

RECYCLED IMAGES: THE ART AND POLITICS OF FOUND FOOTAGE FILMS

William C. Wees

Dedicated to Bruce Conner

Abstract: 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.

Chapter 4 - 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 realiBm

collageimage avant-garde film modernism.

appropriation simulacrum muoic 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 battleship, 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."

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 News-reel, "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."

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."²² 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."

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." 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 to 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 accepts, 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." 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 unmeditated representations of reality.

Notes

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.

William C. Wees is an Emeritus Professor at McGill University where he taught literature, film, and cultural studies courses for many years. In addition to numerous articles and reviews, he is the author of *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde*, *Light Moving in Time: Studies in the Visual Aesthetics of Avant-Garde Film*, and *Recycled Images: The Art and Politics of Found Footage Films*.

In Anthology Film Archives New York City 1993

Copyright © 1993 Anthology Film Archives Manufactured in the United States of America Printed by Braun-Brumfield Inc., Ann Arbor, MI

ISBN 0-911689-19-2