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FOUND FOOTAGE FILM AS DISCURSIVE METAHISTORY

MICHAEL ZRYD

Craig Baldwin's

Tribulation 99

A philosophical premise that's been around for a long, long time: if you want to know what's going on in a culture look at the things that everybody takes for granted, and put a lot of emphasis on that rather than what they want to show you. **BRUCE CONNER**



The found footage film is a specific subgenre of experimental (or avant-garde) cinema that integrates previously shot film material into new productions.¹ The etymology of the phrase suggests its devotion to uncovering “hidden meanings” in film material. “Footage” is an already archaic British imperial (and now American imperial) measure of film length, evoking a bulk of industrial product—waste, junk—within which treasures can be “found.” Found footage is different from archival footage: the archive is an official institution that separates historical record from the outtake;² much of the material used in experimental found footage films is *not* archived but from private collections, commercial stock shot agencies, junk stores, and garbage bins, or has literally been found in the street. Found footage filmmakers play at the margins, whether with the obscurity of the ephemeral³ footage itself

(filmmaker Nathaniel Dorsky likes to call it “lost” footage)⁴ or with the countercultural meanings excavated⁵ from culturally iconic footage. Found footage filmmaking is a metahistorical form commenting on the cultural discourses and narrative patterns behind history. Whether picking through the detritus of the mass mediascape or refinding (through image processing and optical printing) the new in the familiar, the found footage artist critically investigates the history *behind* the image, discursively embedded within its history of production, circulation, and consumption.

Craig Baldwin’s *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies under America* (USA, 1991) is one of the most complex North American found footage films produced in recent decades, and one that functions as a limit case of the experimental found footage film’s relation to history. While some have asserted that Baldwin’s practice is “obscure”⁶ or “cut off from the historical real” (Russell 1999, 269), I argue that the film less *represents* history than *analyzes* the historical discourses and political forces that motivate historical events. A committed leftist satire directed at American foreign policy and media culture, *Tribulation 99* shows how found footage collage, through metaphor and irony, can offer highly condensed metahistorical analysis and complex political critique.

Tribulation 99 uses an astonishingly heterogeneous collection of images. Composed entirely of found footage (with a few rephotographed still images and documents), the film culls its images both from ostensibly legitimate institutional sources of knowledge production (e.g., government documentaries and documents, newsreels, instructional and science films) and from unofficial sources not typically accorded legitimate status (e.g., B movies, science fiction, exploitation films, propaganda, advertising). At forty-eight minutes, and with its extremely rapid montage (some images appear on the screen for just a few frames), *Tribulation 99* is extraordinary in its density and length.⁷

While *Tribulation 99* emerges from the experimental found footage film tradition, it also functions as science fiction narrative and historical documentary.⁸ The film begins as the former: a whispered, conspiratorial voice-over describes an interplanetary invasion of menacing aliens named Quetzals who burrow underground, vowing the destruction of the United States, when they are threatened by World War II American nuclear tests. This fictional narrative quickly gains a nonfiction and historical dimension, however, when Baldwin superimposes a history of U.S. involvement in post-World War II Latin America onto the science fiction narrative, proposing that U.S. foreign policy was motivated by a need to respond to the threat of alien invasion. As the film progresses, Baldwin’s allegory becomes clear: Quetzals stand in for communists, as the film suggests that American political policy was motivated by a racist, paranoid, and apocalyptic fear more appropriate as a response to a threat from reptilian space invaders than to the

presence of democratically elected governments in the region. Just as George W. Bush employs the rhetoric of an “axis of evil” to vilify his enemies, so Baldwin suggests post–World War II U.S. administrations have literally demonized leftist governments in Latin America to justify covert operations, assassinations, support for military coups, the training of right-wing death squads, and human rights abuses. Right-wing forces constructed a communist conspiracy in order to justify a counterconspiracy of patriots to defend the United States and its interests abroad. While Baldwin’s satire mocks American foreign policy in Latin America and suggests its absurdity, it further critiques the ideological discourses and economic logics that still motivate this policy.

Baldwin’s satiric critique is facilitated by the film’s ironic voice-over. As Cicero puts it, irony is *dissimilatio*, saying one thing and meaning another (1979, III, liii, 203), contrasting a “said” with an “unsaid” meaning in order to create dissonance between an explicit meaning and an implicit, usually critical, meaning. Rather than adopt a sincere voice to criticize U.S. foreign policy, the film adopts the ironic voice of a rabid U.S. patriot,⁹ embodying the racist, right-wing, Christian fundamentalist values that, for Baldwin, buttress U.S. foreign policy (Baldwin calls this rhetorical move, “Fake right, and go left” [Sargeant 2001]). The “double-voicing” in *Tribulation 99*’s voice-over narration clearly marks the ironic intention;¹⁰ for example, over images of the Chiquita banana label, U.S. funding of Nicaraguan “contras” is explained:

U.S. President Ronald Reagan champions a compassionate campaign to re-supply the freedom-fighters with the machine-guns, C-4 plastic explosives, and other humanitarian weapons that they so desperately need in their struggle against literacy teachers, health clinics, and agricultural cooperatives.

On the image track, the title “60,000 Nicaraguans Are Killed” makes the excessive violence of this “campaign” clear, while the Chiquita label reminds us of how the economic interests of such corporations as the United Fruit Company motivated the subversion of leftist governments that might have nationalized its landholdings. Baldwin’s satire speaks the voice of racist, right-wing, apocalyptic ideology, inviting us to mock it—but not to dismiss its threat.

For this satire, in the tradition of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” and Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*, is as unsettling as it is argumentative.

The film’s densely layered assault of images and shock cuts, its disquieting ironic voice-over (mixed with abruptly edited layers of found sound and music), and the sheer brutality of the history that the film surveys often overwhelm the first-time viewer of the film, raising questions about the film’s political effectiveness.

Catherine Russell offers the most incisive critique of *Tribulation 99*. She calls the film an important example of postmodern film collage, but one that ultimately fails on political terms. I isolate three objections she raises to the film. First, she argues, “In the void created by the onslaught of images, the possibility of historical resistance to the military-industrial complex is eclipsed” (1999, 262) as the film’s apocalyptic ending seems to offer no options outside the overwhelming forces the film depicts. Russell accurately describes a common audience response to the film. When I have screened *Tribulation 99* in the classroom, many students report feeling lost, overwhelmed, and confused regarding the status of the truths and fictions presented there. Tyler McLeod of the *Calgary Sun*, in a rare review of the film in a mainstream newspaper (1999), complains that “the information just blasts past you until your eyes glaze over,” although he does acknowledge that the film will appeal to a “limited audience.” Baldwin defends the difficulty of his films by stating that he explicitly directs his artistic practice to a “sub-cultural . . . micro-cinema movement” whose members embody a “radical subjectivity” (quoted in Spencer 2001). This split between mainstream and subculture appeal, and the split it signals between reformist and radical political strategies, raises empirical questions of political effectivity beyond the scope of this essay, but which resonate with debates over left-activist political tactics in the 1990s and early 2000s.

I would argue that this spectator-effect of excess and inundation is essential to the film’s embodiment of conspiracy theory and its claustrophobic, hermetic logic: the overwhelming torrent of images mimics the seemingly overwhelming forces of history, as *Tribulation 99* evocatively captures the ethos of right-wing apocalyptic thinking with its desperation and unreflective self-righteousness. Richard Hofstadter has described the deep roots that conspiracy theory has in American culture but notes a crucial distinction: “There is a difference between locating conspiracies in history and saying that history is, in effect, a conspiracy” (1955, 64). *Tribulation 99*’s voice-over narration conveys the basic facts of what is now a well-documented, actual conspiracy in history (U.S. covert operations in Latin America) but adopts the voice of history-as-conspiracy common to U.S. militia groups and literalized in fundamentalist Christianity: history’s *telos* is apocalypse as promised in the Book of Revelations. Although it can be argued that the film’s satirical tactic weakens the pedagogical clarity of its political critique, I would argue that it deepens *Tribulation 99*’s political analysis of historical forces by calling attention to and embodying the dangerous hermeticism of conspiracy theory. As metahistory, *Tribulation 99* points to how the conspiracy narrative facilitates exploitation and violence, raising the stakes of historical action.¹¹

Second, Russell sees the film as “cut off from the historical real” (1999, 269); she writes that *Tribulation 99* “is an extremely ambivalent film, symptomatic of its own paranoid strategies that ultimately curtail the possibility of historical agency in the inaccessibility of a ‘real’ outside the onslaught of images” (263). The “real” may seem inaccessible in the film, but perhaps this is because the film’s textures and structure mimic the image saturation and chaos of contemporary media culture itself; in one very “real” way, the “real” exists *in* the onslaught of images. The ironic voice of the film does not permit it to dramatize activist resistance in its narrative—but that does not necessarily “curtail the possibility of historical agency” nor deny the grounding of the film’s reference to real political events. The film’s field of resistance is in discourse itself, and in the ways in which viewers are challenged to sort through the “onslaught of images” for critical meaning. *Tribulation 99* undoubtedly lacks clear didactic power, and the range of ambivalent responses to Baldwin’s work is a consequence of its textual heterogeneity and the interpretative demands it makes on viewers. The viewer is charged not only with the work of critical reflection and speculation necessary to retrieve historical memory and construct historical understanding, but also with fighting the paranoid discursive structures that threaten to make history a conspiracy, whether real or imagined.

Russell’s third objection accuses the film of a “refusal of coherence” as she argues that its heterogeneity of found footage sets up a powerful but ultimately arbitrary and “impossible network of metonymic relations” (259–60):

Baldwin’s collage is drawn from an image bank so vast that it suggests the wholesale obliteration of linear memory. Images are recalled instead by arbitrary links to storage in this postmodern variant of the found footage film.

Mobilizing these images as cultural documents, *Tribulation 99* functions as a kind of random-access memory of American Cold War culture. (261–62)

Russell’s computer metaphor is appropriate—but I think that a hypertext version of this film would uncover not arbitrary or “random-access” memory, but an extraordinarily complex form of historical memory that, while it rarely pictures historical events, nonetheless references a wide-ranging set of historical discourses.

The “onslaught of images” and the apparent “refusal of coherence” are important indexes of the film’s ability to embody (perhaps all too successfully for some viewers) the disempowering force of the mediascape that facilitates the ideological operations of American culture.



Figure 1. *Tribulation 99* (1991). Frame enlargement courtesy Craig Baldwin.

Rather than an impossible network of meanings, the metonymic and metaphorical strategies of the film work

as a condensation, dense but not illegible, of the historical discourses that *enable* historical events, probing historical motivation, causation, and consequences. Russell is correct in asserting that history in *Tribulation 99* is not referential in the tangible sense, but I would argue that its articulation and analysis are referential of the discursive forces behind historical events: the rhetoric of history rather than the representation of history.

In the remainder of this essay, I will attempt to demonstrate *Tribulation 99*'s density of discursive historical analysis. But before doing so, I want to interrogate the historicity of found footage itself: why does archival and found footage seem so resonant with history and cultural memory? Part of the power of *Tribulation 99*'s structure, which pushes viewers, as Baldwin says, "out to meaning,"¹² is rooted in the ways that the film captures the potential polyvalence, ambiguity, and discursive density of found footage itself. After examining the promise and problematic of the photographic image's power as evidence of history, I will outline some broad patterns of archival and found footage use in documentary and experimental cinema, taking up Paul Arthur's suggestion that such footage has tended to be used figuratively rather than evidentially in film history. I will examine how this figuration mobilizes the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of found

footage, meanings that, through ironic recontextualization, open up layers of discursive meaning. The “historicity” of found footage, resonant with historical fact, memory, and emotion, emerges from the cultural politics of its production, and most important, its circulation as a symbolic commodity.

Found footage films attain force as critical, powerfully condensed apprehensions of the ideological discourses that structure and enable the circulation of images, discourses that facilitate historical analysis and political critique.¹³

Photographic images seem to carry the promise of the true and accurate representation of history. When we look at footage of the U.S. military helicopters utilized in the invasion of Grenada in 1983, we seem to be seeing the historical event itself, represented and captured at the time that the image was exposed. This is the fundamental contract that the nonfiction image establishes with the viewer through the automaticity of photographic technology: the promise of historical evidence with both immediacy (the iconic power of resemblance to reality) and a guarantee of veracity (the indexical power of the photographic image as an imprint of time). We trust the photograph because we know it was made automatically. But this same knowledge of the production process of the image dictates that we question the image as well. Any image can be faked. What happened just before the camera started and after it stopped? What happens out of frame? Into what story is the image inserted and how is that image implicitly and explicitly harnessed for historical narrative?

These questions do not entail thorough scepticism of a photographic image’s truth claims. Yet they do undermine the false *certainty* that the photographic image promises. History does not reside, in a simplistic way, *in* the image; the capacity of the image to serve as historical evidence lies in the contextual framing of the image, what we have been told (or what we recognize) about the image. Who took it and why? Where was it taken, when, and how?

As contemporary documentary film theory demonstrates, the evidential, indexical quality of the photographic image does not signify as evidence until it has been rhetorically framed as such to support or refute argumentative propositions (even a proposition as simple as the basic claim of *vérité* articulated by Bill Nichols, “This is so, isn’t it?”).¹⁴ John Tagg demonstrates that photographs and film have no legal status as evidence in most North American and British courts without contextual warrants determining the time and place the image was taken, the identity of the photographer, and the production conditions of the image.¹⁵ Rarely does an image “speak for itself,” although

it is often rhetorically framed to suggest that it can.¹⁶ All film footage is, in fact, extraordinarily malleable, its meaning and significance provided by context as much as by image “content.” Historical reference shifts away from exact factual evidence of historical events tied indexically to a particular space and time, to the symbolic evocation of discourses, to social memory, and to patterns of thought, belief, and ideology. Experimental found footage films mark a specific mode of film montage that hyperbolizes this malleability, recontextualizing footage to foreground and critique the discourses behind the image. As William Wees says, all archival and found footage films “present images *as images*, as representations of the image-producing apparatus of cinema and television, but collage also promotes an analytical and critical attitude toward its images and their institutional sources” (Wees 1992, 53; emphasis in original). In short, 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.

Paul Arthur describes the slippery use of archival and found footage as evidence in his essay, “On the Virtues and Limitations of Collage” (1997). Here, Arthur delineates a commonly held distinction between “mainstream documentaries versus experimental essays” that relies on an assumption of “two ontologies of found footage” (4). The first, “realist” use of found footage in the mainstream documentary, tends to be “illustrative or analogical,” as archival footage acts as evidence to support the sound track, usually a voice-over that articulates the central argument and, in effect, “captions” the image.¹⁷ The second “ontology” is what Arthur calls the “figurative” or metaphorical use of found footage in experimental film essays (4). Ultimately, he asserts that most footage, even in nonexperimental cinema, functions *both* metaphorically and illustratively, especially in the “generic” image common to mainstream documentary: “many, if not the majority, of illustrative instances in documentary collage are understood not as literal but figurative representations of their subjects” (5). For example, in the classic U.S. documentary *The River* (1937, Pare Lorentz), while the voice-over describes the rise of nineteenth-century industrialization, the image track depicts trees falling, cotton loading, and other general icons of industrial progress. The footage is not evidence of this industrialization (obviously, it was not shot in the mid-1800s) but figurative: industrialization would have looked *like* this. Arthur provides an example from the U.S. World War II propaganda *Why We Fight* series (1941–1945, Frank Capra) “in which the exact same piece of footage of a woman in a kerchief rushing anxiously along a bombed-out street is used in three different episodes supposedly set in three different countries” (7). In most contemporary documentary practice, exact evidential illustration is the exception rather than the rule, and,

Arthur contends, the “expressive, figurative dimensions of collage” (7) are more prevalent in documentary film than commonly acknowledged.

Since the first decade of film history, filmmakers have used archival and found footage for figurative purposes, recontextualizing images to suit different scenarios and arguments. Whether excerpting footage from already released films, researching footage in government or corporate archives and commercial stock shot libraries, or rescuing footage from garbage bins behind film laboratories, these filmmakers have wrenched new meaning and frames of understanding from this material.

In *Films Beget Films*, an early study of the compilation film, Jay Leyda cites an example from 1898 of Francis Doublier constructing a loose narrative depicting the Dreyfus affair out of several actualities and staged one-shot films unrelated to the Dreyfus case, recycling images from an existing corporate catalog to construct a new film (1964, 13–14). Narrative filmmaking studios developed stock shot libraries as an economical way to avoid shooting redundant generic location shots for their fiction features and shorts. Stock shots generally blend seamlessly into production footage or else mark a story’s roots in history, as in historical biographies. In documentary, the specific subgenre of the compilation film uses previously shot footage, but subjects this footage to a variety of rhetorical ends, some critical (e.g., films by Shub, Romm, Storck, De Antonio, Resnais, among others), but more often for simple chronicles.¹⁸

Perhaps the most common figurative dimension of both archival and found footage is its power as cultural icon. Iconic images have a remarkable potential for condensation, for compressed historical “memory” framed as illustratively mythic or ironic.¹⁹ Mainstream texts work off what Joel Katz calls “a new vernacular of film history” that has “produced an increasingly codified, conventionalized and unproblematized practice” (1991, 96). The vast majority of archival film use, growing out of the commercial stock shot industry, follows and feeds this construction and perpetuation of iconography. Iconic footage acquires its cultural resonance largely through repetition. I worked for five years in New York for a large stock footage company, Archive Films, where it became clear that the preference for almost all mainstream image producers, and especially for those in advertising and television, was for iconic images over rare or historically accurate footage. The imperative was to find footage that could “read” quickly and unambiguously, i.e., tap into the familiar discourses and meanings that were meant to be invoked. Certain footage



Figure 2. *Tribulation 99* (1991). Frame enlargement courtesy Craig Baldwin.

requests were so predictable that in-house compilation tapes of frequently requested images were compiled. Archive Films' "History of the Twentieth Century" tape condensed a century of world history into less than two hours. It covered mostly U.S. historical events, and, of course, anything that wasn't on film wasn't history.

Archival and found footage is ripe for the work of both illustration and irony because it can so economically signify and read official institutional discourses: its iconography is the quintessence of stereotype. As filmmaker Yann Beauvais puts it, "The quotation functions better for the very quality of cliché within it" (1992, 21). Found footage fragments can function as "synecdoches for the contexts from which they were drawn" (Peterson 1992, 57), the image part standing in economically for the whole ideological matrix that produced it.

As James Peterson suggests, the symbolic power of the iconic, metonymic image can also be used critically *against* the official discourse that produces and sanctions it: "With found footage compilation, filmmakers engaged American culture by appropriating its iconography and developed strategies and structures for criticizing the culture that provided their material."²⁰ Baldwin calls this strategy "media jujitsu": "use the weight of this absurd, preposterous belief [against itself] and you turn it around and critique [it]"

through the “symbolic agility” of the artist (quoted in Halter 1999). He suggests the more discursive power generated in the iconic image, the greater the potential effect of the ironic reversal to use the power of a cultural icon against itself. Ironic recontextualization mines the subversive potential inherent in much archival footage’s source as official discourse, whether located in the sphere of government, corporate sponsorship, or the entertainment/news media industry. The footage speaks anew as evidence—but less as evidence of an event than as evidence of the folly of the official discourses from which the archival footage springs.

In experimental cinema, a wider variety of subgenres use previously shot footage.²¹ Some interrogate Hollywood and/or film history, whether to examine the iconography of the star (transcendently in Joseph Cornell’s *Rose Hobart* [USA, 1939], ironically in Mark Rappaport’s *Rock Hudson’s Home Movies* [USA, 1992]),²² or the tropes of film language (e.g., Gustav Deutsch’s *Film ist* series [Austria, 1998–2002] or Peter Delpout’s *Lyrical Nitrate* [1991]). Others treat a single body of film to rigorous examination to construct an alternative history from the footage (e.g., Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucci’s *From the Pole to the Equator* [Italy, 1986], which reedits the travelogues of early Italian cinematographer Luca Comerio to expose their neocolonial ideology [Russell 1999, 58]). Craig Baldwin’s films are in the tradition of the influential American artist Bruce Conner, who began making found footage films with *A Movie* in 1958 and whose legacy is found in a large and diverse group of artists that includes Baldwin, Abigail Child, Julie Murray, Leslie Thornton, and many others. Conner and subsequent artists explore the metaphorical qualities of found footage, finding ambiguity and revelation in both the recognizable iconic image, resonant with cultural and historical connotation, and detritus, the seemingly inconsequential footage whose very banality and ubiquity is made resonant of mass media by experimental found footage filmmakers.²³

Filmmaker Standish Lawder discusses how “hidden meaning” is extracted through ironic decontextualization:

Decontextualisation is a lumbering term, but it does the job. Original context is obliterated. The shot is re-presented in a new context and, invariably, with a different sound track. Stripped of its original context, the shot becomes veiled with layers of speculation, subjective evocation and poetic ambiguity. Questions of intentionality and meaning become slippery. The true significance of the *a priori* original image hovers just off-screen; we cannot be certain exactly *why* it was filmed. Yet *what* was filmed remains firmly fixed, only now surrounded by a thousand possible new *whys*. (Lawder 1992, 113–15; emphasis in original)



Figure 3. *Tribulation 99* (1991). Frame enlargement courtesy Craig Baldwin.

The new framing of the footage through montage posits the question of *why* footage was filmed. For example, the “why” of the footage of U.S. military helicopters in Grenada—the historical motivations for the existence of the footage—might be banal (e.g., evidence of the use of helicopters in that military operation), straightforwardly supportive of the motives of the filming institution (e.g., military-supplied footage for news media release symbolizing U.S. military efficiency and power), or recontextualized, as Baldwin does, to read critically (e.g., to signify excessive U.S. aggression in the region).²⁴

Decontextualization creates ambiguity but also opens up footage to wider and fuller recognition of its historical contexts.²⁵

Baldwin intentionally embraces the ambiguity and richness of potential meaning in found footage collage: “You can go in any direction. That’s the nature of found footage. . . . I like that kind of proliferation and multiplication—opening out, and a kind of complexity and layering, layering, layering” (quoted in Wees 1993, 12). *Tribulation 99* structurally replicates these proliferating, multiplying layers in its collage structure, exposing the hidden layers of historical discourse that underlie the ideological forces behind U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. The film’s method is ironic, proposing an absurd ostensible explanation—underground aliens—that mocks the real absurdity and

pernicious politics of U.S. imperialism: a paranoid and self-interested fear of autonomous political action in the region. Baldwin's ironic double-voicing emphasizes historical parallels between ideological discourses in the past and those of the present, using archaic—and hence noticeable—forms of propaganda to illuminate contemporary political ideology. Baldwin uses what he calls “parallax view”²⁶ to expose invisible contemporary ideology—what he calls the United States “being flush with the arrogance of ruling the world”—through the visibly dated ideology of older found footage texts:

“It looks ludicrous in the 50s, so I just used that as a mirror to criticize the 90s. It’s just unabashed, unashamed propaganda—all you need to do is turn it over and it’ll just shoot itself in the foot” (quoted in Halter 1999).

In *Tribulation 99*, the parallax view juxtaposes the explicit and hysterical anticommunist rhetoric of the 1940s and 1950s Cold War—era footage with images of Oliver North, CIA head George Bush, and U.S. invasions of Granada and Panama, linking the ideological projects of both past and present eras.

To conclude, I will examine a single piece of found footage mobilized by *Tribulation 99* to demonstrate how ironic recontextualization performs metahistorical analysis of cultural discourses. Baldwin describes *Tribulation 99* as a “pseudo-pseudo documentary.” But where fake documentaries typically use conventional documentary formats to fashion ironic fictions, Baldwin fakes a particular subgenre of marginal documentary film—the “pseudo documentary” in Baldwin’s terms—which range from “science” documentaries like *Chariots of the Gods* (Germany, 1970, Harald Reinl) and *The Hellstrom Chronicle* (USA, 1971, Walon Green/Ed Spiegel) to far-right conspiracy narratives (post-1950s anticommunist films like *The Commies Are Coming*, *The Commies Are Coming* [aka *Red Nightmare*, USA, 1962, George Waggner]), to fundamentalist Christian apocalyptic warning films. At one simple level, Baldwin is satirizing this obscure subgenre and its preposterous melding of exploitation and crackpot conspiracy thinking in which UFO fanatics, right-wing militias, and Christian fundamentalists indulge. But Baldwin is not dismissive of these texts; rather, he takes them seriously as distilled manifestations of extreme political positions—and metahistorical narratives—that he posits as fundamental to U.S. political culture. Right-wing militarism, motivated by the Christian template of history, is not marginal but central—still—to dominant American government and ideology.

One such “pseudo documentary” taken up by Baldwin, the 1970 film adaptation of Erich von Däniken’s popular book *Chariots of the Gods*, proposes that aliens have

been visiting Earth for millennia, and Däniken finds evidence in everything from Ezekiel to Egyptian and Inca archaeology. Baldwin proposes that Däniken's speculations reflect an ethnocentric metanarrative of Western superiority when claiming that the technological achievements of these civilizations were bequeathed by, in the voice-over narration's words, "bearded, light-skinned" space visitors—a condensation of European (i.e., white) and Christian influence in the image of Jesus-like extraterrestrials. Baldwin "quotes" several shots from the film, including its superimposition of a space-walking U.S. astronaut over the outline of an ancient rock painting. This simplified abstraction reproduces the simplified and abstracting logic of Däniken's argument, which superimposes the icon of Western technological prowess over non-Western archaeology, paternalistically constructing it as mythic and barbaric. Crucially, this image quotation locates the rhetoric of cultural superiority in a convergence of metanarratives of race and technology. U.S. foreign policy in the region is primarily motivated by economic investment and facilitated by materially superior military and economic power. The ideological matrix of Däniken's text legitimizes the terms of this superiority and suggests that any knowledge or wealth already possessed by other civilizations comes from "light-skinned" space visitors, embodied in the primary claim for U.S. cultural superiority, its symbolic victory in the space race.²⁷ Baldwin's quotation from *Chariots of the Gods* evokes, then, a whole range of ideological discourses that support *Tribulation 99*'s larger critique of U.S. presumption of cultural superiority, a presumption that enables its intervention in Latin America.²⁸

Anticommunist hysteria (embodied in *Tribulation 99* by appearances by Cold Warriors like John Foster Dulles and more recent far-right figures like Oliver North and George Bush Sr.) has been used since the 1940s as a front for American political and economic imperialism. This hysteria is hyperbolized in the film by making imaginary communists into imaginary aliens—and human rights abuses do not apply when directed against inhuman aliens.²⁹ Baldwin mobilizes many of the metaphors for communism familiar from U.S. 1950 propaganda and science fiction (disease, degeneracy, automata, thought control), especially their tropes of underground subversion and false appearances. In the paranoid logic of the Cold War, the deceptive nature of communism dictated an equally deceptive response, a whole range of covert activities that implicitly distinguished between good deception and bad deception, good conspiracies and bad conspiracies. This logic was in turn used to justify a deeper covert strategy as anticommunist political rhetoric veiled a more fundamental economic imperialism. On the one hand, *Tribulation 99*'s historical interrogation becomes a metahistorical critique of how American historical narratives are structured by apocalypse and conspiracy; Baldwin finds, in the detritus of media culture, apt illustrations for the prevailing racist, right-wing, and

Christian apocalyptic ideologies. For Baldwin, the enabling discourses behind the historical forces that stir historical events are embedded in his found footage, their meaning activated and released through ironic recontextualization in sound and image montage, and the specific ideological “voices” dramatized and ironized in the film.

On the other hand, the film deals with the deception perpetrated by the U.S. government in the name of national interest (resisting communism) but actually for unspoken U.S. government and corporate interests. Covert activities are done in the name of the good but not in the name of truth—just like Baldwin’s fake documentary. But Baldwin’s fake is not a fraud as, like all fake documentaries, it marks its ironic frame: Baldwin’s “fake deception” offers political critique.

Made during George Bush Sr.’s presidency, and released around the period of the Gulf War in Iraq and Kuwait, *Tribulation 99* presents a dark metahistorical narrative of ideological forces that continue, during George W. Bush’s presidency and his “war” against terrorism, to threaten to obliterate understanding and responsibility for the global operations of power in U.S. culture. The film’s paranoia and sense of apocalyptic threat are symptomatic of the dark mood of American leftist activism at the end of the Bush Sr. presidency. *Tribulation 99* is obviously not a realistic representation of historical events, but it captures the deeper ideological energies at stake in historical discourses and narratives of the post–World War II period. This hyperbolic—and historically grounded—

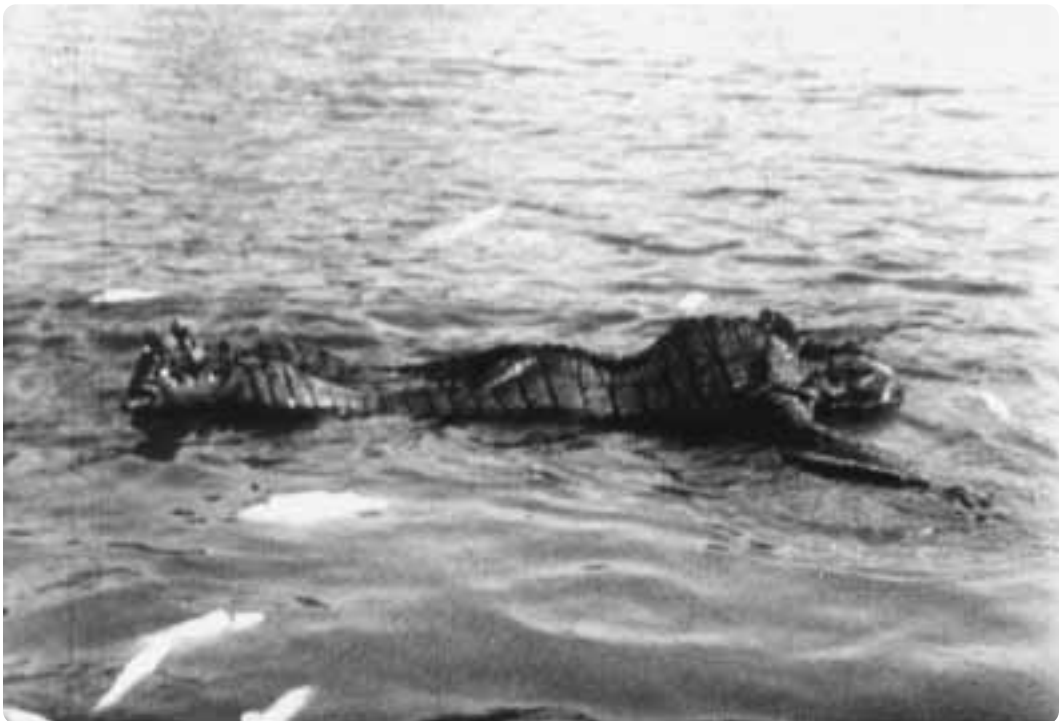


Figure 4. *Tribulation 99* (1991). Frame enlargement courtesy Craig Baldwin.

critique through found footage collage presents a form of rhetorical analysis that engages larger and specific ideological systems of knowledge and value, figuratively going underground with the film's Quetzals to bring the spectator closer to the forces and motives of history. *Tribulation 99* ultimately wants to make ideology visible, to make evident the value claims that inhere in any ideological position, whether they are the justifications for U.S. involvement in Latin America or corporate control over media, as in Baldwin's subsequent film, *Spectres of the Spectrum* (USA, 1999). *Tribulation 99* contains extremes, both uncontroversial truth claims and completely fantastic fictions, partly to foreground the fantastic nature of the truth claims of covert U.S. government and corporate forces. The film mimics the duplicitous voice of U.S. covert operations and hyperbolizes the logics underlying U.S. foreign policy to a paranoid degree with the allegory of alien invasion.

Baldwin uses found footage to point away from referential reality to larger ideological and discursive systems of thought and value, and makes found footage speak anew its historical richness.

NOTES

I would like to thank Robin Curtis and Tess Takahashi for their patient and invaluable attention to this project. I have been invigorated and challenged by discussions about found footage with the following colleagues: Paul Arthur, Catherine Russell, Jeff Vanderwal, William Wees. The critical comments of several anonymous reviewers from *Montage a/v* and *The Moving Image* also helped clarify the arguments I was trying to make (and a few that I hadn't realized I was making). Craig Baldwin was generous enough to grant a personal interview in Toronto, and I have benefited from many other informal exchanges with him.

1. Although found footage films tend to feature deliberate eclecticism of material, the term "found footage" has sometimes been loosely used to describe any film that uses footage not photographed by the filmmaker. Although I will make a distinction between films that use "found footage" and "archival footage," the separation is maintained neither by critics writing on the films nor by filmmakers themselves, who use footage from all sources, including the archive.
2. Thanks to Robin Curtis for this formulation.
3. American film collector Rick Prelinger coined the term "ephemeral film" to describe films made for local and temporary purposes, such as industrial and educational films, advertising, home movies, travelogues, or films produced by religious groups, governments, and unions. See Prelinger 1994.
4. Thanks to Phil Solomon for this anecdote.
5. Many found footage artists, including Baldwin, use the loose metaphor of "archaeology" to describe their work; see Arthur 1997; Child 1992; Katz 1991; and Sandusky 1992.

- 6.** Megan Spencer reports that at the Seventh Annual International Documentary Conference in Perth, Australia, cinema vérité documentarist Richard Leacock found Baldwin's work "obscure" (Spencer 2001).
- 7.** Most found footage films are five to fifteen minutes long, with a few exceptions that William Wees calls "epic collage." His examples include Abigail Child's *Is This What You Were Born For* (1981–1989), Keith Sanborn's *KAPITAL!* (1980–1987), and Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* (1984–present). See Wees 1993, 48–58.
- 8.** Baldwin conceives his work as nonfiction but rejects the conventionality of the term "documentary": "I'm not eager to embrace the term documentary, even though in a larger sense they would fall under that rubric. I like the idea of argument or essay or consciousness raiser. Or rant, actually, is what I really like" (quoted in Spencer 2001).
- 9.** The book version of the film says that the film reveals the findings of "Retired Airforce Colonel Craig Baldwin" (Baldwin 1991).
- 10.** Irony, like all tropes of indirection, is prone to being misinterpreted. As Linda Hutcheon says, irony is "risky" in relation to the gap that can arise between authorial intention and spectator-effect; viewers do not always "get" irony. Ironic markers indicating ironic intention can appear in the text or may only exist outside, as with fake documentaries that are framed as ironic by publicity, introductions at screenings (or post-screening discussion), or word of mouth. It is certainly possible that a viewer with no foreknowledge of Baldwin's politics could read the film "straight" as a paranoid, right-wing rant (Hutcheon 1994).
- 11.** Baldwin's film, moreover, retains a devotion to play and humor that is mostly foreign to conspiracy culture. For example, compare *Tribulation 99* with the dour hysteria of the U.S. television series *The X-Files* (1993–2002), which premiered two years after *Tribulation 99* was released. *The X-Files* shares the film's conceit (aliens plan the conquest of the United States with the complicity of government and industrial elites) and demonstrates how conspiracy thinking had become mainstream by the early 1990s. Notably, when humor was injected into the series, it appeared in "stand-alone" episodes separate from the superserious tone of the "mythology" episodes that articulated the alien-government conspiracy plotline. *Tribulation 99* fully embodies the totalizing logic of conspiracy theory, lacking the ultimately reassuring narrative agency of *The X-Files'* incorruptible protagonists, Mulder and Scully, and invoking the actual consequences of conspiracy in Latin American history.
- 12.** Baldwin claims to make "speculative documentaries . . . that don't lead you to 'x' point"; rather, he says their form is centrifugal, pushing people "out to meaning" (Baldwin 2000).
- 13.** For more on the "historicity" of found footage, see Katz 1991.
- 14.** See Nichols 1991, 114. See also Carroll 1997; Plantinga 1997; Tagg, *Burden of Representation*, 1988; Tagg, "Proof of the Picture," 1988; and Winston (1995) who, despite their theoretical disagreements, agree on the limitations of film's evidential signification.
- 15.** For more on the legal limitations of film evidence, see Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 1988.

16. The botched prosecution strategy in the 1991 Rodney King criminal case in Los Angeles is an example of a rhetorical strategy that attempted to let visual evidence “speak for itself”; the police defense team treated the tape of the beating as “text” and was able to frame and interpret the tape to fit its argument. See Nichols 1994.

17. For an expanded discussion of the caption as a trope of language/image relations, see Barthes 1977.

18. For example, *Why We Fight*, in addition to using Hollywood stock shot libraries, draws on documentary footage taken from U.S. government productions and enemy newsreels and propaganda. Images of mass rallies from Leni Reifenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (Germany, 1934) are used both to illustrate threat (the menace of the mass) and to ridicule regimentation: the footage is used against its original political will, but is still embedded with its political and historical intentions. In the USSR, Dziga Vertov established his own archive of montage fragments, while in *The Rise and Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) his compatriot Esfir Shub reedits the czar’s own home movies and newsreels to expose and foreground the ideological presumptions that inhered in the production of the original footage. Shub’s montage recontextualizes the once celebratory discourse of the original footage, providing an ironic perspective that questions the images and their enabling logics of empire and class. See Vertov 1984, 58–60.

19. For example, a single shot of the Apollo 11 moon walk can function as metonym to evoke U.S. national pride, Cold War victory in the space race, and the triumph of technology. Found footage, in general, signifies metaphorically when it evokes wider and disparate meaning contexts, but since its images are concrete fragments torn from the world and from other texts, it could be argued that found footage is metonymical.

20. Peterson 1992, 75. Peterson provides a detailed examination of how found footage functions as metaphor, including its cognitive and political ramifications.

21. As early as 1930, Luis Buñuel incorporated documentary footage of Rome into an avant-garde film, *L’age d’or*. In *Recycled Images*, William Wees’s encyclopedic survey of found footage filmmakers, he lists the following distribution of films by decade: 6 in the 1930s, 4 in the 1940s, 3 in the 1950s, 48 in the 1960s, 56 in the 1970s, 105 in the 1980s. Published in 1993, it lists 39 films made in the 1990s; many more have been made since.

22. For an insightful discussion of experimental films that rework Hollywood footage, see Wees 2002.

23. For more on “detritus cinema,” see MacKenzie 1998.

24. Similarly, the “why” of the Apollo 11 moon walk footage might be posited as sincere (e.g., America’s technological superiority as a nation mandates that it be the first to land on the moon) or recontextualized to read critically (e.g., America’s frontier myth of conquest and its economic imperative of expansion is sustained through maintaining imaginary frontiers like space, and displaces public criticism from domestic and foreign policy activities).

25. This account of image decontextualization and recontextualization echoes “détournement,” a pivotal strategy of Situationists like Guy Debord

and René Vienet, and an explicit influence cited by Baldwin on his collage practice. Space does not permit a full discussion of the parallels between North American found footage filmmaking and the European Situationists, nor of the still undocumented question of the influence of Situationist ideas on the North American avant-garde (or vice versa—both Bruce Conner and Guy Debord made found footage films in the late 1950s). For an excellent overview of Situationist aesthetics and politics and their affinities with Surrealism, see Wollen 1990, 20–61. An extensively researched history of Situationist film practice is found in the same volume in an essay by Thomas Y. Levin (1990).

26. Baldwin: “I call it parallax view. The way you see depth is through stereoscopic vision, through viewing two time periods, the fifties, the nineties. You see, ah, this pattern emerging” (quoted in Lu 1999).

27. But Baldwin reverses the alien superiority; rather than white folks from the sky bringing civilization, the Quetzal aliens are forced underground and take reptilian form.

28. First-time viewers cannot, of course, “read” all of these meanings—and they can even be opaque to a knowledgeable viewer. Faced with this density, viewers may seek the historical real as a grounding space. Catherine Russell’s critical response to the film legitimately decries the distance between the historical referent and Baldwin’s image barrage, a symptom of the film’s powerful effect. My own response—to propose a coherence and historical logic embedded in the film—is perhaps motivated by an obsessive need to find some order to quell the epistemological panic induced by the film.

29. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service classifies all non-American citizens as “aliens.”

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