

HOW “FOUND FOOTAGE” FILMS MADE ME THINK TWICE ABOUT FILM HISTORY¹

Eric Thouvenel, Université de Rennes 2/Haute Bretagne

Since it became an important topic in film studies around fifteen years ago, we have known quite well what “found footage” film is: material shot by others and appropriated by a filmmaker with an aesthetic, poetic or political interpretation in mind. Found footage films may be used in different ways and for several purposes, a subject over which I won’t linger because it has already been discussed many times, and brilliantly, in several articles, books and exhibition catalogues over the last few years². But something struck me recently: in several European countries there is now a real interest in found footage by people usually concerned with “general” film history, where such an investment was previously more or less “reserved” for avant-garde or experimental film specialists. For instance, Bill Morrison’s films have been screened for almost ten years at the Pordenone Silent Film Festival (*The Film of Her* in 1997; *Decasia* in 2003), one of the major places where film historians, archivists and curators meet every year in a spirit of great seriousness and philological exactitude. In Bologna’s 2004 Cinema Ritrovato Festival, one could see Morrison’s *The Mesmerist* (2002) and *Light is Calling* (2002)³ within the context of a program titled “square cinema” which had been prepared by a group of young people passionate about both filmic experimentation *and* film history and interested in the relationship between film and other visual media.

This increasing crossover between cinematographic “territories”, practices or topics, raises at least two kinds of questions which are, of course, connected: why do found footage filmmakers (or found footage “artists”, if we consider the fact that these films are not concerned only with cinematographic questions) take an interest in a particular film, director, actor or actress, a particular period or moment in the history of filmic representation? And on the other hand, why have found footage films left the arena of the strictly “avant-garde” in the last few years to grab the attention of film historians, who, until that point, had been more committed to setting these films, actors, and periods in the specific context of their “primary” creation? Maybe this is one of the major virtues of found footage: making an encounter possible. Found footage creates an unexpected meeting between some “old” images and a double project: the filmmaker’s project which tries to explore, or elucidate the images, and the historian’s (or the spectator’s) project, which reads these images again, from a new and original perspective.

I don’t mean to answer these questions in the context of this paper (which would be almost impossible, by the way). However, I would like to take them as seriously as possible by making a few remarks in order to better understand how found footage films can help us amend what we think about the historicity of cinema. To that end, I will touch briefly on five points that seem to define the methodological questions raised by found footage films and their critical reception from a historical point of view: 1) the link between film history and the history of the 20th centu-

ry, 2) the ambiguous status of the film author in found footage works, 3) the choice of a historical period by found footage artists and its transformation into a problematic we may call “the life of images”, 4) the didactic dimension of found footage, and 5) the link between found footage and film theory. I will also deal with particular filmmakers, not by selecting an arbitrary sample, but by focusing on filmmakers with a complex relationship to film history *even though* it is not the main, or even one of the most visible aspects of their work (like it is for Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, to give a famous example). Therefore, in what follows I discuss the work of Martin Arnold, Matthias Müller, Bill Morrison, Ken Jacobs, Peter Tscherkassky and Gustav Deutsch.

Found Footage and the History of the 20th Century

This subject is, obviously, *extremely* wide and complex. Nevertheless, we can begin our examination with a statement by French historian Arlette Farge, who claimed that cinema was «the mother tongue of the 20th century»⁴. Maybe, then, film has been much more than a simple “witness” or “trace” of the events of our time, but is instead a privileged medium through which to express those events. With the tools of editing, film provides an insistent and neurotic mode of vision and an unquestionable passion for interpretation. According to this point of view, found footage filmmakers are those who both reject the path of fictional storytelling and refuse to claim that the “duty of memory” must be subordinate to the testimonial function of cinema; rather, they represent a kind of “third way” to approach the difficulty of dealing with the history of the 20th century cinematically.

Found footage films are far more than the “documentation” of an era; there is always a critical statement behind the images. Because these films are a special form of archeology (to use a current and fashionable term), their significance is not located at the level of the represented event, but with the events occurring *within the representation itself*. Thus cinema becomes a place in which found footage filmmakers can produce a new impression of history “as it never happened”. If, according to the famous formula: «Making a precise description of what never happened is the inner work of the historian», then such is the work, and perhaps the definition, of the found footage filmmaker’s activity. The kind of work that forces the spectator to put what he sees in perspective with the way it is shown and to consider images of the past in terms of the way they resonate with the visual culture of the present, can be found in Gustav Deutsch’s installation version of *Film ist* (2002).

Getting Rid of the Author

It is a curious thing that some found footage films obviously use images by famous directors, but that this kind of relationship to a “major” or “noble” film history seems to represent less than half of found footage film production. One might logically expect much more attention to be paid to well-known cinematic works. There is, of course, an economic explanation for this absence – one must pay royalties to use these images –, however, I am quite sure that there is something more at stake in this neglect of film history’s *auteurs*. Indeed, why is “original” found footage often either marked anonymously (for example, in Bill Morrison’s or Gustav Deutsch’s films) or taken from a “minor” director’s work (Ken Jacobs with Billy Bitzer, Martin Arnold with Robert Mulligan or Joseph Newman, Peter Tscherkassky with Sidney J. Furie, to name a few)?

One explanation could be that, since found footage is always an attempt to rewrite film history, this "palimpsest" would naturally tend to make visible the forgotten: forgotten directors, forgotten films and, above all, forgotten people – common people from all around the world who had been captured on film and just as automatically erased by the omnipresence of a few characters that we used to call actors, or "stars"; idealized images of mankind (and practices and habits, etc.) that, when fictionalized, overwhelmed the representation of mankind itself, that is, in its diversity. Another hypothesis might state that these famous films, making up one (but only one) part of the found footage *corpus*, have already been authenticated, that is to say, they are "signed". Thus it is very difficult for found footage filmmakers to inject meaning into the text or to say something about themselves: the risk is that spectators would always see the person that *made* the image and never the one who takes up, interprets or reinvents it. In other words, if a found footage filmmaker wants to be understood as the real author of his work, he often must expel, from his own intimate film canon, the great directors who impressed him some years before. He must deny these figures entry into the history he tries to rebuild. All of which supposes that he constructs a version of film history that could be told *without* the great directors...

The interesting point here is that the ambiguous status of authorship, which seems won and stolen at the same time, made both of admiration and repulsion, may lead to some strange forms of conflict between the author of the original images and found footage artists. From this point of view, one of the most interesting cases of a "major" filmmaker taken up by found footage is certainly Alfred Hitchcock. I think in particular of Matthias Müller and Christoph Girardet's *Phoenix Tapes* (1998), a film that uses numerous excerpts from Hitchcock's films to unveil some of the director's major obsessions through the combination of recurrent figures, empty places, gestures or objects that disseminate throughout his filmography. In this piece, Girardet and Müller show both their admiration for and their critical view of the work of the "master of suspense" in a way similar to what Müller did a few years prior with Hollywood melodrama in his famous short *Home Stories* (1991).

The Life of Images

According to André Malraux's book *Le Musée imaginaire*, through the mechanical reproduction process in the modern age of art: «The model is becoming the means of the image much more than the image is the reproduction of the model»⁵. That is to say, the photographic or cinematographic reproductive device becomes a point of departure for a new kind of artistic production that stresses the way the image is "working" much more than the content of the image itself. Quite at the same time, but on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, Jonas Mekas and Ken Jacobs declared that enough films had finally been made, that the future of cinematographic art would (or simply could) consist of taking up these films again and again in ever new perspectives. This constant revisiting would function to demonstrate the evolution of film technique and allow filmmakers to express the ways in which films can tell us something about the historical and intellectual context of the society in which they were made⁶. These statements, once again, seem to describe perfectly the aim of found footage work, in which the recycling of film history is less a nostalgic gesture than a will to analyze this history which had not, until then, really taken the time for a reflexive interrogation of its own evolution. "Analyzing", that is to say, mainly trying to understand, elucidate or formulate a critical position about the way films were made in the first century of cinema, to whom they were addressed and what purpose they served.

As Jean Epstein noted in 1924: «As soon as a film is finished, and sometimes even before it is completely finished, the film stops being modifiable. Therefore it escapes its author. It starts to live for the good, as for the bad, its own independent life, like a kind of autonomous organism»⁷. Nothing is more accurate, and nothing more obvious than in the “displaced” images as they appear in found footage films. There is the “real” film, the one we can see in the *cinémathèque* or on DVD (but already, on DVD, the versions can change), and there is the “virtual” film, the one that transforms itself through successive visions, through space and time, and is sometimes taken up by a filmmaker whose work is to put, face to face, the two different objects this “film” has become by re-editing it (Joseph Cornell or Matthias Müller), comparing it with other images (Gustav Deutsch or Müller again), forcing it to confront its own decay (Bill Morrison) or exploring it to the point of exhaustion (Ken Jacobs, Martin Arnold or Peter Tscherkassky). For instance, when American filmmaker Standish D. Lawder made *Intolerance (abridged)* in 1975, reducing Griffith’s film from three hours to fifteen minutes by showing, in the right order, only one frame out of twenty-six, he did not only condense the American masterpiece, he also demonstrated that the film, while staying globally the same, was affected by a velocity that was essentially that of the period in which it was remade, the era of global communication, of culture as a product of consumption and of the forthcoming attention-deficit generation.

Another aspect of this problem concerns the interrogation of film history in the digital era. Peter Tscherkassky said several times that found footage was the response of young, avant-garde filmmakers to the overwhelming presence of electronic imagery and a conscious return to the artistic specificity of the medium’s historical expression. The idea of a “technological response” indicates that found footage filmmakers have understood film history fundamentally as a *frame* history. That maybe in an unconscious way, film history had a lot to do with the medium’s peculiar, photographic nature (which doesn’t mean that film history has no place for video or digital media, of course). Some of the most interesting inventions in the art of film are linked to its material support. In this way, found footage represents an attempt to show how many directions could have been taken, and could still be taken to investigate the unexplored possibilities of the medium. These paths would vary according to the distance between the original context of production and its found footage reinterpretation, but would not attempt to alter the essential physical nature of film itself. Peter Tscherkassky’s *CinemaScope Trilogy* (1997-2001)⁸ gives us one of the most brilliant demonstrations of such an enterprise.

Didactic Virtues of Found Footage

An unquestionable virtue of found footage films is that they enable access to images of the “silent era” or “golden age” of classic cinema to a public that had not previously been very interested in film history. The membership of many found footage filmmakers in the “avant-garde” and their links to contemporary art and a culture of remixing or sampling allowed these films to be seen by students and art lovers and read with both a fickle *and* critical approach that permitted “old movies” to make much more enlightened statements than would have otherwise been possible.

Without going into detail, we can see that the didactic aspect of found footage, its propensity to make people see – differently or for the first time – lost treasures of film history, is particularly visible in what Nicole Brenez calls the “visual study”. Briefly, the “visual study” is «the study of an image by the means of the image itself», or «a face to face between an image already done and a figurative project which consists in observing it»⁹. One of the most famous visual studies is Ken

Jacobs' *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*. Made between 1969 and 1971, the film borrows its title from the eponymous movie by Billy Bitzer, produced in 1904. Jacobs begins by screening Bitzer's film in its entirety. Then, his camera directly enters *into* the image to isolate some figures, characters in the nine large and crowded shots, extending the original ten minutes to almost two hours of patient analysis, and finally returning to the original once again at the end, by way of comparison. The film is structurally and visually very complex, but I want to point to the way Jacobs isolates fragments and uses slow motion, close-ups and freeze frames to make visible what was hidden by the apparent visibility of Bitzer's film. According to Nicole Brenez, «a quiet image is a reserve of visual chaos», yet on the other hand, «from an apparent disorder, the visual study will release the inner rationality»¹⁰.

If the utility of this kind of artistic process is quite clear for those who know little about silent film, how can it be useful for film historians who work with the very period considered by found footage filmmakers? Perhaps it forces scholars to reconsider the distance between their own research and the *objects* of research from a methodological point of view. That is to say, found footage films clearly underline the fact that the culture (and, essentially, the visual culture) in which we see Jacobs' *Tom Tom* is fundamentally not the same as the one in which spectators experienced Bitzer's *Tom Tom* when it was released. This is a matter of contextualization. But, more importantly, the historian, in front of this kind of film, may realize that this context is not only political, factual, social or economic. Film history is also the history of film form, a fact never more visible than when one has a chance to observe how a defined object, a specific film, has evolved and transformed itself through the decades¹¹. In other words, found footage shows us that if we really want to understand a movie, understand how it "works" and make it resonate with our present situation, the best thing to do might be to remake it once again and to see how much it is different while remaining the same.

Found Footage and Film Theory

It seems to me that found footage films often achieve a kind of work that is explicitly linked to film theory. At least, it appears that these films have realized some part of the program of theory, not in words, but with images and sounds.

A question first, about editing: would the neurotic editing of Martin Arnold's shorts or the unexpected connections in Mathias Müller's films have been possible without the surveys undertaken by gender and cultural studies in the 1970s with regard to stereotypes in the Hollywood melodrama and the sociopolitical hidden aspects of mainstream cinematography? Would these films have been possible without the reflections of someone like Thierry Kuntzel, who theorized the idea of *visionnage*¹², and integrated the freeze frame, slow motion and fragmentation into the signification of the viewing process? While I cannot answer these questions definitively without having asked the filmmakers themselves, I maintain that these kinds of queries deserve to be raised. At the very least, one can locate here a disturbing convergence of the ways and means of filmmakers and film theoreticians. For instance, when Gregory Peck saw his "acting performance" in Martin Arnold's *Passage à l'acte* (1993), he said that he loved the sound, but claimed to have never done that. And this point is interesting: had he "done that" without knowing it, *or* was it Arnold that made him "do it" by appropriating and reconstructing Peck's entire performance? Arnold called his films his revenge on film history, stating that Hollywood cinema is «a cinema of exclusion, reduction and denial, a cinema of repression. There is always something behind that

which is being represented, which was not represented. And it is exactly that that is most interesting to consider»¹³.

I would like to briefly explore another short example in order to shed light on this privileged link between found footage and theoretical approaches to cinematography. Would the films of Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, or Bill Morrison's beautiful *Decasia* and his 2002 short *Light Is Calling* have had the success and gained the attention they did if the "theoretical" ground hadn't been prepared by the poetic imaginary of ruin that (re)appeared in the early 1990s in film theory, and especially in what is generally called the "figural" approach in film studies? I don't think so, because all of these theories constituted something like an intellectual context, a form of preparation for the spectator's gaze, which made us accept all kinds of distortions in our comprehension of the films, but with the understanding that we would (or could) learn something from a non-narrative point of view. Something like a plastic sensibility was rising during that period.

As we can see in the reflections of Paolo Cherchi Usai or Dominique Païni¹⁴, it is necessary for an image to be in danger of decay to be interpreted, analyzed or simply exist as a part of a history. According to Cherchi Usai, a moving image immune from decay (what he calls a "model image") could have no history. Therefore, «it is the destruction of moving images that makes film history possible»¹⁵. From this point of view, found footage films demonstrate that cinema is less an art of reproduction than an art of variation and repetition. What is peculiar about found footage films is that they question both film history *and* the way this history was written (that is to say, interpreted) by film specialists throughout the 20th century. When some found footage artists started, in the 1960s and 1970s, to rediscover in ancient cinema (and not only in "primitive" cinema) unexpected visual events or formal structures, it led to a serious reconsideration of the linear system on which film form had been based and the invention of new ways to approach film history itself.

So, what happened and what is still happening? Our gaze is in perpetual mutation. If we encounter *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* by Billy Bitzer today, even unmodified, it is already something closer to Jacobs' *Tom Tom* that we see because our aesthetic expectations and mental categories are obviously not the same today as they were in 1904¹⁶. What found footage filmmakers do is to simply reveal (in a photographic sense) the film such as we are in position to see it several decades later. It is not our love for the cinema that must overcome the experience of its destruction; it is only our habits that make us think that films are fixed in a specific production context. Perhaps more important is the context of the meeting between the film and its audience, or between two films from different periods. A film from the 1920s, seen in 2007 by a contemporary spectator, is obviously not the same film; many aspects of it have changed. Those that programmed films at the Anthology Film Archives in New York in the mid-1960s already understood that when, for example, they screened a masterpiece of the silent era alongside some improbable and abstract avant-garde shorts on the same evening. Found footage only makes this transformation a bit more visible, while historical or theoretical works, with words as their only weapon, sometimes fail to show it clearly. Even so, the fact is simple: as Jean Epstein remarked in the early 1920s, «the swarming of rottenness is also a resurrection»¹⁷.

I believe that what we really need now is a better comprehension of these films by film historians, who could try to understand why an era (ours for example) has such a strong need to replay the images of past periods, that is, to make them seem as if they had been shot in the early part of this century. On the other hand, we also need film aestheticians and film theorists to seriously consider the fact that found footage films are part of the history of the relationship between humanity and the image. This history is, perhaps, forced to replay images that passed through the 20th century too quickly and are calling for reconsideration.

- 1 Thanks a lot (and I mean it!) to Barbara Le Maître, Gabriele Jutz, Joana Hurtado, Clara Schulmann, Jonathan Thonon and Sergio Fant for the many discussions we had during the Spring School about found footage, that made me progress a lot in this wide and embryonary work.
- 2 See, among many other references, Nicole Brenez, "Cartographie du found footage", in http://archives.arte-tv.com/cinema/court_metrage/court-circuit/lemagfilms/010901_film3bis.htm, March 12, 2007.
- 3 These two short films "shot" in 2002 are both made with footage taken from James Young's *The Bells* (1926).
- 4 Arlette Farge, "Le Cinéma est la langue maternelle du XX^{ème} siècle", comments collected by Antoine de Baecque, in *Cahiers du cinéma*, hors série, "Le Siècle du cinéma", no. 11, November 2000, p. 40.
- 5 André Malraux, *Le Musée imaginaire*, Gallimard, Paris 1965, p. 84 (my translation).
- 6 On this subject, see Nicole Brenez, Pauline de Raymond, "Retours d'images – Débuts du cinéma et pratique du remploi", in *Cinegrafie*, no. 14, 2001, pp. 234-5.
- 7 Jean Epstein, *Quand dans ma cabine de projection...*, in Id., *Écrits sur le cinéma*, Vol. 1, Seghers, Paris 1974, p. 122 (my translation).
- 8 The trilogy is made of *L'Arrivée* (1997-98), *Outer Space* (1999) and *Dream Work* (2001).
- 9 Nicole Brenez, *De la figure en général et du corps en particulier*, De Boeck, Brussels 1998, p. 313 (my translation).
- 10 *Idem*, p. 320.
- 11 To the rather classical conception of found footage as an "enhancement" of the source film, Barbara Le Maître substitutes the very interesting idea that, from our contemporary point of view, one should see now Bitzer's *Tom, Tom* as a "fossile form" of Jacobs' *Tom Tom*. Thanks a lot to her for making me think of this possible change of paradigm, which results from a standpoint from where we can consider that found footage practices are now completely integrated to our visual culture.
- 12 Thierry Kuntzel, "Le Travail du film", in *Communications*, no. 19, 1972, pp. 25-39, and Id., "Le Défilement", in Dominique Noguez (ed.), *La Revue d'esthétique*, special issue "Cinéma: théories, lectures", 1973, pp. 97-110.
- 13 Martin Arnold, quoted from <http://www.hope.ac.uk/artsandhumanities/everton/cornerstonecinema.htm>, March 15, 2007.
- 14 Cf. Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, British Film Institute, London 2001; Dominique Païni, *Le Temps exposé*, Cahiers du cinéma, Paris 2002.
- 15 Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema*, cit., p. 18.
- 16 And, by the way, neither the same as in 1971: maybe a new *Tom Tom* would be needed again.
- 17 Jean Epstein, *Esprit de cinéma*, in Id., *Écrits sur le cinéma*, Vol. 2, Seghers, Paris 1974, p. 12.