

Media Meltdown

by David Cox



David Cox is a filmmaker, writer and lecturer based in Brisbane, Australia. He has worked with Craig Baldwin on a number of his films: *Oh No Coronado!* (1992) and the upcoming *Spy vs Spy vs Spy*. Cox's own films include *Onus On Us* (1987), *Puppenhead* (1990), *BIT* (1992) and *Otherzone* (1998).

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Further information on Craig Baldwin, his films and own exhibition project, Other Cinema, can be found at <http://www.othercinema.com>

Deep within the South American jungles Che Guevara's toxic DNA has been captured by aliens sponsored by US covert operations. Their plan: wholesale destruction of the corporate media structures. Their director-in-charge of operations: Craig Baldwin.

Filmmaker, teacher, showman, anti-copyright activist, Craig Baldwin is a hunter-gatherer of Images, sounds and ideas. Embracing and celebrating satire and camp, his collage-essay films convey the sheer joy involved in their construction: the exhumation of post-war educational and training films from their once rock-solid cultural contexts into feature-length satirical ammunition. In the cult classic *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America* (1992), Baldwin treats decades of CIA involvement in Central America as mock sci-fi, while *Sonic Outlaws* (1995) exposes the stand-over tactics of major recording publishers in policing their ever-tenuous grasp on media copyright.

A champion of film and video activism, Baldwin has helped transform San Francisco's Mission District into a dynamic cultural hub for the genre. "Collage is the contemporary art," states Baldwin. "It is the most definitive. Yet it runs absolutely against copyright laws. There are certain assumptions about the usage of other people's material in order to make money from it. Collage artists take a tiny little bit of something from your piece and put it together with a lot of other pieces too and make a distinct whole. We're not trying to steal your audience. The copyright laws need to be updated in order to deal with this art form. People of my generation know what is going on with collage in the different mediums: film, music, CD-ROMs." (1)

But if collage is a contemporary art, it has been around since the modernist era of Kurt Schwitters and Pablo Picasso. What makes it current is perhaps best explained by Greil

Marcus: "When it works, all collage is a shock." (2)

A lifelong denizen of the Bay Area sub-cultural underground, Baldwin, 45, once lived in a projectionist booth above a porn cinema. It was in these unlikely surrounds that he experienced a cultural epiphany. From the scraps of film left lying around, Baldwin made *Flick Skin* (1977), a Super-8 film. The formal qualities of the film surface, with its patched-together, hand processed X-rated film material were made obvious to the viewer. So began a career concerned with the politics of the Image, one in which humor and wit guided the choice of Imagery into a carefully reworked mosaic. In Baldwin's hands, the Image is no longer what it initially represented; and somehow, through its radical re-contextualisation, its true identity is revealed. Found footage is unmasked as an impostor, and made to perform roles for which it was never intended. As Guy Debord declared, any image can be made to invoke another meaning from the one it was intended to, even the opposite.

In keeping with his "grab the footage and run" philosophy, Baldwin's *Stolen Movie* was constructed by literally charging in to mainstream cinemas and stealing images off the screen by filming them on a super-8 camera, then rapidly exiting through the rear door with the booty. Part guerrilla theatre, part performance art, this brand of media pranksterism was an act of deliberate provocation and the result of a politics of the everyday.

Baldwin also acknowledges a debt to the Beatnik poets, some of whom with their post-war utopianism helped identify the "peace and love counterculture" as fundamentally positioned "outside" the mainstream. Embracing nomadism for a while, Baldwin hitchhiked and "hopped freights," in his own words, "as a cultural response to the middle-class lifestyle." (3)

One of the biggest supporters of Baldwin's work is the famous 'psychotronic' Z-grade film magazine *Film Threat*, which caters to splatter and exploitation film aficionados. The Z-graders tend to be like-minded, entrepreneurial hobbyists who are similarly forced into filmic resourcefulness. (4) There is an easy exchange of ideas between them and the more politically motivated junk-film cutup films of a method of working Baldwin calls "cinema povera" (the cinema of poverty). "Cinema povera" started with Bruce Connor in the late '50s. Other people involved in the same type of filmmaking include: Bill Daniel, Greta Snider, Eric Saks, and Lori Surfer. They follow the practice of 'using what you have' - not relying on crews, big budgets, and adapting what is lying around to make a "Cinema of Poverty".

By dredging the depths of America's media past, Baldwin develops an archeology of American ideology. The best place to exhume the corpses, it turns out, is the world of ephemeral films. These are the forgotten trailers, commercials, sponsored films and educational films that still transmit forgotten signals from the Cold War and the Space Race. Now cast adrift from their former contexts, these filmstrips still manage to reveal the disarming forcefulness of America's once official culture, with its ubiquitously familiar, authoritarian and paternalistic voice-overs.

In an era of ubiquitous digitization and image manipulation, the arcane use of the

relatively obsolete film object as a field for artistic endeavor is rare. Cut, manipulated, edited, blown up, shrunk down, stretch printed, scratched and drawn on, the very physicality of film is at the very core of found footage's aesthetic appeal, the key to what makes the key to what makes appropriating it so much, well, fun.

Despite a desperate artistic attempt to avoid the uniformity that shapes capitalist culture in America, the culture-jammer look has been appropriated by slacker punk bands like Nirvana, who used found footage in their film clips (e.g. the sperm close-ups in "Come as You Are") and by such mainstream directors as Oliver Stone. The quick montages in Stone's *JFK* (1991) could well have been inspired by a Baldwin movie - the use of rapidly intercut Super-8 with 16mm, and intimately intermixing real with reconstructed footage. Nevertheless, while it is the aesthetics of appropriation that Hollywood adopts rather than any political form of media activism, Baldwin admits that he "got lucky" with *Tribulation*'s timing: "Oliver Stone released *JFK* a few months after mine. In a lot of ways, my film was helped by Oliver Stone, because there was a lot of interest in *JFK* - which is actually a very small part in my picture. But it is the same kind of conspiratorial thinking, which quite obviously won't go away. It is here to stay." (5)

Even the themes of Baldwin's *Tribulation 99* - paranoia, conspiracy and government cover-up - are increasingly the subject of sanitized mainstream media forms, which use such themes and settings for otherwise conventional storytelling. Witness the *X-Files* and *Dark Skies* or *Independence Day*.

Baldwin, in his own words, is trying to "negotiate an alternative pathway toward some kind of understanding of American culture and cinema." "Cinema povera" also attempts a deliberate and consistent turning away from the offerings of the mainstream, looking instead toward the scraps of the past, or the work of filmmakers themselves trying to negotiate a way out.

With its dryly narrated, whispering soundtrack told through 90 per cent "found" footage, Baldwin's *Tribulation 99* lets the audience in on a National Enquirer-type conspiracy, in which invading aliens called Quetzals have come to take over the minds of US decision makers in a battle for control of both Central America and the Earth's core. Watching the film, you will recognize bits of *Earth vs the Flying Saucers*, *Dr No*, various Mexican B-grade movies, Tire Creature From the *Black Lagoon* and *War of the Worlds*. There are strange out-takes from 1960s documentaries on plutonium waste-disposal and magnetism. There are video clips from news coverage of the invasion of Grenada. Viewing this wealth of material, one imagines the feelings that went into its creation - ecstatic delirium mixed with moral panic and political outrage.

"It was curious the way that certain ideas were between the official, political history and the very unofficial paranoid version of things. There were often these weird alignments. Sometimes it was easier to believe the UFO stuff than it was to believe the CIA story that was used to justify our intervention in some country. So I lined them up, superimposed them in a way. I tore out bits of paper and taped them together. The material organized itself. I took real, political material and retrofitted it with the fantastic, wacko literature."
"I was continuing my projects against US intervention in Latin America," says Baldwin.

"My other films have been a criticism of US foreign policy. What came to a head here was the whole Iran-Contra Affair, Oliver North's trial, it was the whole milieu - the center of the times. I wanted to make a statement that was critical of the CIA and our meddling in foreign countries, and it seemed to be a new use of this creative material, these paranoiac rants. "I saw the CIA as being truly a conspiracy. I wanted to make a black comedy instead of a Noam Chomsky kind of thing which is fine and great, but I didn't want to duplicate. Instead of making that kind of attack, I wanted to make one that was satirical - one that would lacerate, tear apart, shred the CIA by burlesquing them, by using these great materials." (6)

In 1995, Baldwin rallied to the defense of fellow cultural samplers, the satirical sound-collage band Negativland, who had fallen foul of the copyright laws for appropriating a U2 song. The case was perhaps inevitable. For the best part of a decade, bands had been lifting riffs from popular songs, and the record companies set out to make an example of them.

Sonic Outlaws is Baldwin's political statement on the collaging and sampling of culture. More formal in structure than the typical Baldwin film, *Sonic Outlaws* is essentially a documentary constructed from interviews with numerous proponents of culture jamming - media pranksters, artists and political groups who take what's out there on the shelves of mainstream USA for artistic and political ends. Negativland are interviewed at length about the battle between their "anti-corporate" record company, SST, and Island, U2's label. Island sued Negativland for appropriating 20 seconds of the U2 song "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" and using the letter "U" and the numeral "2" (next to each other, just like the Lockheed spy plane's ID number upon which the Irish band's name is based) on the cover of the record release.

The venom with which Island's lawyers attacked Negativland over the album, and the about-face SST demonstrated to Negativland, outraged many across the country.

"That happened to be a journalistic incident. It didn't have to be, but it became closer to home because I could identify with it. At the same time, 2 Live Crew was busted for their parody. They won their case because it had to do more with parody, it wasn't so much a collage, it was a reuse of the same melody. It was under protection from this clause in the copyright law called Fair Use." (7)

For Baldwin, Negativland encapsulated the sheer scale of the problem - the economically led protectionism of the global media industry does not acknowledge the validity of borrowing or adapting sounds for use in collage satire and parody. In the eyes of the mainstream, there is no such thing as a "non-commercial" use. The accountants don't want to fathom collage. Copying can only mean bootlegging. Ironically, U2's album *Pop* (1997) appropriates music from underground culture, indicating both the mainstreaming of the sampling genre, the dilution of the political gesture, and the legal muscle available to such super-pop groups.

Nevertheless, the SST/Island/Negativland incident served to galvanize the resolve of Negativland, Baldwin and the whole culture-jammer community. Nothing is quite as affirming as corporate pressure applied to an activist.

Craig Baldwin's found footage work is thus an extension of a whole culture: a culture of community and collaboration; of people gathering in scenes, unified, like the Beatniks and Yippies of the past; a cinema of deliberate self exile from the mainstream, and active opposition to it. This is the avant-garde everyone thought had bitten the dust with modernism. Instead, it lies dormant in the heart of political unrest.

"Oh, that's strong!" Baldwin yells, as a certain image flickers on the screen at Artist's Television Access gallery's basement. Notes are quickly taken in a pad, with a dimming flask light for illumination. The shot might find its way into his next work, *Spy vs Spy vs Spy*. Baldwin interprets everything. His cultural archeology combs the contemporary urban landscape as carefully as it does the detritus of the industrial era - the training film, the advertisement. Watching films with Baldwin is a unique experience. The most boring, turgid, insipid or blatantly tragic films become a source of immense fun and wonder in his hands. The sheer vibrancy of images from forgotten times which show flying saucers, monsters, and sheer strangeness is itself a fascinating entertainment.

Baldwin now has a modest studio. It amounts to a dark basement with shelving filled with film cans, reel-to-reel winders, thousands of press clippings and photos, stickers, flyers, and a tiny radio. The Baldwin workspace is seldom idle. From the earliest hours to the latest, Baldwin does the rounds, methodically organizing notes, text, and correspondence with other film programmers and filmmakers. This flurry of relentless activity makes the process of making found- footage films a natural extension of a lived, everyday aesthetic of foraging, collating, sifting, researching and playing with images, text, sound and selection. This is a culture of ancient movie projectors and bits of editing equipment which are lovingly maintained, of dark and damp basements with dim lights and leaking earthquake-damaged roofing. It is a culture of canned foods and cheap takeaway food. It is a world of moving images nil sounds which are invoked, like ghosts from the grave of cultural history. This is nothing they teach you in film school. This is alchemy.

In an increasingly electronically mediated urban world, media archeology is the most appropriate kind of search for truth among the ruins. Rick Prelinger on the East Coast, whose ephemeral films have been released on CD-ROM (Ephemeral Films and "Our Secret Century" both published by

Voyager interactive) finds himself an invaluable source of material for an ever-widening group who are starting to realize the importance of media archives. Prelinger and Baldwin are colleagues and Baldwin's last film *Specters of the Spectrum* (1999) examined the battle for control of the electromagnetic spectrum over the decades. By using the device of a Time Machine 'scope' the film literally framed early ephemeral films in the context of a story about the history of media itself.

Like Prelinger's archive, Baldwin's collection is valuable not only as a repository of films whose subject matter has been filtered into his own work, but as a kind of snapshot of the filmic variation on the great American collage tradition which includes Joseph Comeli, William Burroughs, Robert Nelson, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.

A cultural and economic climate of uncertainty and doubt during the 1990s infused the US

media with an urgency and a liveliness borne directly from familiarity with decades of non-stop piped images and sounds. Culture-jamming is thus a form of popular revolt - artists manipulating images as emblems of America's official culture. It is the equivalent in many ways of burning an effigy of US cultural hegemony both at home and globally.








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See also

An Evening on Baldwin's Mountain by Dirk de Bruyn

No Text / No Truth / Jouissance and Revolution - An interview with Craig Baldwin by Jack Sargeant

Endnotes:

1. Telephone interview with Craig Baldwin by David Cox. 
 2. Videotaped interview with Griel Marcus by David Cox, 1994. 
 3. Telephone interview with Craig Baldwin by Ashley Crawford. 
 4. 'Psychotronic' is a subcategory of Z-grade exploitation cinema. For more details, see <http://www.filmthreat.com> 
 5. Telephone interview with Craig Baldwin, David Cox. 
 6. Telephone Interview with Craig Baldwin by Ashley Crawford. 
 7. Telephone interview with Craig Baldwin by Ashley Crawford. 
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