Movies Out of Thin Air: a minor art form

The judicious use of the "stock shot" has always been a legitimate part of film making. When Josef von Sternberg needed elaborates crowd shots only as linking and montage devices in "The Scarlet Empress", it made sense not to spend a fortune shooting them for a few seconds of screen time, but to lift them from Ernst Lubitsch's silent "The Patriot". So well integrated were they that even Lubitsch (then production head at Paramount) did not recognize them, and chastised von Sternberg for his extravagance!

However, this practice was soon extended to movies making wholesale use of highlights borrowed from earlier films, and eventually entire movies being written and built around them. Stock footage -- initially the independent companies were the chief culprits, but before long economy minded majors -- even proud MGM were resorting to the practise. There were three very basic reasons for this: 1) Constantly rising production costs made it a temptation to fall back on existing footage; 2) Numbers of independently made silent negatives, apparently of no commercial value in the silent era but now sold outright; and 3) in the pre-talkies era and before the widespread development of revival houses, there was little earning commercial value even in big films like "Hell's Angels" and "Scarface", and they were available for literal pillaging only a few years after initial release.

Some of the usage was tatty and obvious in the extreme, no attempt being made to hide the age of the old material, or the different speed at which it was shot. Tex Ritter westerns from the late 30's used silent Indian attacks dating back to 1915! On other occasions, the usage was equally tatty, but at least ingenious. A late 30's quickie, "Wolves of the Sea", showed its by-the-book sea and jungle story in a small, cramped studio. The most obvious back projection came from Henry King's "Hell Harbour", with its elaborate waterfront dive set -- and a very recognizable Rondo Hatton as its proprietor/bouncer. The new "sets" included a simple staircase behind which the old footage was back projected. Thus Rondo Hatton was able to walk off-screen in the old 1930 footage, and (re-employed for the new film) walk on-screen eight years and three seconds later, even apparently wearing the wrong shirt. A perfectly awful second serial of the 30's "Jungle" was built entirely around one sequence of the silent serial "Jungle Goddess". Every foot of the "new" material was shot in a tiny sound stage, resulting in such hilarious scenes as the perspiring hero struggling past the same clumps of trees and bushes and complaining that he was exhausted from trekking so many days through the jungle! Lafe McKee, High Priest in the old film, was re-employed to play new matching scenes of the same role, in the new. And thanks to his uncanny talent for evoking an atmosphere, he did it. The second serial, and the final edition in the 20's "Jungle" was shot in a totally different context) with a musical score admirably highlighting and somehow "sealing" all of the splices into a cohesive whole.

One independent film "Tundra" used stock footage from all over the lot so convincingly that at the time (1936) it was assumed to be a completely authentic near-documentary. And of course, European films, totally unknown here, could be bought up and reworked into "new" American films, the old German "Gold" thus emerging as the New American "Monster". This was the crux of a movement following this manipulation of old footage is undoubtedly Paramount's "Geronimo" of 1940. The plot itself was an exact remake of "Lives of a Bengal Lancer", and every bit of spectacular western action footage -- ranging from the silent "The Thundering Herd" and "The Pony Express" to the sound "The Plainsman", "Wells Fargo" and "The Texas Rangers" -- was pulled into service. When John Ford's "Stagecoach" was thought to have outlived its usefulness in 1939, the less and the climactic, readily recognizable chase turned up in a half-a-dozen "39" westerns, causing Charles Starrett, James Ellison and other "39" heroes to suddenly wear suspenders to match long shots of John Wayne in the original! Spotting the upcoming insertion of stock is usually an easy matter, as there's usually a line or two of dialogue in which, for no apparent reason, the stars explain why they have to change clothes, or why it will be advisable to use the old stock for their next foray. All of these aspects will be illustrated in tonight's survey.

(For a case of course used extended, more justifiable, and easier-to-handle segments of earlier versions, viz "The Dawn Patrol" and "The Four Feathers")

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CRIMSON ROMANCE: Mascot Pictures were adept at adding production values by both the usage of stock footage, and by renting space at a major studio for a day or two. This one was partially shot at Universal's "Hell's Angels", helped out by back projection and the convenient re-use of Ben Lyon in one of the leads. A 1934 production.

SOS TIDAL WAVE: Mascot graduated into Republic and the trickery became more sophisticated as this 1935 film shows. Inspired by the publicity surrounding Orson Welles' "War of the Worlds" broadcast, this deals with the apparent destruction of New York City, all of the footage being lifted from the 1933 "Deluge." Since that is now a lost film, we can be grateful that Republic's economy methods have at least preserved its spectacle highlights.

LAST OUTFIT: This 1935 melodrama is now surprisingly topical in its tale of Kurd and Afghan uprisings! A reasonably important minor "A" film, it presents the spectacle of Cary Grant and Claude Rains intercut with and acting to cause of old material. Over one scene is taken from "Gregory," "Chang," "The Four Feathers" and "Rango." Even the NY Times was taken in!

RED SHOW: This 1952 mildly anti-Communist melodrama took almost all of its footage from 1932's "Igloo" - a feat helped by the fact that Eskimo actor Ray Mala had aged not one whit in the intervening 20 years, was re-hired, and new close-ups cut in with convincing impurity. (One wonders if he had an Oscar Wildean portrait hidden away somewhere!) Nominal hero had virtually nothing to do, but got star billing and in the last scene was given a decoration for his "heroic" efforts - which consisted mainly of being fed lines that lead into the old footage. (The star's name, submitted above: Guy Madison)

MUTINY ON THE BLACKHAWK: Top prize for ingenuity must surely go to an early 50's melodrama "Two Lost Worlds," which bought a package of stock footage from the Hal Roach films "Of Mice and Men," "Captain Fury," "Captain Caution" and "One Million B.C.", and contrived to have hero James Arness walk through California grain fields, an Australian sheep farm, fight in the war of 1812, and battle dinosaures! Running it a close second however is this expert Universal "B" which follows the basic plot-line of 1936's "Sutter's Gold", using its South Seas and California locales, and also ingeniously inserts a bout of Napoleonic Alpine warfare from 1933's "The Rebel". The unique photographic style of the latter doesn't entirely match, but is led up to by a quick insert of Andy Devine (new footage) asking his western conferees: why they are wearing Tyrolean feathered hats. Not too convincingly, but quite effectively, they reply that when they go into battle they wear those hats to remind them of the old country.

Intermission...

THE WHITE GORILLA (1945) Directed by Harry Fraser; produced by Louis Weiss and George Merrick; Music (?) by Lee Zahler; With an "All Star Cast" (Ray Corrigan, Lorraine Miller, George Lewis, Francis Ford, Charles King, Bud Buster; and in the silent footage, Frank Merrill, Eugenia Gilbert, Bobby Nelson and Milburn Morante).

Either the peak or nadir of this kind of film, depending on one's point of view, "The White Gorilla" is quite certainly the worst film we've ever shown, or can hope to see - but far from the least entertaining. Using reels of footage from a silent serial, a few rocks and trees in Hollywood suburbs, two gorilla skins (one of which also contains the film's hero, Ray Corrigan), some down of their luck actors and one tatty set (the credits have the nerve to refer to setg) the producers come up with a jungle epic for a net cost of a few thousand dollars! It's all quite hilarious, especially in the dialogue that explains everything away, or in the hero's geographic instructions as to how to find a hidden Lost City ("Turn left at the elephant trail - you can't miss it!"). We don't have purist motives in suggesting that you restrain your laughter; but the film was not designed for laughs and is not paced for them, and laughter at one hilariously inept line is apt to drown out the next and even funnier line. In fairness though, the film does deliver what its gaudy ads promised, and at one time there was a market and an audience for this kind of thing, and I have sat in on theatrical audiences who took it quite seriously and discussed its "realism" quite seriously afterwards. (Not admittedly, at the Sutton or the Music Hall -- but films like this were designed for a kind of exploitation house that no longer exists, something we can say more about in the intro).

Program finishes approx. 10.15, followed by discussion.

-- W.K. Everson --