



FROM JUNK TO FUNK TO PUNK TO LINK

Craig Baldwin

Among the rich and richly varied filmways of the Bay Area can be found that rather special practice known as 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 float a few possible contributing factors, and then sketch out a (necessarily partial) chronology of this curious activity in these here parts.

Even curiously, how could the overt use of pre-fabricated industrial images flourish in a regional film culture that so vigorously valorizes “the personal”?

NorCal Avengers

Well, at the risk of oversimplification, I would summon up that sense of artistic identity that Northern California makers might host vis-à-vis the commercial film establishment, especially regarding our neighboring (competing?) film center to the south. In fact, those Hollywood studios are a major source of our found footage! Now, a Frisco 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. We can at least agree that it is a “contrarian” impulse—the artist and audience know that the footage came with a different intention, and much of the later delight derives from its witty pre-emption. The result is not hardly your standard compilation doc, in which the archival images are homologues in service to the narration! Au contraire, mon frère!

Multiple Effects at Multiple Levels

At base, the materiality of the celluloid itself can be reclaimed as plastic-art material—the laughably ephemeral human forms easily enough canceled with a sufficiently sharp object (best if serrated), or stripped off that photochemical platform in an emulsion-erasing Clorox swipe.

Cinéma concreté techniques such as these could be called “structural,” sure, though they were in use long before the 70s, when that term came into parlance. And anyway, I’d argue that



the Bay Area is not nearly so driven by formal concerns as, say, the Buffalo of Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits (tho we still pour a bit of beer on the ground for them, RIP). Our “soft structuralism” has it both ways: Instead of absolute refusal, or deconstruction to null-point, much of our work might be understood as a playful semiotic engagement with the “original” authors. Marshall McLuhan advanced the model of the “Menippean satire”, after Menippus of Classical Greek rhetoric (ah, already Frampton comes alive!), which is the mimicking of modes of speech to parody mannered patterns.

The image can be read two ways: We see the initial expression of the producer—as clichéd and 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. Art-historical graphic processes such as the palimpsest (old-school tracing pad) or pentimento (painting over an earlier image in an artwork) come to mind—more mixed metaphors for “re-inscription” that certainly anticipate our contemporary obsession with digital “versions.”

More Rhetorical Questions/Questions of Rhetoric

So against what sort of register might we consider the varieties of the found-footage experience? Well, for this brief argument at least, let’s take a page from Saussure; let’s consider an array (but not a hierarchy) of “meaning”. ... that semantic denominator that cannot be killed, even at the extreme of Schwitters’ most splintered collage. The Dadaists tried to grind letter-forms down into pure non-sense, while the Beats (on them, more later) wanted to get past intentionality with their I Ching. But you and I have been through that, and that is not our fate. For this here semiological guerrilla, during war-time (never stops), the crucial work is at the level of the symbolic—exposing intentions, harnessing meanings, and then the re-deployment onto the, ahem, metacinematic plane. That is what hopefully elevates our projects beyond Altoids ads, beyond VJ wallpaper, beyond the facile pastiche that’s passed off as...(you know, the p-word).

Slipping and Sliding

Though of course the “liberated” signifiers can always be absorbed as “figuratively” (as opposed to literally) as desired. At one end of our spectrum, they can be abstracted into the broadest sort of all-purpose gesture, often enacted 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 metaphor may be invoked, maybe even the tentative tendrils of allegory.

And/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 or socio-political. This enterprise I call the 'collage-essay'. It springs from what Eisenstein named "intellectual montage," and then extends toward a kind of Conceptual Art.

To better plot these different uses, and to frame the following folk history, let's first stake out those abiding (sub)cultural conditions that served as ground for the genre's growth:

Bases of Bay Area Bricolage

1. A general sense of regional humor and heterodox play that could flourish in a more casual West Coast culture, outside of the Atlantic axis of academies and museums.
2. The legacy of Dada and Surrealism, kept alive by local art schools, the gallery scene, and practicing visual artists.
3. The 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.
4. 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 era.
5. A powerful affinity with a Pop-art aesthetic, driven not by poverty this time but by California wealth, with its attendant self-consciousness of commercial imagery and movie-cult quotation.

6. 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, for shredding the store-bought, and for noise.

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