Abstract

This paper will present the film *Spectres of the Spectrum* (1999) as a synthesis of cinematic dualisms in the service of the expression and support of a particular politic: dialectical materialism. The film's deft combination of historical facticity, contemporary political pundirity, generic science fiction precepts, and transcendence of plural registers of realism situates it as an engaging project in the consideration of material and immaterial media's influences over historical and cultural experience and forms of knowledge production. The film theoretically bridges the gap between specter and spectator within a culture saturated by broadcast spectrums of information, and the quest for signal amid the noise. I will essentially undertake an explanation of how the film enacts and embodies this rarified politic and, though it has been derided as subpar narrative cinema or formalist experimentation, is recuperated by its unique status as a durably activist reflexive media object.

*Spectres of the Spectrum* interweaves facts with science fiction, original footage with appropriations, cinematic nostalgia with futuristic fantasy, film and video, real activist stances and laughable paranoid postures, in the service of the filmmaker's politics: Craig Baldwin's dialectical materialism. Possibly not since *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) has there been a film so devoted to the expression of a political philosophy directly pertinent to the cultural role of representational media. *Spectres* connects paradox and proletarianism with rebellion against the mainstream media complex from its beginning in which its narration broadcasts a distress signal. Any viewers of this film would surely be aware that they are not in fact seeing a broadcast insofar as they see a heterogeneous collage video, composed of representations from various historical moments and even of different forms of media, with different temporal accountabilities. Baldwin's canny irony in introducing a temporally heterogeneous collage video with the announcement "LIVE FEED" undercuts the viewer's trust in the loyalty of media forms to their temporal origins. We see the refresh bars rolling, indicating the mismatch of frame rates familiar from videotaped television screens, and understand that we are quite plainly viewing a record of a record, a simulacrum. But this record is a record of static, of chaos. These images claim that "right now," that which is live, is chaos beyond an insurmountable level of representational remove. According to the discourses of classic television, to be "tuned-in" is to be present alongside a legion of others, directly accessing an event as a unified community. For Jane Feuer:

> television exploits its assumed ‘live’ ontology as ideology. In the concept of live television, flow and unity are emphasized, giving a sense of immediacy and wholeness, even though network practice belies such unity

by editing the content to maintain viewer interest. [1] Temporally, that illusion of unity of broadcast
liveness has long since become fractured. Spatially, the ubiquity of broadcast television never was real. There is always unused bandwidth in space which is marked as forbidden to access. Baldwin’s archival work and the themes of Spectres nod to the inequity of this elision, and seek to establish practices for its return to the public. The film proposes that the broadcast airwaves, once tidy paragons of righteous conquest through space and time, have become corrupt and compromised, comprising an unnavigable morass of noise where there was once signal.

The film features a father-daughter pair of fictional characters, portrayed by actors who appear in newly filmed footage amid the appropriated images that act as landscape. The father figure is a historian and, in the parlance of this mediated universe of collapsing history, a spiritual guide symbolically named Yogi, who establishes through storytelling the lineage of eclipses and seizures of power that have polluted the mediated spectrum. His daughter is BooBoo. [2]

Baldwin also includes a few talking heads who lend a sense of documentary realism to his tale. Contemporary figures conversant in Spectres’ themes, like Erik Davis, whose work explores the historical relationship between technology and mysticism [3] and media activist Jesse Drew [4], embellish Baldwin’s historical tapestry of media apocalypse as intradiegetic emissaries from the metanarrative or “real world.” That this destabilization of the boundaries between historical injustice and contemporary activism takes the form of a convincing propagandistic history of media technology is the genius of Baldwin’s hyperactive and politicized poetics.

The jubilant simulacral destabilization of historical realism in Spectres is but the foundation for its anarchic, anagrammatic charm. Many spectators find the film altogether too much to take, as its breakneck bricolage truly makes it a difficult text to parse, its cinematic and aesthetic non sequiturs blending into a headache-inducing frappé. The sensorial challenge to the spectator is part of the film’s subversive mission, and the film’s mixed modality is one site of its dialectical confrontation with representation and history.

Found footage is a technique oriented toward the past, since it uses old, ephemeral, or appropriated materials marked by histories and outmoded contexts. It is typically affiliated with documentary and with history. Science fiction is a genre that typically uses artifice, fantasy and special effects to explore the nature of existence and to look into the future or other possible worlds. In its structure, Baldwin synthesizes these two influences to appropriately treat the past of a fictional future using images from real and fictional contemporary and historical moments.

In his discussion of “le revenant,” or “the spectre,” Jacques Derrida contributes a strange and evocative reading of the impact of media reproduction on critical analysis. Drawing upon a classic example from Hamlet, Derrida presents the specter as a figure that appears and forces us to confront the past. The specter is the right of inspection itself, but by becoming manifest, the specter’s presence stands for a recuperation of justice. Within the realm of cinema, the detourned image is “le revenant,” reappearing from any provenance, as material as any other image alongside it. But these images with visible traces of time and place bespeak judgment of what was seen and done before, and command by their very reappearance a critical assessment of the context of the present. They implore the spectator to ask, “Where does this come from and what does it mean? What does it mean to understand?” In Michael Zryd’s words, “While all images are potentially polyvalent in meaning, the montage structures of found footage collage and the heterogeneity of image sources invited by collage encourage critical reflection on the discourses embedded in and behind images.” [5]
As compilation films are edited, a variable additive series is created from the preexisting pieces, dislodging the viewer from any stable referent, drawing content from anywhere and anytime. According to Michael Atkinson,

one of the philosophical linchpins of found footage films is the arresting disparity between the filmmakers’ formal/political purposes and the intent of the original footage (it’s the only brand of movie in which every frame has two, often conflicting, authorial intentions). This, plus the fact that the very borrowing of images forces them to be nondefinitive.

However, found footage also necessarily speaks directly to the spectator, in one’s own cultural moment and in the parlance which comprises it, of one’s own relationship to each image and combination. The spectator’s own relation to spaces and times are what endow these found images with meaning. A detourned image bears a message the spectator can understand as uniquely uttered for oneself, despite its clear designation as a text created by others and for others in the past. Baldwin concretizes this theme in the plot of Spectres of the Spectrum wherein BooBoo searches for an encounter with a particular spectral image that possesses a hidden, encoded message only she can uncover. The layered contexts in a compilation film allow for many points of entry into the text and grant this aesthetic approach its characteristic polysemy. These features account for the practice’s popularity in avant-garde practices and yet compilation-based found footage film strategies also boast a particular relevance to documentary, or in Baldwin’s case, “pseudo-pseudo-documentarian” assessments of history and ethnography. [7] Found footage films tend to show images as images, presenting them not as evidence of events, but evidence of continually constructed representation. According to Catherine Russell,

dialectical images create a ‘now’ that is always transitory and momentary. The reference to the past in the form of an image produces the present as a moment in a historical continuum that is in perpetual change. [8]

Upon concluding his dialogue with The Ghost and receiving his mandate, Hamlet remarks that “The time is out of joint.” [9] Derrida treats the appearance of The Ghost as proof of a hidden potential for destabilizing time itself, thereby opening the world to strange and unimaginable possibilities. He asks, “what happens when time itself gets ‘out of joint,’ dis-jointed, disadjusted, disharmonic, discorded, or unjust? Ana-chronique? What does not happen in this anachrony!” [10] An exploration of the anachrony that results in the moment of the spectral encounter is the thematic and formal motivation of Baldwin’s Spectres of the Spectrum.
Found footage films perform cinematic time overtly in a reflexive and structural manner. They invigorate the cinematic spirit of time by using montage to reach across great distances of image provenance and utilize images whose reanimations grant them semantic life. There is a great diversity of effects that can be produced from detournement and appropriation but at their most radical they stridently confront temporal contextualization and reveal the infinite relativity of representational realism. In so doing, the practice of history is exposed as subjective, or worse, rhetorical. Baldwin suggests that this pervasive rhetoric must be overturned in a radical disruption. The specters he seeks cannot be tuned into by satellite, channeled on a sanctioned band, or found interlaced within the televised image. They must be resurrected from the blackness of non-representation and made new with the emblematic tool of cinema: the cut. Montage depends on the dialectic between every two colliding images. [11] Named for this fissure, for the nothingness from which significance emerges, is BooBoo: an angry, embodied wound, the representation of anti-authority, of female lack, an evolutionary accident. She embodies not just opposition to a representational paradigm but a negation of it: a “negative energy” that bleeds through the layered fabric of the film’s montage like an inky blot. BooBoo is uniquely endowed with the post-human ability to withstand and overpower the electromagnetic forces and traverse time. What better match for the specter from beyond the past than the time traveler from the post-apocalypse? It is the tachistoscopic informatics of the film that stands for the toxicity to which BooBoo is immune.

Her time machine, which resembles an Airstream mobile home on the outside and editing dock on the inside, functions as an electronic archive of the moving image, taking her back in time as she overtakes outwardly emanating waves of aged televisual transmissions. The bus is shown wobbling as if suspended by fishing line against a backdrop of a fuzzy galaxy. Asteroids, icebergs, and other threats besiege the time machine in the form of found footage images projected behind the Airstream. Inside, rather than steering and peering out of a window, BooBoo is attentively tuned into a small CRT display. Her mission as a “chrononaut” is to use the archive/time machine to travel back in broadcast time to locate her grandmother who appeared on television in the past, and extract the secret code she embedded to ensure victory against the New Electromagnetic Order and save the world. BooBoo performs a type of time travel that is best described as temporally disjointed channel surfing. When BooBoo locates her personal specter at the right moment in broadcast history, confronts the memory trace and receives her charge, it is to pass not only through images but to merge with them by becoming pure energy, a specter herself.

BooBoo expounds on that potentially fertile aspect of information broadcast: the only thing that differentiates energy from mass, the non-material from the material, and the only thing that differentiates representation from reality, is directionality:

“There is no such thing as matter. No thing. It is literally nothing. Mass is simply physics’ word for what happens when waves learn to store their energy in circles, not lines. And as to the oh-so-convenient illusion of empty space, it’s actually filled with an extremely rich subatomic continuum.”

Both aspects of this conceit motivate the transcendent theme of *Spectres*: by transforming from spectator to specter, she manifests a flattening of past, present and future, the mapped territory made accessible by the anachrony of the spectre’s appearance.

The real specter of this film is Marx, established by reference to *The Communist Manifesto* in the film’s beginning, with the reinterpretation of the “specter haunting the globe” as not that of communism, but of communication technologies’ mega-broadcast of electronic signals. Marx is further deployed through the thematic exploration of the movement from the law of opposites (fiction and fact muddle together and synthesize new sorts of truth), to the law of negation (represented by BooBoo from beyond the apocalypse), to the law of transformation (as she makes her great leap forward into the spectrum).

It is not coincidental that found footage films tend to examine points of no return in the modern
era: the holocaust, the atomic bomb, and here, the rise of mass media. These technological coups represent new eras in science, representation, and subjectivity. It is only natural that they should be represented in films that conceptually push toward the inversion of the relationship between subject and specter; the site at which the past, present, and future collapse into each other. If Spectres of the Spectrum “excavates a bomb-shelter’s worth of material,” as one critic wrote, the question instantly arises: What type of apocalypse allowed this material to survive in its archive-shelter? Are these images the surviving remnants of humanity? Spectres of the Spectrum, like other found footage films, examines injustice in the inhumanity of mediated reality, imagining the proliferation of representational media as accumulating unchecked, sanctioning an inevitable dystopia.

Spectres suggests that the way to disrupt the ascent of image culture from becoming the end-all, be-all form of representing experience, temporality, and history, is to confront anachrony and delve into the fissure between the virtual image and the real. In practical terms, Baldwin’s story prescribes an activist engagement with media representations. He insists the only means of navigating the cultural miasma of hyper-representation, by which indexicality can be encountered in a world defined by its representations, is to take refuge in the archive.

Amber Rae Bowyer is interested in the cognitive effects of moving image media, both as received experience and produced expression. She is especially interested in the stakes of realisms and the ability of visual media to portray abstract concepts such as temporality, as well as the roles of montage and appropriation in the creation of visual meaning.

End Notes

[2] Another interesting connection in these rich symbolic names is their provenance in Hanna Barbera’s The Yogi Bear Show, a hallmark production of limited animation, a strategy that reused animation cels in cycles to replicate movement and conserve production capital in the creation of an illusion of temporal realism. In this way, Yogi and BooBoo have always represented time-cheaters.