

## **Decasia Now: Towards a Heuristic for Re-purposing Historic Footage.**

“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.”—Chick Strand<sup>1</sup>

### **1.0 Introduction**

In the overall cultural production of moving images, the use of historic footage is now so prevalent as to be unquestioned as to why it is used. I am including under this rubric of historic footage all formats of stock, amateur, archival, ephemeral, industrials, orphans and actualities. And though a certain amount of this material is self contained, and sometimes self-explanatory, I am also using historic footage to mean the partial and incomplete. This heightened use of historic footage is a phenomenon that for several reasons would not have and could not have taken place to such a high degree of prevalence in creative moving image work 50 or 60 years ago. The act of using, or repurposing footage is of course as old as the medium itself, re-use has a very practical and logical function in the supply sequence of basic material. How and why re-use and repurposing of historic footage, expository, or “B-roll” material in news and documentary before, say, 1950 was carried out is a different issue but one which does have related overlap consequentially for the type of work I want to consider here. My claim is that the near surfeit hyper-abundance and use of these historic footages (across all regimes: commercial, artistic, and educational) results, in many instances, in a reduction of their potency to merely filmic wallpaper or a de-natured background aesthetic which somehow is supposed to lend an air of “authenticity” or “otherness” to a production. Given our oscillating perceptual stance between the real and its representations, in and out of representation itself, I believe that more often than not, historic footage is used less and less ingeniously to depict, portray, and critique the mechanics of art, memory, and history, including our experiences of them. As they are integrated by a director, matching content with style and form effect reception of the work. This saturation of historic footage subtly, and in some cases insidiously, helps to build ideological constructs which are too easily accepted and go un-examined in spheres of general discourse. These superficial or decorative uses of historic footages usually do not

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<sup>1</sup> In *Recycled Images, The Art and Politics of Found Footage Film*. William Wees. Anthology Film Archives: New York, 1993. p 94.

attempt to identify or interrogate the contentious discourses of the time period of the source material or the dynamic of audience perceptions of themselves, and reception of the material (either in the historic moment of original viewing or in the contemporary instance of viewing the present day work which incorporates the historical material). The most flagrant use of historic footage is when it is used as a stand-in for a time-period, or for the “memorial”, and the use becomes indistinguishable as just another tree in the forest of representations. As part of a larger project of assessing uses of historic footage I would like to attempt here to create a heuristic or metric which would help to establish terms of “good” and “bad” uses of this footage in light of claims to truth in the project of historiography. To this end I will look at independent experimental work since the mid-twentieth century for examples of critical interpretive strategies using historic footage, what Sharon Sandusky refers to as the Archival Art Film<sup>2</sup>.

## **2.0 The nature and inherent two-fold value of historic footage**

It is wise to keep in mind that these footages are redolent signifiers, loaded with psychological freight as well as indexical factual power. In a semiotic arrangement these footages could actually come to have various meanings in various contexts or juxtapositions, not all of them being self explanatory of their own agency or of their time period. Some of them are dangerous fragments, either leaving too much of the larger context of their event in that past time unexplained, or being extremely precise in the evidence they show. Many are simple documents of the mundane, showing exactly how events happened, perhaps just as they continue to do so today. Historic footage has a paradoxical status of embodying the strange as well as the familiar, the banal as well as the fascinating, the informative, empirical, and descriptive as well as the already known, and the same. We can say that historic footage is imbued with 2 forces which exist on 2 different levels or registers. One is the evidentiary and descriptive: historical footage as document. The other level involves psychological cathexis and is much more subtle in that it operates on the viewer in both an intellectual and affective manner. The viewer understands, even if unconsciously subliminally, or tacitly the gulf between what is being

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<sup>2</sup> Sandusky, Sharon *The Archeology of Redemption: Toward Archival Film*. Millennium Film Journal, 26, 1993. 5-25.

seen, what went before, what is no longer, and the time of viewing, the present. This function is entirely compressed and collapsed and usually very little thought is given to it during the viewing process. As a result, this discrepancy of times produces an affective or emotive by-product in the viewer, an identification or longing, or projection, in short, the composite mechanism of nostalgia. This paradoxical status of historic footage—that it holds a power or charge, both visually and psychologically, and that it is a fragment, powerless to complete itself and needing other films, creators and discourses to integrate it—makes it a volatile, attractive free radical which various sectors of the moving image industry attempt to control, manipulate or manage to their advantages. Following from this as these footages are a cathectic capital or fund of potential energy, a loaded signifier, the question becomes how will it be processed: to the ends of the market, and a commercialized, oversimplified cartoon of itself, or as a descriptive creative force for interpretation and analysis of history, however complicated that might be.

Because of the prevalent use of historic footage and the growth of the content industry an analysis of its uses and abuses could take many forms, with various angles of inspection. The genres of the documentary are the most obvious places to find this historic footage, as are the various forms of news digests, magazines and broadcasts. As there are many end points for the use of this footage (both popular television and cinema) there are just as many genres of these types of footages to be included. A comprehensive graphing, across all genres, of type of footage to its end-use and context would be very revealing about how we understand the evidential and its shifting qualities, as well as how we construct meaning, and how our memories are created based on this evidence.

### **3.0 Contentious uses, commercialization of memory**

The market of repurposing in the content industry is just as pertinent to our discussion, especially as there are trends now underway to free up the historic fund of visual imagery from licensing, at odds with other projects for amalgamating content as commodity.<sup>3</sup> Though this problem deserves more attention and study than can be

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of these various trends include Rick Prelinger's initiative to freely distribute via the web, hundreds of hours of ephemeral, industrial, promotional and educational films at archives.org. He has professed that he hopes this material will trickle back into the production of renegade culture jammers, repurposing the ideologically constrained work most of which was produced in America between 1940 and

devoted here, if we can equate the historic footage with its embedded intellectual and psychological capital as the fragment of history itself, the question soon becomes who owns history and how does that ownership effect public and private memories? Ancillary to this question also lurk the problems of authenticity in a globalized society bent on cannibalizing and repurposing its culture. There are two broad camps in this. One sees a tremendous new market in repurposing, or rather a tremendous new market *fabricated for the use* of repurposed, as opposed to original, material. This is mainly of the commercial and corporate order. (As a psychological malady writ large in the business models and behavior of cultural producers—that it is cheaper to horde and resell the leftover, surplus visual entities of an era, than to create new ones—this phenomenon deserves more attention). The other camp of repurposers gladly espouses modernist strategies of detournment and collage in the critical reassembling or deconstruction of the detritus from the cultural, political and social landscapes. From certain didactic directors (c.f. Godard, Farocki, Makavejev) they've learned that the material act of

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1960. Similar attempts at refiguring use and circulation as it pertains to intellectual property rights of images are being conceived at [creativecommons.org](http://creativecommons.org) which aims to set a new paradigm for permission on re-use of born-digital material. Largely a grassroots movement in a populist manner Home Move Day ([homemovieday.com](http://homemovieday.com)) has gained momentum from what started as a small event to a nation wide ritual. As the site claims: "Home movies are the essential record of our past, and they are among the most authoritative documents of times gone by." The efforts of Dan Strieble and the Fox Movietone Newsreel collection at the University of South Carolina have resulted in the bi-annual Orphans Symposium, which aims to broaden knowledge and preservation consciousness regarding lost films out of the mainstream needing stewardship. The tenor and spirit of the symposium is academic but inclusive, and continues to be a nexus for scholars and technicians exchanging ideas about the future use and purpose of preservation. Most importantly is the unique historic consideration given to the work as well as an attention to detail in factually deciphering and placing them into their historic contexts. In 2001, Vidipax, the New York magnetic and digital restoration lab, accepted a contract from Coke to preserve every Coke television commercial ever made. By digitizing this material Coke makes it available for external licensing, and "so that their internal marketing departments can access that footage for current production of their commercials" (See "Media Restoration: Preserving the Past for our Future, Micheal Gruenberg in Interview with Kevin O'Neill", *Bulletin of the Special Libraries Association*, Summer 2004, [http://www.sla.org/chapter/cny/ChapterNews/76\\_2.pdf](http://www.sla.org/chapter/cny/ChapterNews/76_2.pdf)) A similar mania is at work in the burgeoning of companies which edit and convert families' home movie footage into DVDs. 'They convert analog tapes to digital data, weed out the boring bits and stitch the remainder together, often to a music soundtrack. Most companies will include a selection of customers' slides and photos, Ken Burns-style, if asked. The finished product is usually presented to the customer on a DVD, complete with menus, chapters and instant scene access....The importance people attach to home movies is increasing, others agree. Marco Greenberg, founder of Reel Biography ([reelbiography.com](http://reelbiography.com)), a Manhattan-based firm that produces broadcast-quality personal biographies, finds that more of his clients want to incorporate old family video. He speculates that recent documentaries like "Capturing the Friedmans" and "My Architect" -- both heavy on decades-old scenes recorded with imperfect consumer cameras -- may have opened people's eyes to the possibilities. "Old home movies are proving to be an authentic, well-received touch" in his company's work, Mr. Greenberg said....Although Ms. Alexander's company, too, produces original video biographies, the bulk of her business comes from clients who want her staff to edit existing video. The advent of easy-to-use home editing programs like Apple's iMovie and Pinnacle's Studio has not seemed to affect her revenues, which have doubled over the last two years, she said. "Boomers are in the habit of hiring someone to do their chores," Ms. Alexander said. "They don't mow their own lawns, they don't change their own oil and they don't clean their own homes. Why would they edit their own video?" 'New York Times, September 30, 2004. "For Neglected Video, A Hollywood Touch", Rogier Van Bakel

editing a film is an inherently political act. This second camp of repurposers is mainly of the counter-corporate, “underground”, and oppositional order. I would classify the first order as a *fixation* and the second as a *praxis*. Although this is a general distinction, this is not to say that instances of one in the other could not be found. I would like to set the specific circumference of examination to this latter order, and where need be establish external comparisons to test or prove a point of examination. I will begin by sketching a theoretical background, then examining formal arrangements of moving image material as those arrangements determine meaning, and ending with a brief genealogy of historic footage in experimental and oppositional moving image works.

#### **4.0 Possible theoretical provisions**

“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.”—Leslie Thornton<sup>4</sup>

In further examining the semantic role of historic footage in documentary moving image work which exhibit greater or lesser degrees of fidelity to their original source material, I call into account hermeneutical theories of narration, history and memory to further the argument that historic footage can be used as narrative building blocks of inherent yet variable significance which in turn could be assembled in different designs to yield different meanings.

#### **4.1 Ricoeur, Jauss**

Raul Ricoeur has produced much work exploring the territories of history and time and the individual’s placement within. Incumbent upon the historian is a responsibility or duty to see the past faithfully by attempting to place oneself out of one’s self, by projecting and expanding our consciousness towards that of another in another time. This is achieved by understanding through narratives the differences, similarities and constants in people that continue, repeat, evolve and create identity over time. It is recognition of this process, almost as an ethics, that helps the historian to interpret events. Ricoeur also interrogates the notions of objectivity and subjectivity and claims that they are both

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<sup>4</sup> Wees, *Recycled Images*, p. 96

present as the historian interprets. Further there is possible a “good” subjectivity and a “bad” subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> At the risk of paraphrasing the complexities, it could be said that “good” subjectivity allows for an interested and concerned channeling of the past as opposed to “bad” subjectivity which is complete consumption to the point of obliterating the essences of the past. Crudely put, it is a matter of how much the historian-interpreter shows herself in the narration. It is a subtle operation:

History is therefore animated by a will for encounter as much as by a will for explanation. The historian goes to the men of the past with his own human experience. The historian’s subjectivity takes on a striking prominence at the moment when, over and above all critical chronology, history makes the values of past men surge forth. This calling up of values, which is ultimately the only way of evoking man that is open to us since we are unable to relive what they lived, is not possible unless the historian is vitally “interested” in those values and has a deep affinity for the task. Not that the historian should share the faith of his heroes; in that case he would seldom write history but rather apologetics or hagiography. He must, however, be capable of granting their faith hypothetically, which is a way of entering into the problematic of that faith while at the same time “suspending” or “neutralizing” it and not looking upon it as an actually professed faith.<sup>6</sup>

Objectivity and subjectivity operate in a dialectic which results in an intersubjectivity for interpretation. Ricoeur charts the similarities in analyzing history and fiction by way of his idea of the narrative. Ricoeur posits an active, performative emplotment of historical events which sees relations between these events linked to narrative progression rather than absolute, teleological, and strictly causal motivators. Narrative history is a composition and configuring of the events and the residual facts of those events. Not only is this method performative, but it is creative and responsive to the events and their consequences. These documents, letters and artifacts, also help to shape our understanding not only of the subject but of the historic process. Here again is Ricoeur’s idea of the ethic coming into play: it is our debt to the dead to interpret their traces. This motivation compounds the current act of interpretation with the competing motivations for interpretation of the generations before us.

Hans Robert Jauss supports Ricoeur’s idea of historical analysis while particularly noting the fine point of responsibility that lies within narrativizing historical events as a compositional method of interpretation:

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<sup>5</sup> See *Memory, History and Forgetting*, p. 334 and *History and Truth* pp 22-30.

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur: *History and truth*, p. 29

A historian who uses fictive means without further thought is the one most likely to run the risk of turning history into an aesthetic object—into a *theatrum mundi* or a self-representing “play of the past”.<sup>7</sup>

This “risk of turning history into an aesthetic object” is something we will remember as a determinant of how well a moving image work mobilizes the historic footage it incorporates or manipulates. Jauss’ advocacy of a certain amount of historiographic relativism goes further towards opening up the span of interpretation of the texts, units, or traces of history which we are examining here as historic footage. He notes that:

Historiography (and, for that matter, the history of any art) must include openness of meaning in its overall notion of the event: a historical nexus first becomes relevant in the experience of the retrospective observer; that is, it acquires meaning that the participants or those affected cannot recognize while in the midst of diffuse and not yet completed happenings...a historical fact, understood as an event, is not a simple subjective schema of appropriation.<sup>8</sup>

Again, here we note the call for particular attention to the interpretation of fact or event. Jauss’ cautioning against “simple subjective...appropriation” bears on our argument of “good” and “bad” use of footage as appropriation was and still is a tool of critique for oppositional moving image artists. Grading their use of appropriation by checking the degrees of referential matching is part of the heuristic I am trying to develop.

A certain amount of relativism can prove to be advantageous when faced with the multiplicities of data to be interpreted: “The various means of inscribing historical experience in different narrative forms, each of which can legitimate a specific aspect of an occurrence, can be thought of as different and fundamental ways of mastering contingency...”<sup>9</sup>

Once agreed on the possibility for alternation in the narrativial dynamic it is important to look at how narratives, as versions of history, evolve over time, and how awareness of their evolution effects the way newer narratives are constructed by cultural and social producers. A central dynamic accepted by several reader-reception theorists (Ricoeur, Jauss, and Reinhart Koselleck) is the *horizon of expectations*. Although it took us some devotion in defining and situating boundaries of historical interpretation above, even

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<sup>7</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Question and Answer*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1989. p. 32

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 41

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 43

more effort could be given to describing this mechanism which operates continuously, linearly, through the center of time onward. Our horizons of expectations expand and evolve, built upon those of prior generations, but these horizons can never eclipse themselves, which would result in some sort of full or total knowledge. It is important to understand that these horizons can operate as mechanisms of delivery, thus so, codes, attitudes, behaviors and conditions for any one particular level of the cultural or social (from the past) could conceivably be read (in the present) in a progression of accumulating knowledge towards betterment, but in the paradox of knowing that this subject will never achieve complete knowledge. We will concern ourselves in this discussion with the aesthetic implications and for now steer away from the denser philosophical ramifications of limits to knowledge and action when carrying over the old and expecting in the new<sup>10</sup>. Succinctly, we will use the horizon of expectations as part of the heuristic when we look at the three generations of moving image artists using found footage below.

## 4.2 Implications of Horizons

These horizons of awareness and expectations are present in artist's productivity as her work is at some level responding to her understanding of the artistic production that has come before her. In this way we as viewers and producers are linked back to history and creative interpretations of historic events. However as the quantity of technological means for representing increases so does the quantity (not necessarily the quality) of the resultant productions. The historic fund from which to draw for production is increased and attention to decisions of choice (what material or reference, and why and how to use them) becomes more crucial. As we are in an era of image inundation, slippage between the real and its ubiquitous glut of representations is more easily achieved yet harder to distinguish. This is why a judicious use of repurposed historic footage, in order to best mobilize its factual indexical power, is imperative. Maintaining a fidelity between the event (and imbricated in this is the additional fact of its recording) and its end use in the new creative work raises issues of narrative strategies, for

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<sup>10</sup> c.f. Ricoeur's three volume *Time and Narrative* (*Temps et Recits*, 1983-1985) and *Memory, History and Forgetting* (*Mémoire, l'Histoire, et l'Oubli*), 2004, as well as Reinhart Koselleck's *The practice of conceptual history : timing history, spacing concept*. Translated by Todd Samuel Presner, and others ; foreword by Hayden White. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, and *Futures past : on the semantics of historical time*. Translated and with an introduction by Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.



narration itself is a form of interpretation of history. Just as there are various narrative motivators and options for development, there are just as many resultant meanings derived from those options. When the building blocks of the story are actually parts of history, how does/should that effect their narrative arrangement (and thereby the arrangement's overall meaning)? Conversely, how does the narrative arrangement of historic footage effect their original, and inherent meaning as representative units? By juxtaposition and other editing and formal sequencing techniques do they maintain, strengthen, or lessen their potency (which is again a dual potency of factual indexical power and psychological cathexis)?

### 4.3 Freud

On top of these theories which seek to explain dynamics of interpreting the historical, we can lay accounts for psychological motivation. By looking at one study of Freud (and though I won't go into it here, mention should be made of one other "Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through", 1914; as well as Peter Brooks' narratological response to Freud's overall work) we can further define factors at play in the interpretive process, distinctly so by way of historic footage as it is imbued with a psychological cathexis.

Despite its title "Screen Memories" Freud's 1899 article<sup>11</sup> does not refer to the cinematic or discuss the projection of light. It is a hypothesis on recollection and ordering of memories, specifically memories of events farthest from us, those of childhood. Freud posits two forces at work in memory, one reacts and registers the initial memory, though in extreme cases of trauma, a second force creates or attaches another memory of a more neutral moment, or a resistance, to the first traumatic one. This double action in effect masks, or deflects the mind's retrospective recollection from the original memory. The second memory stands in or acts as a screen to block reception and interpretation of the first.

The result of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the memory which would have been justified by the original event, another memory is produced which has been to some degree associatively *displaced* from the former one. And since the elements of the experience

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<sup>11</sup> Freud, "Screen Memories", *Collected Papers*, Volume 4, London: Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1950 p 47-69.

which aroused objections were precisely the important ones, the substituted memory will necessarily lack those important elements and will in consequence most probably strike us as trivial. It will seem incomprehensible to us because we are inclined to look for the reason for its retention is due to the relation in its own subject-matter, whereas in fact the retention is due to the relation holding between its own subject matter and a different one which has been suppressed.<sup>12</sup>

The article is instructive, if we allow the extrapolation of the personal to the communal-social realm, in how memories, and thereby historical events can be mis-remembered or altered somehow in their sequencing and representation. Though Freud is concerned in his context of comparing the differences in how children and adults construct, and then use and recall memories (under what conditions) I would suggest that this mechanism, whether a symptom of the adult's or child's experience, is akin to the selective process of memory on the social scale. As well, oppositional moving image artists use associative and deconstructive strategies to pull apart these disagreeable impressions that are lodged in or have been created by the social's consciousness of itself. Again by extrapolation from the childhood memories to a set of memories of events in a collective near past—say of a nation, its wars and social periods of growth—this article bears significance for defining our historiographical process in that it purports alternating times of alternating and evolving interpretations:

Our childhood memories show us our earliest memories not as they were but as they appeared at the later periods when the memories were revived. In these periods of revival, the childhood memories, did not, as people are accustomed to say, *emerge*; they were *formed* at that time. And a number of motives, which had no concern with historical accuracy, had their part in thus forming them as well as in the selection of the memories themselves.<sup>13</sup>

As we should take caution against the slippages of interpretation it would seem we should also be wary of absolute and singular interpretations which over-ride and cast aside the documents, artifacts and anomalies which do not fit these totalizing histories.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 52

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 69

## 5.0 Alignment: varying degrees of referentiality

This quest for a heuristic by which to appraise uses of historic footage could also be performed as a discussion of form and content. There are instances when the creative intention merits the use of the historic footage and the necessary interface calls into question the various possible formal arrangements. These rhetorical and associative tropes and form/content strategies can be described by operating across a basic referential alignment of the filmic units of image and sound and editing. The resulting truth status of the represented is bound up in the variable arrangement of these units. Which is to say that truth is variable: it can be contested, accepted, under various states of duress or relief, or it can simply not be present at all, not an issue, evacuated. These differing interrogations, dismissals, or absences of truth are the result of differing registers of play and referentiality between the filmic units. Just as filmic texts can be closely read (with more or less attention to the correspondence of details) they can be more or less closely constructed.

To illustrate this I cite two examples.

Marie Delofski, a filmmaker who created a documentary *The Trouble with Merle* (Australia, 2002), to chart the conflicting accounts of ancestry and nationality of the 1930s and 40s Hollywood star Merle Oberon gives this example of an inequivalent referential alignment:

Similarly with images of a “generic” ocean liner leaving the harbor at Hobart. These images are used three times from three different angles in relation to the three different stories of Merle’s departure. It is the same ship we see each time. It is not the *actual* ship of course because we do not know whether in fact Merle actually traveled by ship from Tasmania to India. It is the image of a ship which I hoped would connote the “idea” of *her* ship.<sup>14</sup>

And Dormand Bell, in describing the internal dynamics of a Peter Forgacs film remarks:

In *Wittgenstein* Forgács reworks this material slowing sequences down, reframing shots, using digital wipes in order to evoke the Austrian philosopher’s reflections on language, vision, suffering and death as contained in his magnum opus the *Tractatus*. There is absolutely no referential relationship between the written words of Wittgenstein we hear

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<sup>14</sup> Marie Delofski, “Archival Footage and Storytelling in *The Trouble with Merle*”  
[http://www.oldfilm.org/nhfWeb/ed/04Symp/delofski\\_Merle\\_Essay.htm](http://www.oldfilm.org/nhfWeb/ed/04Symp/delofski_Merle_Essay.htm)

intoned by an actor in the voice-over and the archival images we see of a bourgeois family at play often in a rural setting.<sup>15</sup>

This is not to be seen as Bell's criticism of Forgacs' work. Bell, himself a filmmaker, is like Delofski, pointing out the finer registers and alignments of referentiality and connotation, and their concordant results in making meaning, that occur and go unnoticed uncountable times in traditional expository documentaries. It is, as we will see, the intent of these experimental moving image artists to peel open the traditionally accepted referentiality in expository documentaries to show that, actually, they do not adhere as closely in their expository referentiality as they claim to.

This form vs. content tension can also be described by looking at very "pure" examples from one end of the spectrum. Ken Jacobs' *Perfect Film* (1986), Jackie Goss' *Perfect Video* (1989), and Hollis Frampton's *Works and Days* (1969) exemplify the zero degree of manipulation of historic footages. All are comprised entirely of found material. Jacobs' and Goss' are uniquely eerie in their similarity in that they both are footage about assassinations of American political figures, Jacobs' on Malcolm X, and Goss' on Reagan. Though Jacobs purportedly found his film in a dumpster, and the original whereabouts of Goss' material is not known they were not at all manipulated or edited in sequence or content. How do we read or interpret this type of film (as a text of its own, as a single signifier), and what does this type of presentation do to the material? There are no other intrafilmic contexts to compare it to, and so the extrafilmic contexts (the artists' other works and inherent tendencies, other documentations of assassinations and hence a public social layer of textuality) are brought into consideration. So that even here at the zero degree of manipulation we see that the single text or signifier of historic film always already has several contexts from which to be read.

## **6.0 Three or Four Waves we know about it: a cursory lineage**

A brief genealogy of film and video makers, or moving image artists, using recycled historical footage in an oppositional, interrogative and experimental spirit could be divided roughly into three generations, or waves, with a proto, or formative wave to be

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<sup>15</sup> Dormand Bell, "Shooting the Past? Found Footage Filmmaking and Popular Memory." *Kinema*, Spring 2004, <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/bell041.htm>

considered from early cinema to the 1930s. Though not necessarily oppositional, that prototypical first wave could include any number of works from trick films, which include the film within a film genre, to works which foreground the ostensibility of the medium such as *The Story the Biograph Told* (Biograph, 1904) wherein the filmic proves itself as documentary evidence via its ability to make private behavior public. The 1930s is the pivot point because of two films which began to break apart the alignments of filmic/semantic referentiality. In 1932 there was Bunuel's *Land Without Bread*, and in 1939 Joseph Cornell's *Rose Hobart*. An early mockumentary, Bunuel's *Land without Bread* uses real footage of a real town but by skewing the narration, Bunuel ridicules the observation, tone and delivery of traditional documentaries that propose to relate truth. In *Rose Hobart*, Cornell cuts scenes from a 1931 film *East of Borneo* to concentrate on the eponymous starlet. It is an early homage that rearranges *East of Borneo* footage and through repetition and cutting reanimates the star to Cornell's personal whims. At this time period Cornell's re-representing is lyrical and occasionally surreally menacing in Hobart's gestures, yet there is no embedded critique on gender identity or relations. The fascination with both reanimation and the celebrity (and reanimation of the celebrity) will continuously reappear. This method of homage, also exhibits repetitive fixative rhythms and is copied and expanded on in later generations. Oppositional historic footage experimental work begins in earnest with Bruce Conner in the 1960s and the first wave can be said to stretch from the 60s to the 70s. Connor's montage juxtaposition of found footage opens up Kuleshovian editing, allowing a wider range of social critique and subjective discovery. There is under all a ludic innocence and a fascination with the recently cast off being reanimated. Other works of this first wave share common structuralist proclivities focusing on process, or the material properties of the film itself, and the juxtaposition of the form and content is not as complex as it will get in the next generation. That is not to say that this work is not original or that a simple juxtaposition or adjustment of the filmic properties cannot result in a complex effect both aesthetically and intellectually. The first wave set the stage for the possibilities of re-choreographing historic events, and the assessment takes place in the next generation. I count the second wave as spanning the 80s and into the early 90s. Concurrent with the culture wars of the Reagan-Thatcher 80s, much of the historic footage moving image work begins on a political note, with the instant intent of responding to increasingly mediated and conservative political agendas. As MTV and the rise of cable broadcasting began showing more decontextualized historic footage appealing to some generic yet

supposedly collective memory, moving image artists began questioning these constructs (Craig Baldwin). Some fought fire with fire and mimicked this new rapidity and inundation with a deluge all their own (Abigail Child). A new sense of appropriation and a heedlessness to decorum and previous ideas of the proprietary was also fashionable again. Historic footage proved fruitful for cutting up and subverting visual codes. Just as much a reaction to the media inundation was the personal and contemplative works (Alan Berliner), which began to tease the personal experiences from the generic collective. Also in the 80s irony seriously begins its trajectory, much in a response to extremists or fundamentals of right-wing ilk, but not only. Irony, which is still petering out today in some works, really seemed to die in the flush of late 90s work enamored of any historic footage that was made easily accessible and editable via new non-linear software and hardware like Avid, Premiere, and Final Cut Pro. Distinctive qualities of the third generation center around a refinement of arguments, because of technology more sophistication in manipulation, and, again because of technology, a zenith in the purely aesthetic. Working on video Martin Arnold manipulates frame rates to render Hollywood actors and actresses victims of spasms and seizures as ordinary events are slowed until subtextual desires or consternations emerge, as if we are witnessing some primal scene before the "screen memory" was constructed. The twitching actors are both repulsive and attractive to watch and the visual of these individuals trapped in their own inability to freely move in time is a strange corollary to our attempts at making and understanding historic acts. Presently we are at a point of self reflexivity seeming to hearken back to Jacobs' *Perfect Film* (but this time in a very imperfect state) with filmmakers like Bill Morrison (*Decasia* 2003) and Peter Delpuet (*Lyrical Nitrate* 1991) presenting decaying film as it is: with strikingly visible nitrate emulsion decomposition. Is there a morbid titillation in viewing this material, do we register the films' violent self destruction only retinally, does the simple untreated presentation of the decaying film result in a fetishizing of the dying cinema? Underneath all viewing of historic film is the awareness of death and that those we are watching quite possibly are no longer alive. This must be factored into the dual potency of historic footage as we have identified in order for us to determine when the memorial is merited and when it is merely aesthetically redundant.

## 7.0 Conclusion

As this review began to chart definitions towards a heuristic or metric for appraising fidelity of use with historic footage it could not be exhaustive in all of its examples. Another examination of equal length could be assembled to more particularly compare and contrast use of historic footages in the three generations outlined above. As predictive actions are confounded by limitations of the present that we have understood to also confound hindsight, we cannot comment too far into the future on how use of historic footage might change or adapt to new technologies. Here we are again at another horizon ("As with experience in relation to the present, expectation relative to the future is inscribed in the present..."). It is quite possible though that mnemonic activities will merge further into the recording mechanisms so that coding and metadata which freeze info into the process of recording will effect how the footage is created, harvested, stored, and distributed. The two poles of Vidipax preserving Coke and the home movie editing services providing capsulated versions of familial memory may or may not help to permeate a critical consciousness of the past. What this means for archiving and cataloging the rising tide of images, as well as the uses of historic footage in scholarship and oppositional moving image arts remains to be seen.

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