

Anita Budimir: From found footages to video appropriation

It seemed quite a convenient decision to dedicate selection for the World Day for Audiovisual Heritage to video appropriation practice, a technique of finding new concepts by selecting, combining and manipulating found footages. Appropriation is one of the oldest art practices, it dates back to folk tale transmitting from prehistoric times. Appropriation in cinema exists from the beginning of film. The earliest recordings were made from the newsreel materials by a Lumiere's projectionist. Soon it became the most used documentary form, as it is still today. The so called appropriated, archival or found footages are used to confirm facts and visually envisage the aimed idea. In between and during the two World Wars, different enemy fronts often used the same footages to support their propaganda, thus confirming Kuleshov experiment, in other words footages dependence on the context. In 1920s a new artistic appropriation emerged called *collage film*. Unlike documentary found footage practices, collage films did not confirm an idea of the original footages concept. Rather contrary, by selecting and combining materials from mass media and dominant film production, they contradicted them, found new contexts, and often constructed critique of the source material content. Using the materials from mass media, film, advertising, war propaganda, educational program, even pornography, combining and manipulating them, collage filmmakers brought up cultural taboos, alternative thinking and created constructive criticism of unlimited topics, from military regimes to consumerism. Also, the early 20th century art movements such as cubism, dada and surrealism greatly affected the creation of the collage film, aesthetically and philosophically. First recorded work is *Crossing the Great Sagrada*, by British director Adrian Brunel. He used parts of film *Crossing the Great Sahara* and created parody of the new and popular travelogue genre, that was characterised by colonialist and racist impressions of the newly discovered cultures.

In former Yugoslavia, famous found footage usage was marked in films *W.R. Mysteries of the organism* and *Plastic Jesus*, made by Serbian directors **Dušan Makavejev** and **Lazar Stojanović** in 1971. Both feature films express need for individual, sexual and artistic freedom of expression, using propaganda footages from different regimes and presenting them as the same idea of control and repression. Due to high level of censorship, this kind of filmmaking proved to be radical at the time and both films were banned from public screening until 1986.

In the beginning of 1960s with the emerging of video technology, respectively with the Sony Portapak release on the market, artists from various spheres gathered, interested in exploring new ways to undermine the boundaries of expression, find new audio visual possibilities and build new narratives and purposes, independent from the dominant TV and film production. Proudly called, video artists continued collage tradition of appropriating materials, challenging concept limits imposed by mass media.

One of significant video appropriation examples is *Wonder Woman* (1978) by video art pioneer **Dara Birnbaum**, which repetitiously uses scenes with the action heroine from the homonymous film. Through her work, she stresses the issue of presentation of women in mass media and later on initiates feminist video movement.

Regarding important influence of video on Yugoslav art, curator Biljana Tomić noted “In its early years, Yugoslav video shared the pioneering role in the formation of international video culture. Its history began simultaneously with appearance of the new art practices in the late sixties and early seventies. New artistic exploration in Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade appeared at the same time as conceptual art, land art and arte povera. For the group of younger Yugoslav artist this was an important moment that opened the doors of communication with, and integration of Yugoslavia into, world art movements. Yugoslav artist began to express new ideas about their consciousness and the functioning, place and role of art in contemporary society.”¹

Namely, in Slovenian alternative scene a specific interest in video art subgenres evolved; such as music video and dance video. As far as material appropriation goes, the topics of socialist regime, motives such as dictator Josip Broz Tito speeches, Yugoslav RTV News reels as well as industrial footages, it continued in analogue practice with vivid examples in Laibach music videos.

Subtly political, works selected for this program bring up taboos, investigate current topics and put to question our (audiovisual) heritage. The program overviews video practices characterized by an appropriation technique and exhibits diversity of sources, aesthetics, as well as new conceptual findings.

The most radical material appropriation of the program is video *Pulsation* (2007) by academy of fine arts professor **Uršula Berlot**. It comprises of her own MRI recordings, computer manipulated into opaque pictorial animation with dark, abstract, outer space atmosphere, resembling Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* and revealing authors fine art background.

Technically more typical example of making new concepts using old materials is **Mirko Simić's** video *Back to the Bible* (1992). It combines scenes from various well known films which depict social topics, in their own specific manner, films as *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Battleship Potemkin*, *Metropolis* and other less famous archive footages. The repetition of scenes as a ritual builds tension and association link between the content and the title.

Nataša Prosenc created *Disc / Disk* (1995) out of socialistic propaganda archive footages. Video in black and white presents people participating in mass rituals, primarily wars and the glorification of leaders, which are constant and universal documents of the world. The global and temporal association of these images is emphasised by the graphic sign of a disc, the only colourful object on the screen, which emerges into our view and disappears from it, until finally it is destroyed by a lizard, another - and the last - colourful creature in the records of the world.

Why Do I Do This? (2001) by video artist **Vesna Bukovec**, is a collage composed of found material from educational documentaries and graphic inserts. Through the content of the video author poses questions which can always be answered with "I don't know". With that she problematizes the state of contemporary art, which often lacks concrete answer.

¹ Biljana Tomić, East of Eden, *Videodokument. Video Art In Slovenia (1969-1998)*, ed. Barbara Borčič, OSI-Slovenia (SCCA-Ljubljana), Ljubljana 1999, pp. 111-112.

An example of minimal material to emphasise single point is video *Thylacinus Cynocephalus* (2009) where author **Damijan Kracina** reconstructs the movements of the Tasmanian tiger, became extinct in 1936. A year before the video was created, the Australian Museum in Sydney began developing methods for preserving the genetic material of the animal in order to clone it, when appropriate technology becomes available. Kracina filmed the final footage of the Tasmanian tiger on TV. He coloured the black and white shots and simulated the animal's movements by means of repetition. In this way, he brought the tiger to life and addressed human's irresponsible treatment of animals.

Gorazd Krnc video work *Me V(usual)S(ound) You* is an impressionistic collage of author's recordings and archival material found online. Visually alluding to early video manipulation practises by layering images, distorting colours and opacity modes. Detail of an eye is besieged by images and due to hectic editing the author creates an anxious atmosphere. Chaotic sounds are accompanied by narration of scientific explanation of how the human ear functions additional awareness of the sounds.

Reincarnation On Taxidermist Monitor (2005) by Slovenian video artist **Neven Korda** is a live recording of processed sound and image based on *Reincarnation*, Korda's video from 2001 combined with short inserts from contradictory found footage sources. *Un Chant d'Amour* (1950) a film by Jean Genet, that was for a long time banned because of its explicit homosexual content and *Olympia* (1938) by Leni Riefenstahl, one of the most influential Nazi film propaganda directors, documentary film dedicated to Olympic games held in Berlin, in 1936. Only with the knowledge of the sources context we can conclude the video premise is releasing from all sort of restrictions. With continuous repeating of same short inserts and manipulating the imagery, Korda achieved a hypnotic effect, characterized by club visuals aesthetics. This video is alluding to art voodoo ritual experience with tribal sounds and three phrases repeated as mantras, one of them is the source from where the program name "*World is obliged to live you*" was appropriated.