representation, collage and appropriation part company over the way they respond to media-as-reality. Collage is critical; appropriation is accommodating. Collage

probes, highlights, contrasts; appropriation accretes, levels, homogenizes. If both use montage to dislodge images from their original contexts and emphasize their "image-ness" (that is, their constructed rather than "natural" representations of reality), only collage actively promotes an analytical and critical attitude toward those images and their uses within the institutions of cinema and television.

An image's historical referent — such as the United States' nuclear tests in the South Pacific — may continue to be important in a collage film, but the more significant referent will be the image's original context of production, distribution, and reception: everything the media do to invest their images with an aura of reality. Unlike postmodernist appropriations of found footage, in which the media as the source of images are taken for granted (indeed are more or less explicitly celebrated for their image-producing powers), the collage film subjects its fragments of media-reality to some form of deconstruction, or at the very least to a recontextualizing that prevents an unreflective reception of representations as reality (as presumed by the compilation film), as well as an indifferent or cynical reception encouraged by postmodernist appropriation. If collage is, as Gregory Ulmer has written, "the single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation in our century,"²⁴ then appropriation is the movement that follows behind, profiting from the revolution without embracing or advancing its goals.

One of the masters of surrealist collage, Max Ernst, once wrote, "Ce n'est pas la colle qui fait le collage."²⁵ And for filmmakers, it is not the splicer that makes a collage film. It is the decision to invest found footage with meanings unintended by its original makers and unrecognized in its original contexts of presentation and reception. In its most comprehensive sense, then, a collage film could be anything a filmmaker finds and decides to show in the form he or she found it: the filmic equivalent of a Duchamp "ready made." But found footage films based on a montage of disparate and incongruous images are, it seems to me, more likely to challenge the media's power to make ideologically loaded images seem like unmediated representations of reality.

Epic Collage

No discussion of montage in found footage films would be complete without some reference to large-scale cycles or serial works that not only use found footage but bring together more or less autonomous films under a single, comprehensive title. While found footage plays an important role in Al Razutis' magnum opus *Amerika* (1972-83) — most notably in *The Wild West Show* (*Interrupted By A Message From Our Sponsor*) and the

short, concluding piece, *O Kanada* — it is less important, in the overall structure of the work, than the images made by Razutis himself. Similarly, found footage appears in a few sections of Lewis Klahr's Super-8 series, *Picture Books For Adults* (1983-85), but cut-out animation is Klahr's principal technique for recycling mass media images. Hollis Frampton's *Magellan* was intended to include found footage films, such as *Public Domain* (1972) and *Gloria!* (1979), but not only was that project left uncompleted upon Frampton's death in 1984, it appears that most of the films he planned to include in the complete *Magellan* cycle would not have been composed of found footage.

By contrast, Abigail Child's *Is This What You Were Born For?*, Keith Sanborn's *KAPITAL!*, and Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* not only make extensive use of found footage, but juxtapose a number of shorter films within a larger structure that might be labelled "epic collage" to designate the ambitiousness of their projects. Child's *Is This What You Were Born For?* (1981-89) consists of eight films, all but two of which draw upon found footage for some, if not all, of their imagery. In its complete form, Sanborn's *KAPITAL!* (1980-87) encompasses seven films; however, because the first and last involve live performance and/or multiple projection, only parts 2 to 6 are in regular distribution. Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984-90) includes five works (with another installment, *Whirling*, likely to be completed before these words appear in print). *The Prologue* is on film, the next two parts

are on video, the fourth uses both film and video, and the fifth is on video only. All five parts combine found footage with live scenes improvised by the two children, Peggy and Fred, who are the protagonists of the series.

These works are too long and diverse to discuss in detail here, but I hope at least to indicate what they have contributed to the genre of found footage films through their adaptation of the principles of collage/montage. And to do that, I want to return to the whole issue of collage as a revolutionary development in 20th Century art.

* * *

According to Donald Kuspit, collage is revolutionary because, "It brings the whole idea of art into question."²⁶ Not only does it question the nature of artistic production by substituting actual objects and images for drawn and painted representations, it also questions the idea of the autonomy and the organic unity of art. Invaded by "reality fragments" (in Peter Bürger's phrase²⁷), the collage work cannot offer a haven for purely aesthetic appreciation, nor can it present itself as self-sufficient and bound only by its own rules of representation and signification. Just as it unapologetically displays its fragmentary form and content, it openly announces its affiliation with the everyday world of ordinary objects, consumer products, and popular culture. Its fragments do not blend into a seamless, illusory whole, and its significance cannot be enclosed within the borders of the work

itself. As Donald Kuspit writes, "By its seeming indifference to the fragments that constitute it — conveyed by the seemingly random way in which those fragments are gathered together — the collage forces us to turn from the fragments to the attention that selected them... They themselves, simply by being fragments, exist in attenuated form as stimuli — but never with any absoluteness, only relative to an individual's attention."²⁸ For Kuspit, this makes collage the appropriate principle of organization for art in an age of relativity.

For theorists with a more pointedly political view on art, collage is also the most appropriate way for art to "articulate discontinuity," in Theodor Adorno's words, and thereby "shock people into realizing how dubious any unity [is]."²⁹ Echoing Adorno, Peter Bürger argues that the absence of a coherent, unified meaning in collage "is experienced as shock by the recipient," and shock, in Bürger's view "is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in (initiate) a change in the recipient's life praxis."³⁰ At the very least, I think it is tenable to argue that collage politicizes art by confronting the viewer with actual pieces of reality within a "frame" that has traditionally signified the separation of art and reality, aesthetic immanence and life praxis. The presence of mass produced objects and images in the previously privileged realm of unique artistic representation not only challenges the autonomy of art (much as mechanical reproduction challenges the "aura" and "cult value" of original works of art³¹), it also offers artists a way of

placing all images — whatever their original source and function — on the same plane of visual expression and subjecting them to the same level of critical analysis.

What I have been calling collage, Adorno and Bürger prefer to call montage, except when referring specifically to the *papier collée* techniques of Cubism — as, for example, when Bürger writes, “A theory of the avant-garde must begin with the concept of montage that is suggested by the early cubist collages.”³² As far as I am concerned, either term will do, so long as it is understood to mean the juxtaposition of pre-existing elements extracted from their original contexts, diverted (or “détourned,” in the terminology of the Situationists) from their original, intended uses, and thereby made to yield previously unrecognized significance.³³

A creative technique that is also a critical method, collage/montage obliges the audience to recognize the motivations behind the choice of the elements extracted, as well as the significance of their new juxtaposition. It argues by concrete example rather than discursive reasoning. As Walter Benjamin said of his Arcades project, “Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say, only to show.”³⁴ Had Benjamin completed that project, in which he intended “to show” thousands of examples of concrete phenomena taken from, in his words, the “garbage heap” of 19th century commodities, the result might well have been the largest and most impressive work ever to be based on “a shock-like montage of the mate-

rial.”³⁵ As it is — or more precisely, as Benjamin envisioned it — the Arcades project validates the principle of montage construction as the basis for what Susan Buck-Morss calls “the dialectics of seeing,” by which she means “the interpretive power of images that make conceptual points concretely, with reference to the world outside the text.”³⁶ And it is precisely this “interpretive power of images” that makers of found footage films count on when they construct their critiques of the image world lying outside their own filmic texts.

Both collage and montage are terms that emphasize the constructive end of the process, the act of putting the pieces together (however jarring and fragmentary their juxtaposition may turn out to be). It is important to remember, however, that collage/montage begins with the artist tearing pieces out of context or picking them out of the cultural “garbage heap.” It is useful, in this regard, to recall Walter Benjamin’s observation that, “Interruption is one of the fundamental methods of all forming. It reaches far beyond the domain of art. It is, to mention just one of its aspects, the origin of the quotation. Quoting a text implies interrupting its context.”³⁷ Benjamin was referring to Brecht’s epic theatre, but I think his words can be made equally applicable to the “epic collages” of Child, Sanborn and Thornton.

* * *

There are two fundamental ways in which inter-

ruption serves these filmmakers as a "form-giving" device. The first is extrinsic to the films themselves, and involves finding the materials that will end up as "montage cells" or fragments of filmic collage. What is interrupted, in the extrinsic sense, is the context in which the materials normally exist and in which they seem perfectly "natural" — "natural," that is, in the sense Roland Barthes applies to the function of myth: "giving historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal."³⁸

For instance, to make the section of *KAPITAL!* called *A Public Appearance and a Statement*, Sanborn interrupted the natural flow of television news to extract ABC's live coverage of the events at Andrews Air Force Base when the body of President Kennedy was brought back to Washington and Lyndon Johnson made his first speech as the new president. The home movie footage for Child's *Covert Action* is the product of a different sort of interruption, having been ripped out of its normal mode of presentation at home to family and friends. In a somewhat comparable manner, Leslie Thornton interrupts the historical context of archival footage by taking it out of the archives and inserting it in films that do not — like compilation films, for example — recreate its context through some form of direct historical discourse. In each case interruption produces what Sanborn calls "a forced reading of the popular mythology of the culture."³⁹ By being interrupted, in other words, cultural artifacts are forced to expose their less obvious, ideological functions.

All found footage is, in Benjamin's sense, quotation, and can offer the kinds of insights into "the popular mythology of culture" Sanborn is talking about, especially when juxtaposed with other found footage quotations. Which brings us to the second basic kind of interruption: interruption that is intrinsic to filmic collage. The most obvious method of intrinsic interruption is the juxtaposition of shots with no apparent relationship between them: archival footage of an early 20th century factory followed by NASA footage of a satellite and the surface of the moon in the section of *Peggy and Fred in Hell* called (*Dung Smoke Enters the Palace*), or the TV news footage in Sanborn's *KAPITAL!* followed by choppy, flickering images of a Rocky Graziano fight taken from an old Castle Film, or the rapid, paratactic montage of found footage from many different sources in Child's *Prefaces and Mercy*. While the juxtaposition of even extremely diverse material can evoke metaphoric, thematic, graphic, and rhythmic relationships that satisfy a viewer's need to find some reason for these things to be juxtaposed, there is still a sense of discontinuity, a gap or interruption in the flow of the film which puts conceptual quotation marks around the material and encourages the viewer to see it differently and think about it more critically — which is to say, more politically. The cumulative effect is nicely summed up in an intertitle used by Child in *Covert Action*: "My goal is to disarm my movie." Nothing, in other words, should seem quite right, or fit together neatly and "naturally."

Other kinds of intrinsic interruption can be equally disarming. There is, for example, the interruption produced by the juxtaposition of different media in *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, and different media sources in *KAPITAL!* There are also the discontinuities between sound and image in — to mention only one of innumerable examples — Sanborn's *Man with a Movie Camera* (*Blonde; He Appears To Be Young*) in which a verbal analysis of newsreel footage of the attempted assassination of Reagan is juxtaposed with black leader and then with a still of a woman with a home movie camera. And, as I pointed out in my earlier discussion of a short sequence from Abigail Child's *Mercy*, the ingenious synchronizing of incongruous sounds and images is Child's forté and one of her most effective means of opening clichéd images to new readings. Finally, manipulating the "natural" flow of the film image represents another kind of intrinsic interruption. I have in mind such devices as artificially slowing motion by step printing the home movie footage for *Imitation of Life* in *KAPITAL!*, or repeating and reversing footage of Pete the Penguin in *Peggy and Fred and Pete*, or looping shots in *Covert Action*.

The large, serial structures adopted by these filmmakers are also interruptive in their collage-like juxtaposition of different films made at different times and often in different styles. All three projects offer an open, potentially unlimited structure that could accommodate almost any kind of audio-visual material. This is part of their "epic"

quality as well: they are collages of collages, and in that regard, share with modern epics, like Ezra Pound's *Cantos* or John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, the desire to tell the "tale of the tribe" (in Pound's phrase) in large, all-accommodating formats. And for these filmmakers the "tribe" is our media-saturated modern culture, whose "tale" is told through the media's own images and sounds.

* * *

Walter Benjamin, quoting a phrase from Brecht, writes, "Making gestures quotable" is one of the essential achievements of epic theatre.⁴⁰ I would suggest that the interruptive techniques of Child, Sanborn and Thornton — and, for that matter, all makers of collage films — accomplish the same thing with the equivalent of cinematic gestures. Any interruption of a film's sound and images makes them "quotable," which is to say, makes them stand out from the film's ensemble of audiovisual effects and exposes them to critical examination — not only for how well they serve the needs of the work in which they *now* appear, but also for what they reveal about their original function in whatever cultural artifact they *first* appeared.

Revealing the cultural function of found footage is a political consequence of the revolution in aesthetics called collage. Of course, found footage is always already political, but its politics may not be apparent until it has been subjected to the strategies of interruption and quotation practiced

by Child, Sanborn, Thornton and many other experimental/avant-garde filmmakers who have, like Walter Benjamin, sought to exploit the "shock-like montage of the material" taken from the middens of modern media.

Benjamin: "I won't steal anything valuable or appropriate any witty turns of phrase. But the trivia, the trash: this, I don't want to take stock of, but let it come into its own in the only way possible: use it."⁴¹ Ken Jacobs: "Is all garbage like this? Only waiting for the talented viewer?"⁴² Perhaps. But the first "talented viewer" is the filmmaker who must decide how best to "use it" — which means finding the best way to turn *us* into "talented viewers" too.

Notes

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2. Ken Jacobs, *Film-Makers' Cooperative Catalogue 7* (1989): 272.
3. Ken Jacobs, *Films That Tell Time: A Ken Jacobs Retrospective* (Astoria, NY: American Museum of the Moving Image, 1989): 19.
4. Hollis Frampton, *Film-Makers' Cooperative*

Catalogue 7 (1989): 168.

5. Craig Baldwin, poster for screenings at 992 Valencia (San Francisco), Fall 1991.
6. Jacobs, *Film-Makers'*, 270.
7. Martin Arnold, *San Francisco Cinematheque 1990 Program Notes*: 41.
8. Chick Strand, interview with the author, 25 May 1991.
9. Craig Baldwin, interview with the author, 20 May 1991.
10. S. M. Eisenstein, *Film Form*, Ed. and Trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Meridian Books, 1957): 38.
11. Al Razutis, quoted in Mike Hoolboom, "3 Decades of Rage: The Films of Al Razutis," *Cantrills Filmnotes* 67-68 (1992): 42.
12. Al Razutis, *Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre Catalogue* (1988): 103
13. Mark Street, *Canyon Cinema Catalogue 7* (1992): 335.
14. Paul Arthur, "Lost and Found: American Avant-Garde Film in the Eighties," in *A Passage Illuminated: The American Avant-Garde Film 1980-1990*, Ed. N. Voorhuis (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1991): 25.
15. Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964): 13-14.
16. *Ibid.* 45.
17. *Ibid.* 10.
18. Walter Benjamin, "N [Theoretics of Knowledge: Theory of Progress]," *The Philosophical Review* 15, 1-2 (1983-84): 24.
19. Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive," in

Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Contemporary Artists. Ed. Brian Wallis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987): 116.

20. Emile Benveniste, "Man and Language," in *Problems in General Linguistics* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1976): 209.

21. I do not disagree with Jean-Louis Comolli, Jean-Louis Baudry and others who have argued that all images produced by the camera are ideologically biased, but in the context of the present argument, I would suggest that in the archive the bias of individual shots is inert or merely potential; it becomes active when that potential is realized in a particular film's discourse.

22. Fredric Jameson, "In the Destructive Element Immense," Hans-Jürgen Syberberg and *Cultural Revolution*, *October* 17 (1981): 112.

23. Marjorie Perloff, "The Invention of Collage," in *Collage*. Ed. Jeanne Parisier Plottel (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1983): 40.

24. Gregory Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983): 84.

25. Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn, 1948): 13.

26. Donald B. Kuspit, "Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art in the Age of the Relativity of Art," in *Collage: Critical Views*. Ed. Katherine Hoffman (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989): 40.

27. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): 78.

28. Kuspit, 45.

29. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge, 1984): 223.

30. Bürger, 80.

31. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969): 220-225.

32. Bürger, 77.

33. Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman, "Methods of Detournement," in *Situationist International Anthology*. Ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981): 8-13.

34. Walter Benjamin, quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing; Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991): 73.

35. *Ibid.*, 217, 73.

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37. Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre?" [Second Version], in *Understanding Brecht* (London: Verso, 1983): 19.

38. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. London: Paladin/Grafton Books, 1973): 142.

39. Keith Sanborn, interview with the author, 16 April 1991.

40. Benjamin, "What Is Epic Theatre?" 19.

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Selected Bibliography on Found Footage Films

(Rather than include articles and parts of books devoted to the work of individual filmmakers, I have limited this list to writings dealing with the genre of found footage films, though, of course, specific films and filmmakers also figure in most of these items as well.)

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Speaking of Found Footage

Between the late winter and early fall of 1991 I talked with seven filmmakers who have worked extensively with found footage. From these conversations, which were quite informal and ranged over a number of topics, I have extracted and condensed comments that seem to me representative of each filmmaker's thoughts about found footage in general and her or his use of found footage in particular. In many ways, these comments also exemplify the range of attitudes to be found among a much larger number of filmmakers who have worked with found footage since the appearance of Bruce Conner's seminal work, *A Movie*, in 1958.

In New York, I talked with Abigail Child, Keith Sanborn and Leslie Thornton. Child's film cycle, *Is This What You Were Born For?* (1981-89), contains six films with found footage, including her best known work, *Mayhem*; one of the films, *Covert Action*, is composed solely of found material. Sanborn's *KAPITAL!* (1980-87) encompasses seven found footage films, opening with a live performance with film and closing with a multi-projector presentation. Sanborn also made the English subtitles for René Viénet's "détourné" kung-fu film, *La Dialectique Peut-Elle Casser des Briques?* (1972, 1990). Thornton's on-going series of films and video works, *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984-90), combines original and found foot-

age. Currently she is completing a feature-length narrative about the late-Victorian writer, Isabelle Eberhardt, which also includes some found footage.

In San Francisco I sought out the *doyen* of American found footage filmmakers, Bruce Conner, who has made a dozen films with found footage since 1958, the most recent of which is *America Is Waiting* (1982). I also talked with Craig Baldwin whose *RocketKitKongoKit* (1986) and *Tribulation 99* (1991) have become increasingly widely known and admired, and who often includes found footage in the film series he programs for an alternative art space in San Francisco. His recently completed *O No Coronado!* (1992) mixes found footage with footage shot by the filmmaker. And in Los Angeles I met with Chick Strand. Like Bruce Conner, she is one of the older generation of American experimental filmmakers who have worked with found footage. Her first found footage film is *Waterfall* (1967); her best known and, in my view, richest use of found material appears in *Loose Ends* (1979).

The Canadian filmmaker David Rimmer has been making found footage films since 1970, when he completed three films made with found footage. Rimmer lives near Vancouver, but I talked with him briefly (hence the brevity of his remarks in these pages) during one of his visits to Montréal.

Although I have tried to preserve the way each of the filmmakers talked, I have edited their comments rather extensively. I have cut out most of the

redundancies and false starts and extraneous comments that are part of the normal flow of informal speech, but are confusing and irrelevant on the printed page. Sense rather than verbatim accuracy has been my goal. Also, I have eliminated my questions and comments, and consequently, on occasion I have added a few words to a filmmaker's comments to make the context clear. In several instances I have changed the order of the original remarks for the sake of coherence and continuity of thought and incorporated some subsequent emendations by the filmmakers. Significant ellipses in the flow of the conversation are indicated by a row of dots between paragraphs.

I am grateful to the filmmakers for taking the time to talk about their work and various related concerns, and I must emphasize that they were not presenting definitive statements carefully prepared for publication. They were responding to my questions and to their own train of thought. Like everyone else, they have the right to change their minds.

Craig Baldwin

I think you'll find that a lot of the younger generation, the contemporary filmmakers, have read a lot of theory. That's not really the case with me. I'm more what I call a garage filmmaker. Improv-

erished. Make-do. Bricolage and this idea of cargo cult I like to talk about. We're here in the ruins of post-industrial culture, and there is all this value in these shots thrown away and these old commercials and trailers and things, just trying to resurrect them and reinvest them with new meaning. Like someone in New Guinea or somewhere trying to worship a plane or something.

You know, I sympathize with a lot of the rhetorical justifications, but I came to found footage filmmaking not exactly naively, but naturally, as I worked in the movie business for many years. I didn't make porn, but I worked in porn theaters. Well, Market Street theaters, which means exploitation or grind houses as they call them or B-movies or genre movies. I just loved them. I would see the films again and again and again from about three feet away. I would be totally demystified. I knew what film was — it was a piece of image, you know, chemicals on celluloid. I had much more of a plastic, or collage, or more of a visual art approach to it, and I just played and mucked around with it, cutting and pasting it. I do collages too, you know, on paper. So my approach was more having to do with my impoverished situation or marginalization in the art world.

* * *

There's a political edge to it when you take the images of the corporate media and turn them against themselves. So, I have an affinity with that whole justification: that it's a kind of political

statement. It's subversive. I've always been politically active, too, and it's part of an underground movement. See, I want to bring back the term underground movement. They don't talk about underground any more. They say, "Well, this is avant-garde," which is meaningless, even more so than "experimental." I think the whole art world's kind of been recuperated by the academy — par-don me — and it's lost its edge.

What I like are films that express a sub-culture that rejects and refuses this kind of standardization of perception and this commodification of culture. So it's kind of a thumb your nose thing. It's an art of defiance. You take, steal, however you get their images, and turn 'em against them. Plus you can afford to do it.

I mean, there are images all over. Walk down the street, there are bill boards everywhere, there's the sides of buses, the graffiti, the flyers under your feet. You don't have to go far, we're bombarded by images. Of course we're gonna say, well, I've the power to shape some of this, to make a comment on it, and turn it against itself. That's the ultimate justice.

* * *

The bottom line is probably my impoverished, debased, marginalized status. I mean, I intend on making films. I don't have the money really. I'd like to get a grant. That's for sure. But, you know, technically I do everything wrong. I'd rather do something against the grain, and to spite the

corporate market — but also the art world. If I can work with the art people, that's fine, I'll do it. But my films, you know, they're raw. Ugly. They're supposed to be noisy. They're supposed to be filled with dissonance and texture. So there's this kind of against the grain attitude. This sarcasm. This refusal of some kind of aestheticism.

Later they are aestheticized by critics, scholars, or whatever. They take 'em out of the real world and sort of place them in a frame and talk about them theoretically. That's fine with me. But to me, I work with the community. I live in a big teeming mass here. Hundreds of people come to my shows. I show in all sorts of places. I don't stick with galleries. I show in clubs. I show in alternative spaces. I show to a lot of pissed off people. People who are sick of the corporate media, people who know they don't have to go to art school to be trained. So it's more like a raw, tearing out the heart of the beast kind of thing. There's that sense to it, you know. More of a political activist thing. Underground. Again, an alternative movement or alternative sub-culture that doesn't try to get accepted by the bourgeoisie by being good artists and minding their manners, but talks back, is sarcastic, has an attitude, steals your images and all that kind of thing. Punk kind of attitude.

* * *

Formal experimentation is good too. It's not to say, hey, we can't go into that territory. But people try to do more now. They have more respect for

their audience, and they're saying, well, we're not just going to aim our stuff at this little cult of experimental filmmakers, because it gets boring after awhile. It gets passé after awhile. They just don't want to see this retinal thing, this play of images on the eye. I mean, they do, but that's not enough. It's not enough any more.

San Francisco
20 May 1991

Abigail Child

My generation of filmmakers, people born after World War II — we are TV kids. We were easily influenced by media and by how the media influence our worlds. In the '70s a lot of us were seeing structural film, and yet we were coming from this TV background. Now what I think a lot of us are doing: we're using emotional images, images that mean something to us, powerful, resonant images — not taking just anything, but being attentive to what images say and mean and how they can be read, actually approaching the flow of image-meaning, representation — and then rolling those representative images into structures that might share more formalist ideas. Ideas of repetition, disjuncture or materiality, for instance. The inheritance of structural film then, on top of this combo

of raunchy, suburban, post-World War II American optimism and '60s psychedelic revolutionary idealism and feminism. That's the topos for this work. Of course, each of us is different.

* * *

As an editor, I think it is easier to keep your critical distance with found footage. It's easier to know exactly what will work, what's beautiful and should last, what's ugly and should last, what's amazing and remarkable. With your own footage, you have all kinds of *a priori* affections for various pieces. You have all these hopes about the material, but in the end you have to see what it actually projects. And you may have to lose something it took ten hours trying to get because it's not really what you need for this film. Increasingly I find that I've gotten better at looking at my own footage and having the kind of attitude that just lets you say, "This is useful, this is not. This is useful, this is not."

* * *

Covert Action came from some footage I got through an ad posted at the Collective for Living Cinema: the remnants, since a colleague of mine got there first, about a thousand feet, and there was this little bit that I always imagined was two brothers on vacation. I'll never know; it seemed like two brothers on vacation, either on successive weekends or successive summers with different

women. It was very familiar and very horrifying at the same time, in the way the women are posing for the camera and in the way they are both volunteering themselves as objects and being treated as objects. It's pretty familiar to one's own world but also horrific. I set it aside, and about two years later when I picked it up and said, ok, let me see if I can make a film out of this, I looped actions, anything that would make a dance, and then working with this very limited material — probably no more than 400 feet, and using about 100 feet of that — I went through what was left for anything where people touched, any body contact, body gesture, body movement.

In the process of reworking the material, the document becomes a kind of "fiction." I did not know the source of my material, so I made up a story that may or may not have any relevancy to the true source. *Covert Action* is the first of my films that begins a narrative exploration of this type.

* * *

In *Mercy* I know what almost all the source material is. It comes from educational films and science films. Here I'm subverting the original meaning. I'm looking at the material to reveal what is the essence of it, what's been hidden from us in the form it was originally, whether it's scientific, "objective" footage, or advertising you're not supposed to question, or footage that looks playful but is documenting something very different.

ent, the unnamed ideology at the heart of American culture. In that sense, *Mercy* is an archaeology of the document, forcing the image to "give up" its history.

In college I did work as an anthropologist in Mexico and New Mexico, and that experience raised questions of my own about "actuality," and the ability to represent the "real." Experientially, I knew there were multiple sides to any "truth." This was not scholastic knowledge for me. As a filmmaker, as an editor, I'm trying to dislodge, unearth and subvert the image, exploring the limits of representation, asking how can I bring forward the contradictions in the image, its par-tialities, its beauty, or as the case may be, its horror.

* * *

Mayhem was inspired by sound. There's always a number of things that go into a work, but in *Mayhem* it was especially the idea that sound could choreograph emotions. Without a script, sound could be my script, and specifically found sound. One of the first things I did was tape off cable TV and Latin soap operas. I used them as the score of the piece: "jealousy," "anger," "anticipation," "romance," "fear," "melodrama." You get that quality of history and expectation from the soundtrack. I had a silent rough cut, first, and then the sound was cut in, and things moved into different areas until everything kind of fell together. That was the basic structure. I had

additionally recordings of sound effects and news stuff and machine noises, and I organized that. The aural track becomes very specific; for example, when the woman is taking off her dress, can't get out of her dress, there is the sound of a stalled car. And when there's that little title that says "no, no" you hear "yes, yes" on the soundtrack.

Again, I'm subverting the image, this time through sound. The sound supports a certain reading of the image that I twist. I'm trying to keep you conscious. I'm trying to give you pleasure and make you conscious of its source, where your pleasure is coming from. I'm playing with a number of strategies to deflect the initial thrust of the work, to complicate it so that you read one thing and two other things come to mind as well; to push you back into the fact that it's a constructed thing. You've been seduced and made conscious of the seduction that's going on.

* * *

Mayhem was supposed to be all my own shooting. I was trying to break out of some patterns and give myself a chance to develop my own lighting. I never had been able to deal with that before. I did the shooting for about a year and a half, and the film was in process when some found footage came my way. One was a negative of a French romantic story with all the sprocket holes broken; another a British science fiction thriller about a man who married a woman who turned out to be

an alien — *that* related to my concept — the third a fiction film of World War II in which Germans interrogate French partisans. At some point I said to myself, I'm going to include this, and started cutting.

I was interested in the match. It wasn't that I was trying to hide the source or the cut, but I was interested in the visual match, where it "mimes" fiction. Similarly to how in *Covert Action* I place Inuit speech in the mouths of the Western women, a doubly false dubbing. One of *Mayhem*'s themes was voyeurism and the seduction of fictive structures. I wanted to foreground movie illusion and additionally, explore my love of kinetic movies, of feeling the cut. Also I knew I wanted to bias it sexually, bi- and multiply, set experience against social convention.

I don't feel I treated the found footage differently after awhile. I kept them on separate rolls, but they became strands feeding into the film as a whole. In that sense of weaving and process, there's a real relation in my work to a filmmaker like Brakhage or Frampton.

The shape of *Mayhem* is the same shape as *Covert Action* is the same shape as *Mercy*, which is in my eyes a spiral shape. Images come in and they come in again, and get added on to. It's a rich, open structure that you can keep developing, adding and expanding. It also allows for associations, peripheries, returns back beside itself but changed, like memory and consciousness. In *Covert Action*, a story develops by digressions, by what's missing. The spiral suits this space of inclusion.

* * *

Found footage is potentially an archive of the world's images, past cinema. I love the encyclopedic quality and as well, the hand-making process. Projects get bigger, stretch my facilities and time, but I'm committed to this hand-made process of making films and reluctant to let go of that. What found footage does is give me access to images that I could never have otherwise. This is the landscape of our brains, shaped by the social. I access that landscape, ethnography of the seen.

New York City
11 February 1991

Bruce Conner

I've always known that I was outside the main, mercantile stream. I have been placed in an environment that would have its name changed now and again: avant-garde film, experimental film, underground film, independent film, etc. I have tried to create film work so that it is capable of communicating to people outside of a limited dialogue within an esoteric, avant-garde or a cultish social form. Jargon I don't like.

* * *

I don't believe that anything like *A MOVIE*, existed in film prior to 1958 ... as far as my experience was concerned. The only movies I can relate to it were outside of experimental film. I went to movies a lot. I would see third-rate, cheap movies that came out of Poverty Row in Hollywood. They had a stock footage library and would use the same images again and again. When there was a scene in New York introduced, you would see the same shot of the Brooklyn Bridge from the same position. And in a foreign locale there would be a classic cliché shot to represent that the tiny sets and exteriors were to be imagined to be there. Also it was cheaper to shoot in front of a rear projection screen in the studio instead of going out. People were walking in front of *a movie*! Cowboys would pick up their guns and point them, and up would pop shots taken from previous and larger productions: Indians attacking and things like that. So I became aware that there was a "universal movie" that was being made all the time! It's classic images. It's the *Mona Lisa*, it's the Sistine Chapel, it's the Statue of Liberty, it's all these symbols, except it is in film.

It seemed natural that I would make this movie called *A MOVIE*.

One of the other things that influenced me would have been "coming attractions," where the highlights of a new movie are encapsulated into two or three minutes. More specifically, I remember scenes like Barbara Stanwyck throwing a glass of liquid in a man's face and saying "I hate you! I hate you!" And the next was of a railroad train going off the

side of a cliff. I also saw weekly adventure serials where the sequence of events at the end would lead you to believe the consequence of those events was totally disastrous to the hero. But the hero would survive the next week since something had been left out of the sequence of events — or they would just lie about it. So it became apparent to me that you can create an emotional response which is very different from what was socially agreed upon as a narrative structure.

However, anything which was taken for granted as not serious, not art, just things that are thrown away, were exactly what I paid attention to. By the '60s this attitude was codified into a structure called Pop Art — as if it was a big new discovery. But all that Pop Art did was to follow philosophical premises that have been around for a long time: if you want to know what's going on in a culture, look at what everybody takes for granted. Put your attention on that, rather than on what they *want* to show you. I view my culture here in the United States as I would regard a foreign environment. That is, it's supposed to be my culture. I don't feel that way.

Another influence on *A MOVIE* was television: when you can switch from one channel to another. Also, watching TV without sound and adding your own selections of music and other sound.

I saw movies using stock footage such as the sequence in the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup*, when Harpo appeals for help in a border war and calls up all variety of helpful creatures.

Short subjects shown in movie theaters would

use newsreel footage and mix it up with something else or put a different soundtrack with it, and alter it in that way.

Spike Jones and His City Slickers, did some parodies in their stage show. One of their classics was a monologue about a horse race featuring a loser of a horse always running last. Except the horse, Feetlebaum, suprisingly is announced the winner. The last time I saw them perform it, they had created a movie to project on stage. Not only was there a horse race, there were racing cars and a pathetic and old sway-backed horse named Feetlebaum. The movie cut back and forth between Feetlebaum and the race footage. These images were used in a comic manner. It was just silly.

The reason I made *A MOVIE* was because I was waiting for *somebody* to make a movie that seemed obvious to my mind. I became interested in what was called "experimental" movies, because I had seen some unusual short sequences disguised as "dream sequences" in 1940s movies. Fantasy scenes would not be seen in narrative feature films except occasionally when a character would dream events similar to real life. Strange transformations would take place in normal scenes. Images might be in negative instead of positive, slow motion, backwards, extremely fast, etc. A door would open revealing something different from what you would expected. These were throw-away sequences similar to the low-grade Hollywood movies that had the stock footage in them. So I saw a lot of these movies during the 1940s. I was about

14 years old when my interest made more demands. I wanted to see more of the "surrealistic" films. I didn't see much of it in commercial films.

I joined the Wichita Film Society, and they showed one or two films that were supposed to be surrealist, but they weren't quite what I was expecting. Later I found myself forming new film groups in order to see the films I wanted to see. I managed to meet a filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, when I started the Experimental Film Group at the University of Colorado in 1956. I had met another filmmaker earlier in the 1950s named Harry Smith. But Harry was paranoid about showing his films. Afraid that his ideas would be stolen. I never saw Harry Smith's films until the mid-1960s. I went to Cinema 16 programs in New York.

When I moved here [San Francisco] in 1957 and started a film society with Larry Jordan, it was the only film society in Northern California, that I know of. It was called Camera Obscura.

Larry showed me how to use a splicer. And I used his Griswold splicer and rewinds and viewer. I went to the local photography store and bought 100-foot reel condensations of 16mm feature films like "Hopalong Cassidy" and newsreels and racing cars and all sorts of stuff. That is how I got access to footage. I bought Castle Home Movies and gathered any TV commercials and old movies that I could find. I had virtually no money, so most of my films have to be considered bare bones poverty films. I could not buy a camera. It was actually much cheaper to buy a hundred feet of film already developed and processed, than to buy

a hundred feet of film, shoot it and have it processed. It would cost about five or six times more to shoot your own film.

Since there was a movie I wanted to see, and didn't see it being made, I decided it had to be my job to make it. And absolutely nothing was being taught in schools on how to make films. I couldn't take a class in filmmaking. I had to invent my own ways of making movies. All I could learn was how to glue one piece of film to another. A *MOVIE* was made in the most primitive film editing process that is possible. You just glue it together. I had no work print, synchronizer, moviola, sound reader. I had none of the technical tools that beginning film students use today. I had never even heard of most of these technical tools. Although A *MOVIE* is being used today — and has been used since it was completed in 1957 — in teaching film classes, the way I made A *MOVIE* is not the way anybody is ever taught how to make films.

* * *

At the time I made these films, I loved to look at anything that moved. When I got a movie projector, I would run movies over and over. It was fascinating to see them again and again. And on my Craig viewer I could wind them by hand, backwards and forwards. I could stop the frame and examine it. As I went through these films, educational films and others, there would be shots I thought were curious or interesting, absurd or

peculiar, or maybe they touched a reminiscence in my mind ... an image that I would not throw away. I would cut out all the footage in between, and the reels would keep getting shorter and shorter. Sometimes an image would accidentally find itself fitting with a couple of other images and creating a kind of emotional context similar to the movie star slapping a man and the train going over the cliff. An emotional, symbolic gesture of a different sort. It might be more enigmatic. I would save sequences of images that I didn't know what reason I wanted to save them for, or what they might represent, except they were fascinating to me. Many times when making the films, I have not been able to consciously understand what they are communicating. I've been able to talk about them after the fact, but that doesn't necessarily represent what they are.

* * *

I started *REPORT* as soon as the day Kennedy died. Working in relationship to the death of President Kennedy became very involved. The process turned into paintings, sculpture, events, film in several different forms. The film titled *REPORT* was made into a negative from the original film edit after five years of transformations. In the meantime it changed. Every print was different, except that it was edited to the same soundtrack. The assassination was transformed in the media by political, social and economic pressures. What was obscured was the confrontation

with death, and that here was a man shot and killed. The death became an object that was played with in ritual, tribal observances of one kind or another. Almost immediately there were gross political exploitations of his image to promote political action that Kennedy would have been opposed to. It represented to me what apparently happens in the complexity of every human's death. The assassination of President Kennedy in *REPORT* is my death, your death, it's everyone's death. He is a figure that symbolizes it. It had become so common and prevalent a cultural image through this process, that all the ways in which death is exploited and reused and deified and everything else were centered on his death. Here was a death assumed to be closely documented and clearly communicated. There couldn't have been more cameramen, reporters, witnesses, and yet all of it is fragmented into thousands of points of view.

* * *

My approach to filmmaking, whether I have shot the film or taken footage from another film is not different. All footage is found footage for a film editor, if the editor has not made the film. My technique is no different despite the fact of having shot the film myself or not. The editor's role is to work with given images, put them together and, perhaps, make them do things that were never there in the original intent. There are many examples of how footage can be made to appear

quite different by changing the context.

* * *

I disagree with the tendency to make "found footage" a category, rather than a description. And possibly montage comes closer than collage, because collage, as I understand it, is a French word that deals with the placing of separate layers of paper on a flat surface. Assemblage is a French word, but it is also an English word. But it's such an all inclusive term that it has virtually no definition whatsoever. I don't think we should be talking about collage when we speak of film. We should be talking about montage.

* * *

My films are the "real world." It's not a fantasy. It's not a found object. This is the stuff that I see as the phenomena around me. At least that's what I call the "real world." We have "reality shows" presented to us regularly. The most prevalent one is the five minute "reality show" — the five minute news. If you listen to a news program on the radio it may report ten events in a row. It's no different than *A MOVIE*. Something absurd next to a catastrophe next to speculation next to a kind of instruction on how you're supposed to think about some political or social thing. You know: "President Bush had lunch with his wife and went to Kennibunkport, Maine, today. Fifty thousand people died in Bangladesh in a horrible disaster.

Sony says they're going to produce a new three-dimensional hologram television set which will be released sometime in the 21st century." GaGa, GaGa. I mean this is comic book time.

San Francisco
22 May 1991

David Rimmer

[In the late 1960s] I was associated with the group Intermedia in Vancouver. The National Film Board had given us two boxes of old film. So I began going through them, and we were also at that time doing performance events with film projection, music, dance performance. And I would take some of these stock images and just loop them and project them during the performances. *Variations On A Cellophane Wrapper* began as part of a performance where I remember quite distinctly that I had four projectors, each with the same loop projected on the wall, and I was

putting color gels over it and playing around, and then I just thought why don't I fix it and make it into a film, and began working with it and worked it up to the film it finally became. I just became interested, I guess fascinated, with all this old footage. I also made *Surfacing on the Thames* and *The Dance* at the same time, both with stock footage. So since then I've been looking for it and collecting it and stealing it. I have lots of it!

* * *

I'm an editor. I love that part of it where it begins to make sense. But I usually feel that it's *my* footage because of how I rework it — through either optical printing or whatever I do to it. It's no longer just somebody's straight footage. And I don't feel guilty about manipulating other people's images, especially when they're so far in the past — some of the ones — so it doesn't bother me.

* * *

Some of my work has to do with a critique or a deconstruction of the image, but hopefully in a poetic way rather than in a didactic way. Because I don't want to just deconstruct it, I want to transform it into something else. So that's what I look for in some kinds of work: an appreciation for the old stuff. I like the old stuff.

Montréal
19 September 1991

Keith Sanborn

I always liked found footage. I always loved Bruce Conner's stuff. And it seemed to me that a lot of the interests of formalist film, as they were developing in the '70s, had to do with trying to eliminate content quite deliberately, quite didactically. Sometimes that was interesting and sometimes it wasn't. Anyway, I found that that desire to rob things of content in favor of form was a dead end for me, and I thought, why can't you have interesting formal experimentation in conjunction with interesting content?

Also, there's a certain point at which there's a kind of a change in generational sensibility, from the utopian belief in form to something more critical, a belief that formal critique is not adequate in itself. And there was a lot said, around that time, in other segments of the visual arts, about what were called then "appropriated images." Exactly what you call those kinds of movies or that kind of art is certainly open to debate. I always thought of mine more as expropriated images, but how you call things has to do a lot with the political understanding of them. I mean, there's a long stretch from the sort of casual surrealism of found footage to *détournement* as a rigorous project of cultural critique. And I guess I lean much more toward *détournement*, albeit in a playful kind of way.

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A lot can happen when you have an image that has been taken from one context and put in another. It comes trailing its context behind it in various ways, and for me what distinguishes an interesting from a not-so-interesting found footage movie is whether or not it actually gives the image a new meaning in its new context. I really love Bruce Conner's films, especially *A Movie*, but I think the most successful passages are when he does create a new meaning, like that sequence with Marilyn Monroe and the submarine and the torpedo and the atomic bomb. I mean, that's montage. A lot of the rest of it is just high weirdness by Castle Films. Which is a lot of fun, but it's just not the most interesting part of the film.

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I think another thing with the people of my generation is that if video represents the eternal present, film represents history. It represents the category of memory, of that which preceded us, in a way that TV or video does not. And besides there are the essential physical qualities of film and the social aspects of projecting film. Films are the stuff of history in a weird way. They're palpable. They're material. There's a difference between a found footage film and a found footage video. In video the image is so obviously from the TV, but in film there's something more insidious, because it implies an access to a public body of images. There's always very much of a power struggle about whether or not they are your images or their

images or what your ability to participate in the life of those images is. All of that's also related to the idea of context and meaning in found footage films.

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Found footage is like a very concrete form of history, and working with that kind of material gives you a chance to research in history, which has always been a fascinating topic to me: creating meaning in history or finding it — creating things out of pre-existing material. And the other thing for me, for my generation, was the sense that formal experimentation was at a dead end, that in fact there were too many films already, and that what was needed wasn't new films or formal innovation in that sense, but rather a better understanding of what was already out there. I don't know if the people I consider my generational peers would say it in exactly the same way, but there was definitely a sense of formal cinema having become this kind of end game which was basically a very exclusive club, the membership to which had been rounded out and the door shut on it. Even if one wanted to belong, one was not going to be offered a membership, and so it takes on the dimensions of a political struggle, an oedipal struggle.

Also I think it has to do with being part of the TV generation, and that as a group we were much more visually literate in a certain kind of way than the previous generation, not necessarily in terms of

quality, but certainly in terms of quantity. And that sort of sheer mass of data required a different sense of the politics of seeing, and for the people I know, I think the politics of seeing is a more key issue than the art of vision.

Of course, there can be more and less interesting uses of found footage, and I think there was a desire to do something which would have an immediate resonance. If you have pre-existing material then, in a way, you can get a much deeper and more immediate reach into people's consciousness than you can by creating another world where an ideal vision can be carried out. It's sort of a forced reading of the popular mythology of the culture, which has an immediate impact.

I also think that found footage films are among the most fragile historically. A lot of the nuance is lost from them more quickly than other kinds of avant-garde films, because they have a sense of context, because an image — the meaning of an image — can change drastically over time. I mean, for Esther Schub when she made *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, footage of the Czar's family or footage of the peasants had a specific informational structure, and of course the intertitles are extremely didactic, whereas about 100 years removed, without an incredibly aggressive supplementation of that material, it simply reads as historical. It's almost as if its meaning is exhausted by the category of the historical.

* * *

Sometimes found footage movies, the typical surrealist use of them, you know, the schoolboy surrealist use of them, is just one weird thing with the next. It's sort of like a low budget version of the Kuleshov effect. I guess it's amusing if you're high on drugs, but after awhile it's not so interesting even if you're high. And that's a problem with found footage movies in general. They can be really, really boring or else they can be really interesting. They have that quality of the irresistible force meets the immovable object.

New York City
16 April 1991

Chick Strand

Having seen *A Movie* and the possibilities therein, I knew it was possible to work with old film and not be intimidated at all about it — lifting things and rearranging them, doing collage. It's just sort of a miracle to find some junk nobody wants. All that stuff I got would have been thrown away, except for the few pieces I heisted from a couple of prints. I was so entranced by the image itself and how I could mess with it, stick it in another context in a sort of semi-outrageous way. Nothing is sacred. You just rip it out of one context, or leave

a couple of the little sub-contextual things in it, and mix the whole thing up with something else entirely, and make up a context. I love it, it's just great!

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When I'm editing I sort of view all footage as found footage. I like to distance myself from the footage I take. Editing is a whole different thing from the emotional involvement you get, or I get, when I'm filming people doing things. When I edit I withdraw myself, hopefully, to have a better eye, a more objective eye, in terms of what it's going to look like as a whole, rather than keeping something in because I can't let go of it. So I try to be ruthless.

* * *

It seems to me that a lot in my films, especially the found footage stuff, refers to filmmaking and to movies. As an anthropologist (which is what I was preparing myself to be before I got involved with film), I see movies as artifacts of the culture, so in a way they hold exceptional value like, maybe — I'm trying to get a really good example — maybe like the Codex of the Aztecs. I mean, that's much more romantic and idealized than old movies that were made for some other reason than religious. But I don't think it matters what name we call it, it's an artifact, it's part of our material culture. It says a lot about our culture in one way or another,

so I see it as artifact.

But also, like the Codex, it's part of our history. For example, some of that Muybridge stuff that I have in *Loose Ends* is not only an historical piece of our culture, an artifact from that time, but it also relates to our whole idea of movement and all kinds of related things. You know what I mean, it's like finding a bowl in a cave or something, only we're going to interpret it much differently than people who come after us and haven't lived through our times.

I know these pieces of film are artifacts when I'm editing. Intellectually, I see them as artifact, but emotionally, because I'm part of the culture, I see them at a whole different level. This brings me right back to World War II when I was a kid watching *Movietone News*. Yet when I use text from *Last Year at Marienbad* [in the conclusion of *Loose Ends*] along with the images that were shot, I think, reasonably soon after World War II was over, I'm just reinventing a history and really messing things up, because, really, they don't have anything to do with each other. But what I think is that the way that guy describes Marienbad, the rococo this and that, is sometimes how we perceive or internalize what we're watching on the screen — that terror and that awfulness in the war footage, for example — turning it into rococo marble.

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What I see as the wonderful joy of it is that you

can mix up so many things, and not everybody is going to get everything. I guess, I'm an old fart because I choose older stuff. To me, it just seems more important. I mean, it's just too crazy now. It's all out of context anyway. We're living in it, in a collage.

Los Angeles
25 May 1991

Leslie Thornton

There are a number of different ways that I've worked with found footage, so I can't really make an overriding statement about it. But I can talk about some of the things that I've thought about, some of the things that have occurred to me. One thing is that in *Peggy and Fred in Hell* these children have constructed an environment out of cultural detritus. So there is a way in which showing three minutes of an old Westinghouse factory documentary isn't so dissimilar to Fred picking up a telephone and enacting the behavior of a TV actor. In a sense with Peggy and Fred, all their behavior is "found" — as is everyone's, really. But I try to create a kind of artifice for them. So, I would say that in using that kind of cultural artifact, I'm not privileging it, or making it very impressive — devaluing its historicity, in a way —

but, as is often the case in my work, I try to do lots of things at the same time. At the same time that it might be handled rather flippantly, it has on the other hand an aura of importance about it. Depending on how the material comes up in the project — it's either embedded through montage or some kind of story that's going on, or it's just another element of their environment — it's grand, something overarching, so much bigger and inflexible, but still maybe very ordinary at the same time.

I've thought so much about the use of others' material, appropriation, that if I use the material in a way that I think is beautiful, or provokes the experience of beauty, I always want to shift it a little to an uncomfortable position. So there's always something ambivalent about it. But that's a very particular point of view on it, I recognize. I guess I could sum up the direction of what I'm saying as being interested in archival material for its historical presence, but also to make historical presence ordinary, not to regard the historical as spectacular. It might look spectacular, because if you take shots of bombs dropping in World War II it looks spectacular, and that is, in a sense, aestheticizing something that had a very different quality at its source. There's a way of looking at bomb footage as if you were there. But that isn't the point either. The point is to see something spectacular, but to recognize that it has a referent, and the referent is enormous, but it is somehow within the present as well as the past. You read it in the present, but your present is made up of all

pasts, and so forth. So that's the kind of circling that's going on.

I think one of the reasons this is hard to talk about is because it is really about looking at one thing in a number of different ways. Part of the discomfort of a project like *Peggy and Fred* is that it really tries to confront the viewer in a way that doesn't allow one to be complacent. You see the story, you see what's happening to these kids, you see what the time frame is. At the same time there is always something odd or strange to look at. So, there's even an entertainment value, certainly there's that level of engagement. But at the same time there is a pressure to exert your viewing to accommodate what's being thrown at you. It's not nonsense, but what is it? You can't say what it is. It's not really recuperable in language.

* * *

There is another thing I want to say about the use of found material, particularly in the project *Peggy and Fred*. In a way, I've approached all the material as if it was found. The behavior of the children is virtually found behavior, though it was always instigated or set up by suggestions. But it wasn't shot with a script, and I did shoot for eight years. In *The So-Called Duck Factory* there is a way in which the archival material and the material I shot become almost indistinguishable as far as developing the story is concerned. In the future the position of the archival footage may not be so much with quotations marks around it. The nar-

native I'm working on now will embed the archival material differently, the embedding will be deeper. I think you can see this starting to happen now in the video, *The So-Called Duck Factory*, particularly some odd nature images that maybe look like they weren't shot consciously, with an aesthetic end, or you can't understand what the purpose of shooting might be — which is often the case when you look at archival material — so that quality has been incorporated into the shooting, that kind of absence of mind in the shooting.

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I'm just beginning to appreciate the unremitting, formally linear machine of narrative, of narrative discourse in general. And I just feel like I can breathe when I'm looking at something whose purpose isn't entirely locatable. And that's part of the freshness of working with archival material, separate from all these other things we've talked about, and I guess that has been contributing a lot to my practice. The camera is ideologically loaded, so I'm just asking questions about how to use the camera — as well as having a good time and trying to talk about something. My number one rule is that there are no rules in filmmaking, and archival stuff really works in well that way because it comes from a million different places for a million different reasons.

* * *

Art is changing, it's changing. I think a lot of people who call themselves artists now are cultural critics who are using instruments other than just written language or spoken language to communicate their critical perspective. But I don't put myself in that category, absolutely not. I would say I see that as an aspect [of my work], but — I'm not sure I've ever said this before — I really believe in art. I think if it's important right now in this world to have a critical perspective as a cultural producer, it's just as important to pursue forms of address that we call aesthetics. You can't just cut one off and say it's, you know, questionable, bourgeois, corrupt, or whatever. It all goes together, and the work that's going to last is art. Art's going to be there.

New York City
19 February 1991