

MEDIA CANNIBALS LOST (AND FOUND) IN THE FOREST OF SIGNS

– CRAIG BALDWIN ON FOUND-FOOTAGE

MEDIEKANNIBALER FORSVUNNET (OG GJENFUNNET!) I SKOGEN AV TEGN

Vi har invitert found footage-guruen Craig Baldwin fra San Francisco til å holde et foredrag om found footage. I dette foredraget på fredag i Pan vil han vise klipp fra historien og fram til i dag. På lørdag i Pan presenterer han egne arbeider og viser lange utdrag fra filmene *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1991), *Sonic Outlaws* (1995), og *Spectres of the Spectrum* (1999), i tillegg til et innblikk i det verket han holder på med nå, *Mock Up On Mu*.

Stilt overfor økningen av banalisert og kommersialisert amerikansk film har filmskaping basert på allerede eksisterende opptak – found footage – blitt locus, fokus og hokus-pokus for diskusjonen av intenes omtvistede emner innen nåtidig kulturteori og praksis: arkivet, eieomsrett til åndsverk, nye dokumentariske og narrative moduser, film-essayet, taktisk medieintervensjon og så videre.

Craig Baldwin bor i San Francisco, California, som etter manges mening er et senter for denne nylig styrkede modus av neo-dada/politisk collage. Baldwin er både kurator og utgiver, og har med seg til Grimstad en hundre minutter lang foredrags-demo om denne polymorfiske praksis, og foreslår også noen mot-kategorier med hvilken dens surrealistiske, herlig perverse humor kunne verdsettes.

Han vil vise 14 filmer (og videoer) – noen kun i utdrag – og vil foreslå et uformelt leksikon for å forstå de forskjellige utgaver av og virkemidler i produksjonen av found footage. Han vil også gi kjøtt på bena til konsepter som mediearkeologi, kompilasjons-dokumentar, collage-essay, appropriasjonskunst, 'detournement', 'culture-jam', 'mash-up'. I tillegg vil han argumentere for sine egne neologismer for sjangerne: elektronisk folkekultur, tilgjengelighetskunst, artefaktialitet, Jiu-Jitsu, buktalerkunst og den trojanske hest!

Blant kunstnerne i foredraget finner vi Bruce Conner, Chick Strand, Martha Colburn, Damon Packard, People Like Us, Wetgate, TV Sheriff og den ekstremt sjeldne tilbakevendingen av den skandinaviske 'situationisten' Jens Thorsen! I tillegg blir det en spørsmål-og-svar-sesjon.



Her er mediearkivar Craig Baldwin i kjelleren på ATA (Artists' Television Access) – et visningssted for undergrunnsfilm i San Francisco.

Foto: Per Platou

We have invited found footage guru Craig Baldwin from San Francisco to give a lecture about found footage. During the lecture, on Friday in Pan, he will show extracts from historical times to the present. On Saturday, also in Pan, he will present his own work, with extended sequences from his films *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1991), *Sonic Outlaws* (1995) and *Spectres of the Spectrum* (1999). He will also show bits and pieces from the film he is working on right now, *Mock Up On Mu*.

In the face of an increasingly banal and commercialized American cinema, found-footage filmmaking has become locus, focus, and hocus-pocus for the negotiation of intensely contested issues in contemporary cultural theory and practice: the archive, intellectual-property rights, new documentary and narrative modes, the essay film, tactical media intervention, et cetera. Based in San Francisco, California, arguably a center of this newly energised mode of neo-dada/political collage, curator/publisher Craig Baldwin brings to Grimstad a 100-min. lecture-demo on this polymorphous practice, suggesting some critical categories by which its surreal, delightfully perverse humor might be appreciated.

Screening 14 films (and videos) – some in excerpted form – he will propose an informal lexicon for understanding the various ways and means of found-footage production, fleshing out concepts such as media-archeology, compilation doc, collage-essay, appropriation art, detournement, culture-jam, mash-up, as well as arguing for his own neologisms for the genres: Electronic Folk Culture, Availabilism, Artifactuality, Jiu-Jitsu, Ventriloquism, and the Trojan Horse!

Among the artists included are Bruce Conner, Chick Strand, Martha Colburn, Damon Packard, People Like Us, Wetgate, TV Sheriff, and the extremely rare return of Scandinavian Situationist Jens Thorsen! Plus Q&A.



People Like Us 2006. Vicki Bennett has been making collages and doing live sound mixes in front of her projections for over ten years now. This image metaphorically represents her general creative project of 'scratching' musical recordings to construct synthetic worlds, that we can see layered, composited there in a Pop-Art fantasy landscape.

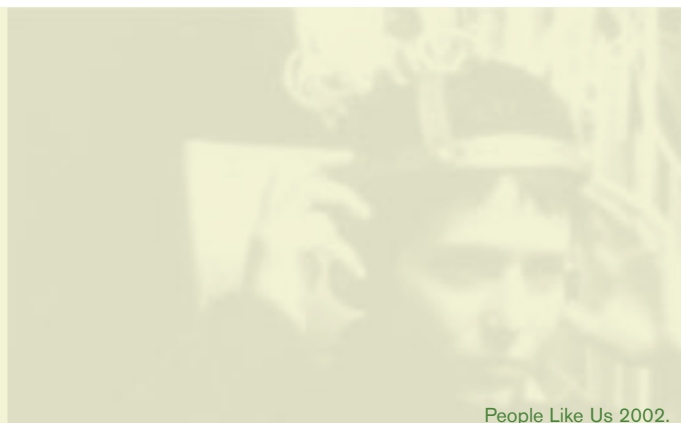
Among the rich and richly varied filmways of the San Francisco Bay Area is that rather special practice called the Found Footage (FF) film. There can be little doubt that this mode of making has enjoyed a particularly prominent place in the local tradition...but why, exactly? As an FF practitioner myself, I would like to point to a few possible contributing factors, and sketch out a (necessarily partial) chronology of this curious activity. Instead of a positive identification of 'causes', my speculative history affords a review of the FF phenomenon through psycho-geographic means – a description of human sensibilities attendant within a certain space and time. For example, and in the first place, how could the overt use of pre-fabricated industrial images flourish in a regional film culture that so vigorously valorizes 'the personal'?

Well, (always) at the risk of over-simplification, I would point to that sense of artistic identity that Northern California makers might have vis-à-vis the commercial film establishment, especially in relation to our neighboring film center to the south: Know that those Hollywood studios are the major source of our 'found' footage! Now I couldn't say for sure, but a San Fran maker just might see herself as an antagonist to the assembly lines of the Southland, and her re-purposing of the material as a redemptive gesture of personal creative agency. Though developments in the fine arts have certainly played a role, I would submit that it is more for the force of social-psychological factors like these that this outsider art took hold here. And if 'outsider' is too much a brag, we can at least agree that it is a contrarian impulse – the audience knows that the material came with a different intention, and much of the later delight derives from its witty pre-emption. This is not your standard compilation-doc in which the disparate archival images are homologues in service to the narration. Au contraire, mon frère, it takes a willful, slightly perverse act to render dross into gold.

FROM JUNK TO FUNK TO PUNK TO LINK

Craig Baldwin has written the article «From Junk to Funk to Punk to Link» especially for the Norwegian Short Film Festival's catalogue. This is an excellent opportunity for everyone who wants in-depth information about found footage, with a special emphasis on its practice in California. The article has not been translated but is accompanied by a summary in Norwegian.

Artikkelen «From Junk to Funk to Punk to Link» har Craig Baldwin skrevet spesielt for Kortfilmfestivalens katalog – fritt fram for den som har lyst til å fordype seg i temaet found footage, med særlig vekt på found footage-kulturen i California. Artikkelen er ikke oversatt, men følges ad et resymé på norsk.



People Like Us 2002.



Excerpt from film by People Like Us 2002

www.peoplelikeus.org

MULTIPLE EFFECTS AT MULTIPLE LEVELS

At base, as we shall see, the materiality of the celluloid itself can be reclaimed as plastic-art material – the trivial human representations and constructions of meaning cancelled with an (ideally serrated) sharp object or stripped off in an emulsion-erasing Clorox swipe. Cinema concrete techniques such as these could be called formal, sure, though they were in use long before the '70s, when attention to cinema's materials and structures came into academic vogue. The Bay Area is not nearly so driven by Structural concerns as, say, the Buffalo of Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits... tho we'll still pour some beer on the ground for them. R.I.P.

See, the community is generous. And instead of absolute refusal, or deconstruction to null-point, our work is best understood as a playful engagement with the original author(s). (Marshall McLuhan advanced the model of the Menippean satire [after the Greek cynic Menippus – uh-oh, already Frampton comes alive!], which is the parodying of different modes of speech to reveal patterns.) The image can be read (at least!) two ways – :We see the first-instance expression of the producer – as clichéd or ideologically over-determined as that might be – and at the same time, like Schrodinger's Cat, we read it in its new context – a split or schizophrenic sign. Graphic processes such as the palimpsest (old-school tracing pad) or pentimento come to mind – more mixed metaphors for re-inscription that afford useful art-historical models for current media's re-iterations and digital versions.

MORE RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

So what is at stake, and what register (besides the diachronic) could be offered by which we might consider these varieties of the FF experience? Well, it is precisely this semantic quotient that cannot be killed, even at the extreme of Schwitters' most splintered collage (his *Merz* from *Kom-merz Bank*). The Dadaists tried to grind down those letter-forms into pure non-sense, while the Beats (more later) wanted to get past ego/intentionality with their I Ching toss. But you and I have been through that, and that is not our fate (!). For THIS lil' semiological guerrilla, the crucial work is at the level of the 'symbolic' harnessing meaning, exposing intentions, and then the enfolding into the meta-cinematic fabric. That's what elevates this project beyond Altoids ads, beyond scratch video, beyond the facile pastiche that's passed off as p.....m.

Aa-aa-aaaah!

ECSTASY OF COMMUNICATION REDUX

These liberated signs can be re-deployed and re-read as literally (!?) as the so-called user desires: At one end of the spectrum, they can be abstracted into the broadest sort of all-purpose gesture, often enabled through extraordinary studio/lab techniques. Perhaps this pole comes closest to painting and printmaking. If maybe a little language is added (or even if it isn't), the spectre of allegory may be invoked, maybe even the long arcs of an epic form. (Now, a compilation-narrative is surely what I'd like to see, but they remain quite rare; more later.)

Or the FF artist can choose to work the more indexical end of the axis, 'picking up more stitches' of the Real and self-consciously threading them through the warp and woof of the new quilt. The shots retain their specificity, be it film-historical and/or socio-political. This enterprise I call the Collage-Essay. It springs from what Eisenstein named 'intellectual montage', and extends, as we may see in the survey below, towards a kind of Conceptual Art. To plot these morphological developments and their human determinants, I'll first establish those abiding (sub-)cultural conditions that served as ground for the genre's regional growth:

BASES OF BAY AREA BRICOLAGE

1. The legacy of Dada and Surrealism, kept alive by local art schools, the gallery/museum scene, and practicing visual artists.
2. Influence of the Beats, with their existential, Zen-tinged appreciation for the 'is-ness' of the lived world, for humble objects and stressed materials. And their embrace of poverty – coping through ingenuity (and masochism), rather than 'buying one's way out' of problems.
3. A distinctly San Fran transcendental impulse, certainly related to Buddhism but also to Native American religions, to the Kaballah, and to the New Age vision quest – the Jungian journey through psychological symbolism, the pilgrim recomposing herself as she shuffles among the new configurations of meaning. Also, the communitarian, collaborative practices that are woven deep into the social fabric, especially since the Hippie Period, A.D.
4. A powerful affinity with a Pop Art aesthetic, driven not by poverty this time, but by California wealth, with its attendant fetishizing of commercial imagery and movie-cult quotation.
5. Hell yeah, an aggressive and deeply ingrained punk-rock attitude that has not been quashed even yet, that opposes the 'precious' with a perverse appetite for violent collisions between compositional elements, in shredding the store-bought, and in noise.
6. A general sense of humor and heterodox play, that could flourish in a casual Coast culture, outside of the Atlantic axis of academies and venerable cultural institutions.

