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American Apocalypse

Craig Baldwin's *Spectres of the Spectrum*

"An infinite number of possible worlds ... and this is the worst one."

BY GARY MORRIS

In a disposable culture like ours, it's ironic, also rather pleasing, that some of what's disposed of gets resurrected in the service of a cultural critique. Such is the case with the work of the found footage artists, those filmmakers who mine the pop culture past for snippets from B-movies, commercials, old kinescopes and TV shows, 16mm filler material, laboratory reject footage, and god knows what else.

San Franciscan Craig Baldwin is one of the most successful of this group, working with found footage for more than a decade (at least since 1992's **Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America**). Unlike mainstream agitprop auteurs whose labored work must be endured as part of the ritual of leftist credibility, Baldwin's film's are dizzyingly ambitious collages that both attack and engage. His 2003 feature **Spectres of the Spectrum** is typical in its complex skewering of the American mindset that cloaks its invisible wars, clandestine nuclear programs, and other nefarious activities behind the bland reassurances of postwar pop culture – most especially 1950s educational TV shows like *Science in Action* and kitschy biopics of science-heroes like Ben Franklin, Marconi, Edison, Roentgen, Samuel Morse, and others.

Running 98 minutes (an almost unheard-of length for this kind of thing), **Spectres** is a nonstop barrage of visual quotes from the above mentioned sources, along



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with other detritus of popular culture, from cheesy movie monsters to *The Jetsons* to stilted re-creations of the lives of science heroes like Tesla and Marconi to primitive animated art depicting phenomena like the Big Bang beloved by 1950s science teachers.



Baldwin deftly juggles a series of stories — time-travel sci-fi story with echoes of '50s B-movies; conspiracy theory narrative; a sort of “child’s history” of science — that together comprise a scathing attack on America’s postwar bomb culture that remains very much in force today, perhaps even more apocalyptically than in the 1950s.

The year is 2007, the “Eve of the Solar Eclipse, Las Vegas, Nevada” according to an informative title. BooBoo, an “epileptic telepath,” is the granddaughter of scientist Amy Hacker, who died with a secret on her lips that BobBoo must uncover if she’s to save the planet. She’s part of a small group of revolutionaries fighting “electromagnetic control” by a shadowy entity called the “New Electromagnetic Order” (NEO) that, after decimating the earth, plans to erase the memories of every living creature on it. Abetting her is her father Yogi, an ex-intelligence guy who transmits anti-NEO propaganda from his bunker/Airstream trailer. BooBoo is immune to the devastation that’s been wrought; the mind-control efforts of the NEO have no effect on her. Her plan is to travel back in time to retrieve her grandmother’s secret and rescue the world from “the electronic miasma” that’s annihilating it. This process allows her — and viewers — to survey America’s apocalyptic past and the “heroes and martyrs” of “electromagnetic history” in the 19th and 20th centuries.

This thumbnail sketch gives the bare bones of the story but doesn’t capture the dynamism on screen. The story of BooBoo, Yogi, and Amy Hacker is secondary to the dazzling parade of images and motifs. The narrative (much of it delivered in voiceover, and visualized on amusingly cheap Ed Wood-type sets) is relentlessly paired with imagery that expands on or ridicules what is being verbalized.



When BooBoo says, “The zombies are at it again!” — in this futureworld, people have become marauding undead — Baldwin shows a forlorn monster hand from some unknown ‘50s B-movie. When the narrator pompously describes the theory of “transverse wave technology,” Baldwin shows the dime-store heartbeat monitor from **The Bride of Frankenstein**.

Much of the film is in fact taken up with science, real and bogus, progressive and fascist. Interspersed throughout are brief sketches of the lives and works of pioneers like Marconi, Edison, Ben Franklin, and

Nicolai Tesla. But rather than rendering coherent thumbnails of their lives and achievements, Baldwin adds footage to question and undermine these innovators. The Tesla sequence includes overacted scenes from a 1980 Yugoslavian biopic of the man who invented alternating current, but also a snippet from a silent movie that shows a tacky fake lightning bolt zipping out of a mysterious machine to burn a man's ass. The fascist impulses of the scientific community are also savaged in some of the scenes from *Science in Action*, e.g., a casually gruesome sequence in which the dorky teacher-host tortures a live manta ray with an electric wand. Throughout there's a sense of true heroes like Tesla, or Wilhem Reich, as visionaries for the common good being overwhelmed by much more craven mentalities like Edison, Edward Teller, and the military-industrial complex — and subsequently, a bittersweet feeling of utopias lost.

Counterpointing the film's grim "real" science is the fake science of the NEO, "the neuron wars," "the electromagnetic revolution," "the Monopolar Pulse Project," et al. Baldwin's blending of the real and the fanciful throws the "real" into question in what amounts to a pointed parable about America's lethal faith in science and its use of technology for hegemony and control. Much of the film's power lies in this critique, which is meticulous despite the seemingly amorphous collage technique. Baldwin methodically interlards real incidents and secret government activities throughout, touching on scary, shadowy nuclear programs like "Project Sedan" and "Project Starfish" that are well known to conspiracy buffs.

In the midst of the film's assault on the military-industrial complex, there are hilarious moments. Korla Pandit, the big-eyed, hypnotic TV organist-swami known for his kitsch-camp style, appears throughout on TVs in the background as a sort of trashy spiritual presence. Occasionally he takes center stage, as when BooBoo declares that the "dim, forgetful, weak superstitious creatues" that are human beings can be drowned out by "the contraband Korla Pandit tapes." In a nod to Ed Wood, Baldwin shows a tacky model of the Airstream trailer, Yogi's hideout for broadcasting subversive commentaries, flying into space after a meteorite hits the earth. Another '50s touch is a kind of Beat poetry strain in the overdub, particularly in BooBoo's angry, rhythmic attack on the "average human" who "lashes out reactively in gut impulse and greed like a flock of mental cripples flailing against the trailer walls..." Real-life counterculture theorists like Jesse Drew and the brilliant *Wired* writer Erik Davis appear throughout — as guests on the revolutionaries' "TV Tesla" — to add a further dimension to the film.

As much a product of editing as of directing, **Spectres of the Spectrum** is one of the most exciting and challenging pieces of pure cinema in the past few years. In an interview with critic Alvin Lu (available through the [Other Cinema](#) website), Baldwin says, "I hate to describe myself as a moralist, but there really is this drive behind the film, not only to make something that's beautiful-



slash-ugly, but also to raise consciousness. That's my missionary zeal.”



The DVD offers an excellent transfer, an enlightening essay by Gregory Avery in the enclosed booklet, brief online sketches of cast and crew, trailers and preview, and a strong commentary by Baldwin and San Francisco critic Patrick Macias (who witnessed the filming) that, without being too double-domed, goes far in elucidating the film's considerable complexities.

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ACCESS: Go to [Other Cinema](#)'s website to find out more about the film (including an interview with Baldwin). Gregory Avery's great essay on the film can be found here. You can order the DVD from [Microcinema](#), where you'll find many other tasty items in unusual genres.

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