



FOUND FOOTAGE: SOME THOUGHTS

Malcolm Le Grice

Abstract: So, again in retrospect, what did I (intuitively) want or demand from the found film material ? Firstly I sought a quality of mystery about an image - what I now talk about as a 'latency' - finding some aspect of the sequence that was not seen or intentionally put there by the original cinematographer and that, when re-combined in a different context, opened up new and surprising meanings.

Though I now have a problem with the implications of delineating a category 'Found Footage', my work has certainly made use of film sequences that were found (or maybe they were borrowed or stolen).

At the time of my earliest work with film 1965/6 I was teaching at St Martins School of Art. This was then located in London's Soho district, which was also the centre of the British Film Industry. To get to the School involved a walk from Piccadilly Circus through Old Compton Street and Soho where there were often boxes of discarded 16mm film – residues of out-takes and faulty prints from the numerous production companies in the area. Though I had already made a few 8mm films, the first ambitious work in 16mm, **Castle 1**, was largely made from sequences I had found in Soho and then selected and re-edited, repeated and looped, then had printed. During these foraging walks I collected a huge quantity of material - often minor documentaries or news-reels that I used as an 'image bank'. My selection from the dozens of reels was very demanding, only choosing a small number of sequences with images that for me had some visual 'charge' or mystery.

At the time I had very little access to a 16mm camera and this bank of material formed a major basis of a lot of my earlier works – particularly, **Castle 1**, **Castle Two**, **Yes No Maybe Maybenot**, **Reign of the Vampire**, **Threshold** and, the Edison, burning barn sequence used in **Berlin Horse**, which also came from a Soho garbage can. Even the source material for **Little Dog for Roger** was in a sense 'found' – it was made from fragments of a 9.5mm home movie shot by my father around 1950.

Any theoretical position I expressed at the time did not address the idea of 'Found Footage' and I do not recall the term being used at that time, though by the late 1960's there were many examples of works making use of material not shot by the film-maker. Instead theoretically I concerned myself with issues of media, materiality, projection and the condition of the spectator. So any thoughts here are very much in retrospect of this early practical exploration and stimulated by this new request to comment on the topic.

Why did I use pre shot film material ? One reason was economic. Making film at that time was very expensive and the discards of the industry represented a huge

free source and implicit financial investment – this aspect was opportunistic. However, artistically, it fitted well with many of the aesthetic concepts that fed and influenced my early work as a painter particularly montage of found images and other material – as seen for example in the work of Robert Rauschenberg . It also related directly to the notions of the cut-up from William Burrows and even earlier to the Merzbild of Kurt Schwitters. Of course as a visual artist, this background of collage and montage was already almost a norm rather than an exception. So in my early exploration of film it was not really a new way of thinking, perhaps merely an application of existing ‘modernist’ (maybe post-modernist’) ideas to Cinema. Remember that as a young artist working in London in the 1960’s I had almost zero knowledge of either the early European Experimental Cinema or the American underground film of the time. Indeed – I only encountered Bruce Connor’s **A Movie** when David Curtis showed it to me at the Drury Lane Arts Lab after he had seen my **Castle 1** and he wanted to point out a similarity and educate me about work he had seen in the USA.

So, again in retrospect, what did I (intuitively) want or demand from the found film material ? Firstly I sought a quality of mystery about an image - what I now talk about as a ‘latency’ – finding some aspect of the sequence that was not seen or intentionally put there by the original cinematographer and that, when re-combined in a different context, opened up new and surprising meanings. For my part I largely rejected the obvious quasi-satirical meanings that seemed to be common in other found footage works I started to see at the time, including in the none-the-less excellent **A Movie**. Instead I wanted to create a postponement of interpretation and retain the mystery or uncertainty of interpretation – a concept that actually fitted with my more overtly expressed theoretical views on the role of the spectator. In this context, I now see the issue of repetition and partial repetition thorough looping as an important ‘device’ in retaining a form of uncertain, shifting or multiple interpretation. This satisfied my fundamental demand for a **transformation** of meaning in the use of the found material.

Another, and different form of transformation, came with the physical transformation of the image quality itself through multiple systems of re-colouring

and overlays in film printing. After **Castle 1**, all my work was developed and printed by myself; firstly on home-made equipment and then, from 1970, using the ex-laboratory professional equipment that I had helped to set up at the London Filmmakers Cooperative. Printing and developing allowed me to use found sequences as a form of raw material where, for example in a film like **Berlin Horse**, I could explore a structure for a film that ‘traced’ its own visual transformation as part of its content and meaning.

Following this early period I largely moved away from using found film material and particularly so when I started to generate my images with video or the computer in the 1980’s. However there are three video based works – **Chronos Fragmented**, **Neither Here Nor There**, and **FINITI** –that incorporate some material not shot by me. Each of these works draw on some film or televisual images of war or conflict providing a context for the more secure condition of ‘personal’, ‘first person’ experience that forms the basis of other aspects of these works. They raise for me new theoretical issues for the found footage topic, many of which will need some time to resolve beyond the scope of this short reflection.

Briefly, the new factors relate to a shift away from film to digitally generated media. We can no longer think of the sequences as ‘footage’, a physical material concept – they are now minaturised files, easily copied and reproduced – this is not a trivial change as it shifts many aspects of availability, transformation and use. Television and the Internet intrinsically places all its material into an easily copyable public domain. Strictly almost all the found footage I and others used in our earlier films was ‘owned’ by the original makers and subject to their copyright if they ever chose to enforce it. And this still applies to any material copied from TV or the Internet. However, many of the new conditions of image use raise ethical as well as economic issues. Does the public culture of TV and the internet ethically belong to all of us even if there is a conflict with copyright law ? Artistically this is an important factor – as artists do we have the ethical right to comment directly through use, transformation and re-contextualising this material ?

In my own experience this conflict arose when making **Chronos Fragmented**, transmitted on UK national TV through Channel Four (1997), and

requiring copyright clearance on all the materials before transmission. A short sequence copied from a documentary on the Yugoslav conflict was freely donated without a copyright fee. The only sequence for which I had to pay for copyright was of Hitler and a small sequence from a German war time documentary. This was for me beyond irony. As a child in 1941 in Plymouth I spent night after night in a bomb shelter whilst Hitler's Luftwaffe flattened the town. Why should I now be paying for the image of this tyrant?

A new theoretical look at the question of found, borrowed or stolen 'footage' of course needs to discuss technical ease of availability. But, in the context of *aesthetics*, it particularly needs to discuss the *ethics* of use of material *taken* from the public culture and its potential conflict with matters of ownership and copyright.

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Born 15 May 1940, he has exhibited internationally including Fondation Joan Miro, Barcelona; the Louvre Paris; and Tate Modern and Tate Britain. His work is in collections including the Centre Georges Pompidou; the British Film Institute; and the Royal Belgian Film Archive. He has published extensively including 'Abstract Film and Beyond' and 'Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age'.