as a whole are not based on found footage, nor are they “about” found footage. On the other hand, Bruce Conner’s A Movie, Joseph Cornell’s Rose Hobart, Ken Jacobs’ Tom, Tom, The Piper’s Son, Abigail Child’s Prefaces and Mercy, and Craig Baldwin’s RocketKitKongoKit and Tribulation 99 (to mention, again, a few of many relevant examples) are not only composed of found footage, but highlight that fact and make it one of the film’s principle points of interest. While I have no strict rule for calculating how much found footage a film must have in order to be a bona fide found footage film, I think more than intuition or arbitrariness leads me to include some films with a fair amount of original footage such as Leslie Thornton’s Peggy and Fred in Hell, Mary Filippo’s Who Do You Think You Are, Gunvor Nelson’s and Dorothy Wiley’s Schmeerguntz, and Mike Hoolboom’s Eat — while excluding the films listed at the beginning of this paragraph. Clearly, it is not a question of merit, but of emphasis.

Similarly, although I offer a survey of found footage filmmaking, my emphasis falls on films constructed according to the principles of montage or collage (a term of equal relevance, as I will try to show). There are other valid strategies for recycling found footage, of course, but montage/collage seems to me the most effective means of exposing the social and political implications of found footage while, at the same time, adapting it to the demands of the “quintessential twentieth century art form,” namely, collage.

Finally, and perhaps it goes without saying, the privileged realm of filmmaking for this project is experimental or avant-garde film, where the most interesting, aesthetically satisfying, critically informed, and politically challenging uses of found footage are to be found. Or so it seems to me.

Surveying the Field

Recycling found footage may require nothing more than finding it and showing it to someone who appreciates it. “A lot of film is perfect left alone, perfectly revealing in its un- or semi-conscious form,” Ken Jacobs writes in a note on his Perfect Film (1986). That film, which is composed of unedited interviews, location shots and other material gathered for television news reports on the assassination of Malcolm X, is distributed (with only a slight adjustment to the soundtrack) exactly as Jacobs found it “in a Canal Street bin.” Similarly, Brian Goldberg’s and Jackie Goss’ Perfect Video (1989) reproduces on film a discarded video tape containing degraded, jumbled and repeated images of John Hinkley’s attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan. In both cases, a haphazard assemblage of newscast left-overs yields unintentional insights into the media’s handling of violent public events. (By contrast, the treatment of the Kennedy assassination in Bruce Conner’s Report [1967] — a film to which Perfect Film and
Perfect Video invite comparison — clearly derives from Conner's own montage of radio reports and found footage. His film's sources are found, but its form is constructed by the filmmaker and communicates an individual's conscious intention — which is precisely what is absent from Perfect Film and Perfect Video.)

Jacobs' Urban Peasants (1975) and Hollis Frampton's Works and Days (1969) offer other examples of found footage that seems "perfect left alone." Simply by connecting 100-foot rolls of 16mm home movies shot by his wife's aunt in the 1930s and '40s, Jacobs permits the original footage to be seen as its maker and her family and friends saw it. However, the passage of time has invested it with nostalgia, historical and sociological interest, and an aesthetic value that is apparent only because Jacobs left the footage intact, rather than re-editing it to suit his own formal and thematic concerns. (The latter practice is much more common among avant-garde filmmakers, as exemplified by such works as Alan Berliner's Family Album [1986], Ron Finne's People Near Here [1969], Noll Brinkmann's Der Fater [1986], and Abigail Child's Covert Action [1984]). In a similar vein, Frampton's Works and Days reproduces an early documentary of a man and woman methodically planting their vegetable garden, to which Frampton added nothing but the title and his logo. Because the title is the same as that of Hesiod's ancient almanac and agricultural handbook (c. 700 B.C.), it encourages viewers to be aware of traditional patterns and rituals in the seemingly mundane activities of two anonymous gardeners, and Frampton's logo implicitly acknowledges the aesthetic accomplishments of the equally anonymous camera operator and editor. Frampton said that he placed his logo at the end of the film "in the spirit of the Chinese connoisseurs who affixed their vermilion seals to paintings as a mark of admiration."  

In the same spirit of nonintervention — but not necessarily admiration — Craig Baldwin includes found footage in the avant-garde film series he regularly presents in a store front gallery in San Francisco's Mission District. In the fall of 1991, for example, he offered a program entitled "The Return of Industrials Amok!" which he advertised as follows:

Like a bad habit, our perverse fascination with the time-warped informational films of the '50s and '60s finds us with Frank Capra's propaganda "pièce de résistance" Your Job in Germany, followed by Civil Defense clips, Alcatraz Escape bulletins, and Mob and Riot Control trainers. Also unspooling unashamedly is the nudist review The Raw Ones, the bohemian-befuddled religious kinescope Delinquent, Hipster and Square (with music performed by Max Roach), a Censorship lesson for kids, slo-mo Crash Tests, and other ludicrous left-overs.  

If these "left-overs" are also "perfect left alone," it is not because they are unrecognized gems of cinematic art, but because their very artlessness exposes them to more critical — and more amusing — readings than their original makers in-
tended or their original audiences were likely to produce.

In most cases, however, filmmakers do not assume that found footage only needs to be shown to be appreciated. The more common practice is to rework the footage in some way, so that its richer implications become more apparent. In Ernie Gehr's *Eureka* (1974), for example, a five-minute film shot from the front of a tram descending San Francisco's Market Street in the early 1900s, is step printed and stretched into a 30-minute tapestry of cluttered street life in an American city at the turn of the century. For *Tom, Tom, The Piper's Son* (1969), Ken Jacobs refilmed a short, 1905 version of the well-known nursery rhyme, and by stretching its action, repeating movements, and blowing up details of its mise-en-scène, he "reverently examines" the original film for nearly two hours. Jacobs' "Nervous System" presentations (which require specially designed equipment operated by Jacobs at each performance) also use short segments of found footage to make lengthy forays into unfamiliar and often baffling realms of perception.

Equally unfamiliar are some of the perceived movements in Martin Arnold's *Pièce Touched* (1989), in which the frames of a mere 18 seconds of found footage are rearranged in extremely complex variations on a two-steps-forward-one-step-back progression. The result is a bizarre 15-minute exposé of "the hesitation and discomfort in a Hollywood B-movie couple heading towards a kiss." A very different, mirage-like effect results from the slow, frame-to-frame dissolves in David Rimmer's *Surfacing on the Thames* (1970). A brief clip of two ships passing on the River Thames becomes an eight-minute exploration of texture, color, and barely discernable shifts in the relationship of forms in space. In several other films, Rimmer uses a technique favored by a number of filmmakers: looping found footage to make the same sequence of frames appear over and over again. In *The Dance* (1970), for example, Rimmer looped a brief shot of two ballroom dancers spinning rapidly as they execute a large circle at the front of a band stand. With just a little "jump" where the ends of the loop meet, the same movement continues for five minutes in an ingenious isomorphism of form, content and technique: circles within circles within circles.

By simply changing the order of shots, filmmakers have found other ways of opening found footage to new, unexpected readings. For *Rose Hobart* (1939), Joseph Cornell rearranged a comparatively small number of shots from a 1931 feature film, *East of Borneo*. His "re-make" celebrates the beauty and cinematic allure of the film's star, Rose Hobart, at the same time as it produces a surreal narrative of unmotivated gestures, unexplained confrontations, and unconnected spaces and temporal relationships. It is a work that both savors and wryly deconstructs many familiar conventions of Hollywood narrative cinema. In *The Doctor's Dream* (1978), Ken Jacobs turns a sentimental, cliché-ridden TV movie into an oddly ambiguous psychodrama by begin-
ning in the middle of the original film, alternating shots from progressively earlier and later points in the narrative, and finishing with the original film’s opening and closing shots cut next to each other. Donna Cameron’s *Dracula and the Baby Sitter* (1986) derives its disjointed, dream-like narrative from the re-editing of a movie about gambling addiction, and in *The Falcon* (1987), Cameron introduces only a few changes in a documentary about falconry in Kuwait to make a sardonic commentary on the politics of leisure among wealthy Arabs. Pushing the re-editing process still further, Daniel Barnett rearranged and repeated shots from a trailer for a James Bond movie. His *Pull Out/Fall Out* (1974) comically deconstructs the contrived excitement of all trailers for action-thriller films. Nina Fonoroff carries the deconstructive process further still in *Some Phases of an Empire* (1984), by rearranging, repeating, reversing, and cropping shots from the Hollywood spectacular, *Quo Vadis*.

A few other noteworthy examples of re-cutting and repeating shots from a single film are also worth mentioning. Sharon Sandusky’s *C’Mon Babe (Danke Schoen)* (1988) which is both a black comedy about compulsive and self-destructive behavior and a sly critique of manipulative “nature films,” comes from a Disney documentary about Lemmings’ suicidal journey to the sea. Charles Levine’s *Bessie Smith* (1968) uses repeated shots from a 1929 film, *Saint Louis Blues*, to celebrate the great blues singer and, at the same time, to criticize some of the stereotypes imposed on images of black women. Bruce Conner’s *Marilyn Times Five* (1973), an homage/critique of a different sort, comes from a tawdry little film of a teen-aged Marilyn Monroe (or someone looking very much like her) awkwardly adopting a series of peep show poses. Looped again and again, Monroe’s inept gestures are almost graceful, yet their mechanical repetition undercuts their playfulness and naive simulation of erotic pleasure. They become increasingly artificial and anti-erotic. Despite its stag movie and pin-up girl clichés, the film renews its initial invitation to the voyeur. Instead of a closer, more intimate view of a woman’s body, the repetition of shots and the extreme graininess of the film increasingly draw attention to the body of the film itself, to the film’s own image-ness.

And that, I would argue, is the effect of all found footage films. Whether they preserve the footage in its original form or present it in new and different ways, they invite us to recognize it as found footage, as recycled images, and due to that self-referentiality, they encourage a more analytical reading (which does not necessarily exclude a greater aesthetic appreciation) than the footage originally received.

* * *

So far, it should be noted, my examples have come from films based principally or entirely on images taken from one source, be it a feature-length movie or a fragment of a single shot. In a
great many found footage films, however, the images come from a variety of sources and are juxtaposed in montage constructions that invest them with new or previously unrecognized implications. As Chick Strand has put it: “Nothing is sacred. You just rip it out of one context — or leave a couple of the little sub-contextual things in it — and mix up the whole thing with something else entirely: make up a context.” Or, in Craig Baldwin’s words: “You can go in any direction. That’s the nature of found footage ... I like that proliferation and multiplication — opening out, and a kind of complexity and layering, layering.”

The nature and degree of “complexity and layering” depend upon two factors: the kinds of images found by the filmmaker and the way those images are juxtaposed. Newsreels, documentaries, propaganda films, educational films, industrial films, travelogues, stock shots, archival footage, cartoons, pornographic films, early silent films, Hollywood feature films, TV ads, game shows, news programs, and the rest of the detritus of the film and television industries supply the images for montage constructions that range from loose strings of comic metaphors and analogies, to off-beat narratives, to surreal visual poems, to formal experiments in graphic and rhythmic relationships, to critiques of the media’s visual codes and the myths and ideologies that sustain them. In every case, the film’s montage exploits discrepancies between the image’s original and present functions. That is to say, it does not disguise the fact that the shots come from different sources; yet, at the same time, it prompts us to recognize an appropriateness in their juxtaposition. In their new setting, even individual shots may have implications that their original contexts suppressed, as when Bruce Conner exposes a phallocentric subtext in the famous shot of the U.S. Marines planting the American flag at Iwo Jima (in Cosmic Ray [1961]), or Gunvor Nelson and Dorothy Wiley bring out the trivialization of women in beauty contest footage (in Schmeerguntz [1966]).

Although Bruce Conner is probably the best known filmmaker to mix and match fragments of found footage, there are many others who have transformed found footage through similar montage techniques. Among Conner’s contemporaries, the most productive have been Arthur Lipsett, Standish Lawder, Chick Strand, and Stan Vanderbeek, but one might also mention Jerry Abrams, Stan Brakhage, Louis Brigante, Charles Gagnon, Adolfoas Mekas, Paul Morrissey, and Raymond Sarnoff among older filmmakers whose found footage films have been — with the exception of Brakhage’s Murder Psalm (1981) — overlooked, underrated, or forgotten. Among the younger generation, Craig Baldwin, Alan Berliner, Jean-Claude Bustros, Abigail Child, Mary Filippo, Heather McAdams, Julie Murray, Jay Rosenblatt, Greta Snider, and Michael Wallin are a few of the many filmmakers who have kept the tradition alive by adapting it to their own interests and skills. Whatever their individual differences, all of these filmmakers — young and old — have one
thing in common: the ability to make others’ images serve their own purposes through the transformative power of montage.

Investing disparate shots with a kind of pseudo-continuity is one way of transforming found footage, as Bruce Conner demonstrates in a well known sequence of *A Movie* (1958): a submarine captain seems to see a scantily dressed woman through his periscope and responds by firing a torpedo which produces a nuclear explosion followed by huge waves ridden by surfboard riders. In *Short of Breath* (1990), Jay Rosenblatt recreates the Freudian “primal scene” with a shot of a young boy getting out of bed, walking down a hall, and looking through a partially open door. This is followed by a shot of sexual intercourse (obviously taken from a pornographic film), and then another shot of the boy standing in the hallway with an ambiguous expression on his face (for which the classic Kuleshov effect supplies the appropriate emotion). In *Loose Ends* (1979) Chick Strand concocts a somewhat more complex narrative out of shots of a boy running about in a field, a man firing a double-barrelled shotgun, the boy falling, and a woman suddenly looking up from her ironing board and hurrying out of the room. After more shots of the gunman and the boy, the sequence continues as the abandoned iron sets the ironing board on fire; smoke and flames billow upward; the panic-stricken woman runs out of a smoky room and up a flight of stairs; flames appear superimposed over several standing figures; and finally a long pan reveals fields dotted

with burning haystacks as far as the eye can see. It is Strand’s montage that spreads the fire from an ironing board to acres of farmland.

This pseudo-narrative is part of a broader theme of violence, death and disaster, which is introduced early in the film with footage of a question mark superimposed over flames and smoke. Subsequently, there are shots of a horse being slaughtered (from Franju’s *Blood of the Beasts*), and people starving to death in India (taken, I would guess, from Paul Rothen’s 1947 compilation film, *The World Is Rich*). Similar images of starvation and death return at the end the film, where they take on an hallucinatory quality through stop printing and a soundtrack taken from the meandering inventory of architectural details at the beginning of *Last Year at Marienbad*.

The examples I have cited so far illustrate two kinds of associative processes characteristic of found footage montage. The less common one is immediate shot-to-shot associations that produce (however improbably) narrative continuity: a boy leaving his bedroom accidentally sees his parents making love; a man shoots a child whose mother hears the gunshot and rushes out, leaving her iron to start a fire that spreads to the surrounding countryside; a submarine officer sees a sexy woman through his periscope and excitedly fires a torpedo which sets off a nuclear explosion that creates huge waves for surfers to ride on.

The other, more common process of association links shots conceptually, metaphorically, and thematically. As each shot contributes to a reading of
the one next to it, so the accumulated readings produce thematic categories or paradigms in which most if not all of the film’s images fit, no matter how unrelated their original contexts might have been. I have already noted this associative process in A Movie and Loose Ends, but I would like to draw upon two other films — Arthur Lipsett’s Fluxes and Abigail Child’s Mercy — for examples of thematic unity in found footage that is not linked by implied (if obviously impossible) cause-effect relationships.

 Fluxes (1967) includes the following sequence of shots: a monkey in a laboratory touching glass panels as they light up, a man placidly sitting with electrodes taped to his bare chest, a disk and cam turning and pumping back and forth, and Adolph Eichmann, behind the bullet-proof glass of the witness stand, testifying at his war crimes trial in Israel. Humans and other animals reduced to subjects of conditioning, testing, measuring; living beings as machines; one of the human gears in the terrible machinery of genocide now caught in a machine of retribution and placed in a glass cage like a rat in a laboratory experiment. Other viewers might make different associations and find different ways of characterizing the sequence’s theme of dehumanization (for lack of a better word), but so strong is the mind’s inclination to turn juxtaposed images into something meaningful (which is, as Eisenstein always insisted, the psychological basis of montage), that every alert viewer will find some way of associating and thematizing these images, even as he or she recog-
nizes that they were never intended to be seen together.

Moreover, as is often the case with found footage films, the meaning derived from viewing Fluxes depends not only on its montage of images but also on the soundtrack’s accompanying montage of “found sounds.” As Eichmann takes the witness stand, for example, an anonymous voice barks, “Are you kidding?” A guard hands Eichmann a book (presumably a Bible) as a different voice explains, “And if you don’t touch this box while you’re doin’ it ...” Still another voice then asks, “Are there any clues?” Loud audience laughter follows as Eichmann refuses to take the book and pushes it away. Such inanities and clichés on the soundtrack, juxtaposed with the stiff, formal solemnity of the trial (and with everything that an image of Eichmann on trial brings to mind), produce an ironic tone and anxious, dark humor that is characteristic of the film as a whole — indeed is characteristic of Lipsett’s films in general. For that matter, most found footage films assembled from seemingly incongruous pieces of found footage engender an ironic view of their images and the world those images depict.

Abigail Child’s Mercy (1989) fits these generalizations as well, but it also shows that in addition to thematic development, found footage montage can produce rigorous formal designs with graphic and rhythmic relationships between shots, complex alignments of image and sound, and subtle variations of tempo. A characteristic passage begins with a man in his undershirt breathing
through a tube attached to a measuring device of some sort. An enthusiastic male voice on the soundtrack begins to recite, “It’s colorless, it’s odorless,” and continues, “and if you could drink it, it would be tasteless!” over a brief shot of a dark shadow advancing along a railroad track (accompanied by a rattling sound and strong bow strokes on a cello), an equally brief and ambiguous image of water or steam flowing behind rocks or metal, and a longer shot of a man’s bare arm bending and flexing its muscles (synchronized to the sound of a creaking board). A cacophonous mix of sounds dominated by a pulsing rhythm on the cello coincides with the arm opening again and then dissolving to a schematic drawing of the arm’s muscles and tendons. That sound continues over another ambiguous and very brief shot of two large disks or wheels turning on what may be a ship’s deck, followed by an even briefer shot of a machine-driven hammer striking red hot metal. A strong stroke of the cello’s bow is synchronized with a cut from the fiery blow of the hammer to an aerial view of many simultaneous explosions along the edge of a large quarry. Through Child’s editing, the impact of the hammer “sets off” the explosions; its downward action “produces” an upward reaction and a release of the mounting tension of the sequence. That tension, generated by the tempo of the montage as well as by energetic movement within the shots, is thus temporarily released in the explosions: a spectacular image of destruction for constructive ends. That image and the sequence as a whole embody the film’s principal theme: the domination of nature and human beings by science and technology — though it must be added immediately that the film’s wit and the liveliness of its rhythms prevent it from being as heavy-handed and didactic as my restatement of its theme might seem to imply.

The bursts of energy that carry this montage sequence to its explosive climax call to mind Eisenstein’s comparison of montage to “the series of explosions of an internal combustion engine, driving forward its automobile or tractor; for similarly,” Eisenstein continues, “the dynamics of montage serve as impulses driving forward the total film.”10 As Eisenstein knew and demonstrated in his own practice, however, strong montage does not carry the film forward in equal, evenly spaced impulses, but in unequal thrusts and surges, interrupted by pauses and counter-thrusts that retard and even momentarily reverse the film’s momentum. This is how Child’s montage works, and while it is notable for its intricate, jazz-like rhythms, it is like the montage of most found footage films in its creation of a thematic connection between diverse and dissimilar sounds and images.

As both Mercy and Fluxes illustrate, found footage films frequently include a playful and ironic “vertical montage,” as Eisenstein called the moment-by-moment juxtaposition of a film’s sound and image tracks. At the very least (with the exception of a few films with no sound at all, such as Stan Brakhage’s Murder Psalm [1981], and Chuck Hudina’s Nigeria [1989]) music accompa-
nies the images and influences the way we are likely to read them (as a soft, lyrical passage of Respighi's "Pines and Fountains of Rome" produces an oddly peaceful counter-point to the images of the submarine-to-nuclear-explosion sequence in A Movie).

More frequently, filmmakers influence a shot's signification by introducing "inappropriate" sound effects (laughter with a shot of Eichmann, a note on a cello synchronized with a hammer blow and an explosion), or by adding brief comments and sound bites obviously taken from other contexts. A few examples of the latter strategy, chosen more or less at random, include: the saccharine voice of a TV commentator at a Miss America pageant saying, "A beautiful girl, isn't she, John? And certainly a lovely representative of our country," as two women contestants in a roller derby fight in front of an American flag hanging prominently on the wall behind them (in Nelson and Wiley's Schmeergunz); the voice of Lyndon Johnson intoning, "This is a time for decision. You are the generation that must decide," as two sky divers descend in free fall (in Stan Vanderbeek's Panels for the Walls of the World [c. 1966]); a series of "Good Evenings" by TV news anchor persons synchronized with shots of people sneezing, and later in the same film a shot of an African woman breast feeding her baby accompanied by applause and an anchor woman saying cheerfully, "Now that's scary!" (in Laurie Dunphy's Journalism Conducts A Tour [1989]). While examples of this sort are endless, the underlying tactic remains essentially the same: the incongruity of sound and image expose, satirize, and produce new readings of the banalities, clichés and conventional modes of discourse — verbal and visual — that are endemic to the mass media.

Some filmmakers attach more extended verbal statements to their montage of found images. On the soundtrack of Mike Hoolboom's Eat (1989), for example, a woman describes her symptoms of anorexia nervosa; then as the images of the first half of the film appear again (with a few variations), a man tells an extravagant story of overeating. In Better Be Careful (1986), Heather McAdams makes wry comments about herself and her world by scratching words in the emulsion of her found footage. And in Daniel Eisenberg's Displaced Person (1981), extracts from a talk by Claude Levi-Strauss, mixed with a Beethoven string quartet, accompany footage from a documentary on Hitler and repeated shots of two boys on a bicycle in what appears to be a Jewish ghetto somewhere in Europe. While there is no indication that Levi-Strauss is referring specifically to Hitler or to the events of World War II, his elegant, thoughtful comments on the relationship of the individual to culture and history deepen the meaning of the footage (some of which is cropped, looped, and step printed to augment its visual and emotional intensity). Together, the words, music and images make a moving meditation on the relationship between a particular historical catastrophe and, in Levi-Strauss' words, "the question of meaning without order."
In addition to thematic contexts, extended voice-over narration can introduce a more subjective point of view than is common in most found footage films. In the first section of Greta Snider’s Futility (1989), a woman’s voice listing synonyms for futility introduces sexual connotations (the synonyms include flaccid, impotent, and infertile) which become explicit in the second and third sections of the film. In the second, the woman recounts a first person narrative about becoming pregnant and getting an abortion, and in the third section she reads an ambivalently aggressive letter from a woman to her lover. In Michael Wallin’s Decodings (1983) a male voice recounts three anecdotes with overlapping themes of isolation, alienation, friendship, and male bonding, and like Futility, Wallin’s film includes a wide diversity of found footage to illustrate (albeit indirectly, allusively, and sometimes ironically) the stories told on the soundtrack.

In She’s Just Growing Up, Dear (1992), Julia Tell draws upon a few shots from a sex education film of the 1950s as accompaniment to a series of diary entries recounting events in a woman’s life after she dreams that her father sexually abused her when she was very young. Similarly, in Remembrance (1990), Jerry Tartaglia reproduces a few images from Joseph Mankiewicz’s All About Eve, interspersed with some home movie footage of a big family gathering, as he describes his admiration for, and identification with, the strength, independence and bitchiness of Margo Channing, the character played by Bette Davis in that film. Less indirect and metaphor rich than Futility and Decodings, the films of Tell and Tartaglia also depend less on montage. In fact, they are more like Bessie Smith or Marilyn Times Five in their use of repetitions, freeze frames, looping, and other manipulations of a comparatively small amount of found footage. But like Snider’s and Wallin’s films, they show how extended verbal commentary can turn mass produced public images into components of individual and even autobiographical statements.

For Craig Baldwin, voice-over narration serves a more political and polemic purpose. In Rocket-KitKongoKit (1986) and Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America (1991), Baldwin creates a distinctive form of pseudo-documentary that parodies the voice-over narration and compilation montage of conventional documentary films. While purporting to document elaborate conspiracies between governments, multi-national corporations and (in Tribulation 99) extraterrestrials, his films are funny, satiric, anarchic (“underground” and “punk” are terms Baldwin likes to use in talking about his own work), and astute critiques of the visual and verbal rhetoric of the mass media.

Baldwin not only steals images from the media, he appropriates modes of discourse used by the media to authenticate their information and envelop themselves in an aura of authority and omniscience. In both films, Baldwin parodies the familiar tactic of using solemn, fact-filled commentary to make unrelated shots seem related to
each other, as well as relevant to an overriding narrative or thesis. For instance, a sequence in *RocketKitKongoKit* cuts from a shot of business executives sitting around a conference table, to Captain Kirk and his crew also sitting around a conference table in a scene from *Star Trek*, to Mobutu Sese Seko speaking on television, while an earnest voice-over describes the efforts of a German-based “Orbital Transport Rocket Corporation” to build secret rocket bases in Zaire. In *Tribulation 99* Baldwin neatly parodies the mass media’s propensity for making images of politicians suit prevailing public opinion. The most memorable example occurs when the narrator remarks, “Our good friend Noriega is suddenly replaced by a grotesque voodoo-spouting freak,” as the face of Hollywood’s Wolf Man undergoes its famous transformation from human to canine features.

Baldwin shares with many other filmmakers an alienated, antagonistic McLuhanism that takes the omnipresence of the media for granted, but is determined to expose the silliness, numbing redundancy, and ideological conformity with which the media represent the world to a more or less acquiescent public. Although they lack Baldwin’s inspired mimicry of media exposés, films like Stan Vanderbeek’s *Panels for the Walls of the World* and *Newsreel of Dreams* (1964), Bruce Conner’s *Report* (1967), Alan Berliner’s *City Edition* (1980), Al Razutis’ *The Wild West Show* (1980), and Laurie Dunph’s *Journalism Conducts A Tour* imitate, parody, and to varying degrees ridicule the media through montages of the media’s own words and images. Also like Baldwin’s films, they occupy an interestingly ambiguous position vis-à-vis the media, since their methods of organization mirror, at the same time as they mock, the formal strategies of the media themselves.

That is to say, television, movies, radio and the popular press already use montage to give their discrete units of information some semblance of formal coherence. Baldwin, Vanderbeek, Conner and others pull the media’s montages apart and put them back together in ways that make their montage structure more apparent and their coherence (and claims to accurate representations of the world) more problematic. Furthermore, our total communication environment — McLuhan’s “global village” — is a macro-montage of all the media; so the micro-montage of every found footage film implicitly reflects the experience of living in a media-dominated world. Just as all found footage films are self-referential, so they are all media-referential as well. They cannot avoid calling attention to the “mediascape” from which they come, especially when they also share the media’s formal and rhetorical strategies of montage.

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If “perfect” films, entire and untouched, occupy one end of the found footage spectrum, and montages of found footage occupy the middle, then at the other end are films with footage that has been
scratched, scraped, perforated, painted, dyed, bleached, chemically-altered, or subjected to various techniques of optical printing that radically change its appearance. The content of the original footage may continue to be recognizable, but its impact depends principally on its new visual aspect, and in the most extreme cases only hints or fragments of the original images may remain within a kind of filmic palimpsest created by the filmmaker’s erasures and additions.

An early, classic example of graphically enhanced found footage is Len Lye’s Trade Tattoo (1937), which combines painting on film with special optical effects applied to out-takes from documentary footage of factories, docks, ships, trains, workers, etc. With its strong, poster-like colors and lively rhythms, Lye’s film celebrates modern labor and industry while advertising the services of the film’s sponsor, the General Post Office of Great Britain. Chick Strand adopts many of Lye’s techniques (except painting on film) for her short film, Waterfall (1967), and Pat O’Neill produces a virtual catalogue of optical printing effects applied to found footage in Runs Good (1971). O’Neill often loops and superimposes shots in collage-like compositions that not only play with formal relationships of color, scale, spacial arrangements, and movement, but comment ironically on the repetitive structures and stereotyped images of the mass media. Similarly, in Scott Bartlett’s Heavy Metal (1978), footage from gangster films goes through a number of optical permutations which are not only striking in their own right, but highlight — at the same time as they begin to deconstruct — some of the clichés of the genre: prison escapes, shoot outs, anguished girlfriends and stoic, unexpressive men.

The ambivalent relationship between celebrating and deconstructing found footage is even more apparent in Al Razutis’ Sequels in Transfigured Time (1976), Ghost: Image (1979), and For Artaud (1982): three of the six virtuoso performances on the optical printer that constitute Razutis’ Visual Essays series (1973-84). The source of Sequels is footage from films of Georges Méliès, which Razutis reprinted on color stock bipacked with high contrast black and white negative. The combination results in mysteriously beautiful images that look like elaborate tableaux etched in metal or translucent glass. Freeze frames and step printing slow down the pace of the original films and reveal, in the filmmaker’s words, “Méliès’ invisible cuts — where he turns an omnibus into a hearse or midgets into puffs of smoke. I wanted to show how he’s making these transformations.” The footage for Ghost: Image comes from Dadaist, Surrealist, and German Expressionist films. Razutis flipped the images and superimposed them so that a profile facing left is symmetrically balanced by the same profile facing right, a figure moving in one direction splits into two identical figures moving in opposite directions, and so forth. The effect is strangely hallucinatory, and at the same time evokes the libidinous energies and macabre, gothic fantasies through which the original films engaged their audience’s imagina-
tion. In For Artaud a few images from Carl Dreyer's Passion of Joan of Arc (in which Antonin Artaud played a small but significant role) occasionally and only barely show through a midnight-blue ground filled with sparkling grains of blue-white light. Although Razutis has referred to the film as "an essay in expressionism and the tradition of Gothic horror," I would suggest that it is equally illustrative of the mutability of the film image itself.

A similar trope of mutability appears in David Rimmer's Variations on a Cellophane Wrapper (1970). The film is based on a loop of black and white footage (taken from a National Film Board of Canada documentary), in which a woman in a factory raises and lowers a large sheet of cellophane. As the woman repeats the gesture over and over again, the image undergoes a series of subtle but increasingly dramatic transformations. Due to various combinations of negative, high contrast and color effects introduced through optical printing, the conventional photographic representation at the beginning of the film gradually metamorphoses into abstract patterns of pulsing colored light at the end. What begins as a clever image of repetitiveness in factory work, becomes increasingly rich aesthetically, and more than that, offers viewers an unusual opportunity to experience shifting relationships between perception and cognition as the footage works its way from documentary realism to painterly abstraction.

More direct methods of working on film (scratching, drawing, painting, etc.) can be equally effective in changing the appearance and signification of found footage. At its simplest and most playful, this approach appears in Heather McAdams' Scratchman II (1982) with its graffiti-like lines, circles, arrows and other rudimentary shapes scratched into footage of an earnest, executive type speaking directly to the camera (though what we hear is a tinny repetitive tune produced by what sounds like a cheap music box). In Victor Faccinto's Book of Dead (1978), devil's tails, horns, slithering snake-like shapes, triangle noses and hats, and other more or less representational forms are drawn on footage that includes a dead body floating in a river, cowboys driving cattle, a wife being told that her husband has been killed, a woman adjusting her bikini and other scenes on a beach. Although simple in technique, the effect is strangely disturbing, as if some mischievous, demonic spirit were playing tricks and mocking proprieties while people go on about their business, oblivious to this sly, derisive presence in their midst.

As methods of modifying found footage become more complex, the viewer's attention increasingly shifts from the photographic content of the found footage to the textures, colors and rhythms created by the filmmaker's methods of effacement and erasure. The strip of film itself becomes the principal object of interest. An early and fairly primitive example is Walter Ungerer's Meet Me, Jesus (1966), in which ink, paint and scratches partially obscure a loose montage of found footage taken from a variety of sources. More sophisticated applications of the same techniques (elabo-
rated and intensified by optical printing) appear in Hy Hirsh’s *Scratch Pad* (1960) and *La Couleur de la forme* (1961) and Jane Conger’s *Odds and Ends* (c. 1950s). These films have an off-the-cuff, improvisatory appearance — suitable for a “scratch pad” or collection of “odds and ends” — that makes them seem more like studies and experiments than fully developed and organically unified works. In Mark Street’s *Winter Wheat* (1989), on the other hand, the predominantly orange tones painted on the film, the bleached and intricately scratched emulsion, and the limited set of images taken from an educational film on farming, produce a work with greater formal unity and “a quiet but persistent theme of destruction [that] winds its way through the film.”  

The most obvious destruction occurs on the surface of the film itself, as Street removes portions of the emulsion and the images embedded in it.

The process of obscuring the content of found footage is carried much further in films by Caroline Avery, Cécile Fontaine and Phil Solomon. In *Big Brother* (1983), *Midweekend* (1985) and *Simulated Experience* (1989), Avery uses short lengths of found footage that have been scratched, painted, split, cut into small pieces, and reassembled in collage-like constructions reminiscent of both Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism. Fontaine not only bleaches, scratches and paints found footage, but for films like *Two Made for TV Films* (1986) and *Cruises* (1989), she soaked strips of film to loosen the emulsion and rearrange or layer it on other strips of film. The shifting, overlapping images constantly appear on the verge of total disintegration. In Phil Solomon’s *The Secret Garden* (1986), the chemically treated and re-photographed images taken from children’s films, including *The Wizard of Oz*, virtually disappear in a rich texture of prismatic light that flickers and flows in rhythmic patterns suggestive of fire or reflections on water. Occasionally, recognizable shapes emerge like mirages or fragments of hypnagogic vision, only to be reabsorbed into an undifferentiated figure/ground which Paul Arthur has aptly characterized as “granular, reticulated clumps at the edge of abstraction.”

With abstraction comes a whole new set of aesthetic and critical concerns that have nothing to do with found footage as such. Yet, even films with little direct evidence of their origins as found footage differ significantly from purely abstract films made with similar techniques. Clearly, the films of Solomon, Fontaine, Avery, Street, *et al* have a good deal in common with the abstract animation of Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Harry Smith, and others who scratch, draw, and paint on clear or black leader. However, when a film’s starting point is neutral, imageless leader, the emphasis falls entirely on the dance of lines, shapes, textures and colors created “out of nothing” by the filmmaker. When the filmmaker works on found footage, something different happens. In addition to their innate interest as gestures of personal expression, the visual effects added by the filmmaker assert the individual filmmaker’s power to reclaim the terrain of public images for
personal use. Thus even the most painterly and abstract found footage films offer an implicit critique of the film industry's conventional, standardized representations of the world, and like other kinds of found footage films, they interrupt the endless recirculation and unreflective reception of mass media images.

In the Domain of Montage: Compilation, Collage, Appropriation

I have been arguing that the recycled images of found footage films have more in common than simply their origins in footage that was found by the filmmaker. Whatever the filmmaker may do to them — including nothing more than reproduce them exactly as he or she found them — recycled images call attention to themselves as images, as products of the image-producing industries of film and television, and therefore as pieces of the vast and intricate mosaic of information, entertainment, and persuasion that constitute the media-saturated environment of modern — or many would say, postmodern — life. By reminding us that we are seeing images produced and disseminated by the media, found footage films open the door to a critical examination of the methods and motives underlying the media's use of images.

To open the door is one thing; to go through it and confront the media on their own ground — the manipulation of images — is another thing, and the filmmakers most likely to take this further step are those who draw most heavily on the resources of montage. Therefore I want to elaborate on my previous discussion of montage in found footage films, not only because I think its critical — and ultimately political — implications are especially noteworthy, but also because the conjunction of montage and found footage also appears in other, more widely recognized forms, such as conventional compilation films and, at the opposite extreme, an increasing number of music videos. Montage, in other words, has many applications, and to more fully appreciate its function in films by experimental and avant-garde filmmakers, I want to take into account these comparable forms of film and video designed for mass audiences.

For the purposes of the following discussion, then, I propose to distinguish between three kinds of found footage montage, which I have labelled compilation, collage, and appropriation, and I will try to show why collage (as I define it below) has the greatest potential to criticize, challenge, and possibly subvert the power of images produced by, and distributed through, the corporate media.

Since compilation, collage and appropriation have a variety of meanings, some of which overlap to a considerable degree, I will distinguish between the three methodologies along the lines suggested in the following model or conceptual grid of