Pigott, Michael. "Found Footage." *Joseph Cornell Versus Cinema*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 9–44. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781472544728.ch-001>>.

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CHAPTER ONE

Found Footage

Rose Hobart was a film as it was remembered.

– Ken Jacobs¹

Cornell's film *Rose Hobart* is often erroneously given the honour of being the first found footage film. This is not the case – there had been previous examples of film-makers creating film collages (notably Esfir Shub²), and even, much earlier, the widespread practice of film exhibitors creating unique evening presentations by splicing together a number of short films garnered from a variety of sources.³ *Rose Hobart* is, however, the most prominent early collage film, as well as being Cornell's best known film work.

It is a seminal precursor to the history of films that appropriate the content of other films, and is frequently acknowledged as such in critical accounts of found footage film. However, such accounts usually move quickly on from this acknowledgement to get to what they really want to talk about, which is likely appropriation in the mode of Bruce Conner's work, and the flourishing of similar work from the 1960s onwards.

Yet, there is something quite different about the mode of utilization or deployment of found footage between these two periods, between Cornell's *Rose Hobart* and Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958). The peculiarity of Cornell's use is occasionally acknowledged also, but almost always in a way that presents it as simply that – peculiar. A wonderful eccentricity, an emanation of obsessive love, at worst an accidentally significant conceptual precedent for found footage and the practice of editing against the grain (implicitly inscribing the later period as primary, because of its clearer intellectual foundations and conceptual framework). *Rose Hobart* is described as mysterious, lugubrious, atmospheric, oneiric. All of which manage to name the difference but tell us little about it. What I want to do in this chapter is to work towards identifying and analyzing the particular found footage mode of Cornell's early work, and to do so I will look at another film-maker who worked with found footage in a different period, and whose own peculiar mode of practice has been much more fully and fruitfully analyzed and

explicated in recent work by Michele Pierson⁴ and Malcolm Turvey⁵ – that film-maker is Ken Jacobs.

Rose Hobart had a profound effect on Jacobs and his then brother-in-arms Jack Smith, its influence clearing the path for *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* (Jacobs, 1969–71) and a prolific career full of forensic explorations of cinema, time and perception. In Jacobs' words, 'We thought he had directly broken through the drags on cinema, all the plotting that distracted from and justified these satisfactions of chaotic desire that really brought the customers in'.⁶ The removal of structures in order to reveal or release something contained, or latent, within the footage is a key characteristic of Cornell's film work, and a shared goal and strategy developed across Jacobs' vast and impressive body of work. In this respect, the lack of an antecedent or pre-existing conceptual framework, in comparison with the found footage work of the second half of the twentieth century, is less a problem than a defining and positive attribute. During the course of this chapter I will endeavour to explain what it means to lack such a framework, and why such lack might be desirable.

Tom Tom the Piper's Son

In 1969 Jacobs took an eight minute Biograph one reel movie entitled *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* (probably filmed by Billy Bitzer in 1905, with a significant contribution from Wallace McCutcheon) and re-filmed it using a 16mm camera and an RCA home sound projector.⁷ The result sparked off a wave of interest in early film, as well as a serious critical reconsideration of the aesthetics and value of work that had for a long time been written off as naive. That film, also called *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, uses its seventy minute running time to examine, interrogate, and play with these moving images of (most probably dead) people. Using a projector and a translucent screen he re-films the original, manipulating both the film speed and framing to focus in on specific parts of the image, and to replay short sections repeatedly, often producing a strange, stuttering, strobe effect.

Tom Tom is nominally a structuralist film, but perhaps not the kind that you think (the kind that has come to dominate our impression and understanding of the term), even though it was instrumental in establishing the definition. *Rose Hobart* bears a similar relationship to the category of found footage film – in that it does not quite fit the definition that it was

instrumental in establishing. Both films are invoked as seminal, in the case of *Rose Hobart* we might even say ancestral, for their respective avant-garde categories, for these two different trajectories; of found footage, and of structuralist film. Indeed *Rose Hobart* has become a kind of foundation myth, or origin story, for found footage film-making and appropriation art more generally. I would argue that both *Rose Hobart* and *Tom Tom*, and even Cornell and Jacobs, are attempting to achieve similar goals, and going about it in roughly similar ways. Such an understanding permits a link to be forged between their works, and distinguishes it from the two larger movements with which these films have been respectively, and perhaps to their respective detriment, associated.

However, as I have already mentioned, there is much more to this link than perceived similarity. Jacobs has claimed that *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, indeed his whole career post *Tom Tom*, including his many interrogations of various already-existent film sources, would not have been possible had it not been for his (almost accidental) encounter with *Rose Hobart*. So, from Jacobs' mouth we have a very strong claim for a direct guiding influence coming from Cornell. Bearing in mind the very distinctive nature of Jacobs' work, it seems worthwhile, then, to try to identify what it is that might be shared between these two films, or, at the very least, what is there in the mode of Cornell's film that might have prompted Jacobs' perspective shift.

Michele Pierson draws a connection between the French philosopher Henri Bergson and Jacobs' more extreme defamiliarizing strategies, which primarily include the use of strobing and stuttering to create a very distinctive, and for some a very disturbing, sometimes unbearable, viewing experience. The key linkage that she makes is between Jacobs' stuttering techniques and Bergson's foundational positioning of intuition as a special way of knowing the world, a way that is superior to conventionally 'intellectual' and rational ways of knowing and understanding the world. Art for Bergson offered a privileged way to intuition. Great artworks arise through the intuitive reasoning of the artist, and indeed, for Bergson, the main criterion for great art was its capacity to provide an intuitive glimpse of the real for the viewer.

The difficulty with intuitive glimpses is that they seldom occur, and when they do they are precisely *glimpses* – they happen suddenly and do not last for very long. Added to that, humans have distinct problems with maintaining attention, which is perhaps why the notion of a sustained

intuition sounds like it might be an oxymoron. Intuitive glimpses would seem to be difficult to provoke and impossible to prolong. The latter difficulty may arise from the fact that our minds arguably spend most of the time ignoring things rather than thinking about things, deciding what can be safely ignored, and what details must be focused on because they are relevant or imperative. This model of an ignoring mind crops up in various fields; it has a somewhat stable origin in the concept of the proprioceptive system used in neurological science, has been theorized in relation to the moving image in the Deleuzian sensory-motor schema,⁸ and has other roots in Jerome Lettvin's infamous paper on the perceptual filters of the frog: 'What the frog's eye tells the frog's brain'.⁹ Based on this motley collection of research, we are in a position to suggest that humans have a set of apperceptive filters based on relevance, precedence, newness, and a variety of other factors that highlight one set of sensory information amidst the vast gamut that we process at every moment. The task, for Jacobs, for Bergson, and I would argue, for Cornell, is to get us to look without these filters in place (or at least, to temporarily reconfigure them), and then to maintain that kind of critical attentiveness.

Jacobs' strategy for achieving this, for first of all producing and then prolonging the moment of the intuitive glimpse, depends on the persistent renewal of the image in a manner that attempts to shock one's nervous system into attending to each flash of the image as new, as an image that it is imperative to read, but practically unhooked from the rest of the sequence, resulting in the possibility of removing some of those filters. This strategy, which we can trace back as far as *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, has more recently been consolidated into a patented digital process that Jacobs has dubbed *eternalism*. The patent document reveals the process to be stunning in its simplicity. It is facilitated by the digital, but by no means the product of complex algorithmic trickery. Put simply, it consists of the sequential and repetitive patterning of extracted film frames. Groups of two extracted frames (A and B) are separated by a newly introduced third solid colour frame (C). The new set of three frames is now played repeatedly, producing the characteristic strobe effect. This group can then be integrated into larger, more complex sequences of loops, containing multiple groups.¹⁰

Jacobs' work is rooted in a politically, historically and culturally engaged desire to see, and to help others to see, the past as a real place, populated

by real people. But not only the past – the same kinds of filters and blockages that we have in relation to the distant past also apply to the disregarded present. ‘I really think it’s about penetration to the sublime, to the infinite, to an abyss within the commonplace, and the joyful return and appreciation of the richness of the commonplace’.¹¹ The ‘abyss within the commonplace’ – our first suggestion of the thing that is half known and half unknown, a double-natured object, whose two natures necessarily obscure each other.

Return to the Scene of the Crime, Jacobs’ 2008 film, is a digital re-working of the same source footage used to create *Tom Tom the Piper’s Son*. The title wittily references both the narrative of the original short – the theft of a pig in a busy marketplace – and the return of Jacobs to the material that holds such fascination, his crime the brutal transfiguration of the film, the loving-violent prying open of its mysteries. Here he uses the patented *eternalism* process, a digital refinement of the process that he used in the earlier version.

By making strange these images of the relatively distant past, by stretching them out so that we have longer to look, and by creating the conditions for a perceptive mode tuned for the intuitive, Jacobs is attempting to convey the material reality of the past in these photographic images, to insist upon the significance, value and closeness of the human history before us.

Return to the Scene of the Crime

An indicative sequence in *Return to the Scene of the Crime* comes at a point almost exactly halfway in, at 44.40 on the DVD version.¹² The first shot of the original 1905 short is a busy crowd scene, a static long take filled with players bustling around within the limited space of the frame. Using digital scans of the preserved paper print, re-imaged this time using computer and screen, Jacobs performs a similar interrogation to the one performed in 1969. The newly available digital tools allow him to look differently, perhaps more deeply, certainly with enhanced clarity and control. Here Jacobs’ camera focuses in on the pie-seller – a man in medieval garb, hawking pies (presumably) from a tray hanging from his neck. Deep in the hubbub, yet frontally unobscured at this moment, he has somewhat fraught and aggressive interactions with potential customers. The frames

step forward at a consistent pace, slowing the original motion speed to stretch these few moments of register. We freeze a little longer on the image, now that a woman in the background has been revealed. When the image launches into motion again we have zoomed in to look more closely at the woman's face for those few moments in which she is visible. Jacobs uses the *eternalism* process, repeatedly cycling through two image frames and one black frame, creating the characteristic strobe effect. Her flicker of life is repeatedly re-started, shocked into animation, and shocked forcefully into our perceptive and intuitive field, making us look and recognize this remnant of a moment of registration. Her eyes are closed and her mouth opens mid-word every time we pass through the cycle, twenty times in all over the course of four seconds. At the end of this block of strobing repeats we snap to another part of the frame, the camera slightly farther out and following the progress of the pie-seller, who now meets a willing customer. The *eternalism* process begins again, strobing and stuttering the movement of the customer's outstretched arm delving into the pie-seller's tray. As the cycle repeats, we notice the man in the background playing a long, thin wind instrument. Twenty cycles over four seconds again, before time cranks back into forward motion once more. His strange, dark face looks heavily made up, his eyes are unusually bright and scowl as his head turns in an arc, and the customer and pie-seller move to the left in a curious dance of jovial consumption and surly admonition (possibly implying a refusal to pay for the pie). The customer too bears a strikingly unusual visage, likely made up to suggest a buffoonish character. Time freezes again, and the camera backtracks and reframes, showing us the man with the wind instrument again – a new, enigmatic detail to examine before we move on.

Details mount up, more and more exquisite moments reveal themselves through the roaming, reframing camera and the stuttering effect of the *eternalism* process. The progress of *Return* is not one of linear examination, investigation and accumulation, but rather an obsessive branching, a retracing of steps, a compulsive need to cover everything and discover everything, to not let a potential detail pass by. Yet the necessity to return to this material repeatedly, over a series of film investigations spanning almost 40 years, suggests that everything cannot be covered, that details evade capture and consumption, and that new details continuously emerge from old texts.

Rose Hobart

Rose Hobart is a concept that works well on paper. As an idea, it can be explained in the course of a sentence; Cornell re-edits the low-rent B-movie *East of Borneo* (Melford, 1931), cutting out all the action and keeping only shots of the star, Rose Hobart, destroying context and reducing the film's running time to nineteen minutes. I reproduce this here as an indication of the kind of reductive summary of *Rose Hobart* that commonly circulates – the potency of its conceptual aspect is demonstrated by the fact that this notion of the film is more well-known and widespread than the film itself. However, this description is both factually wrong and, I believe, does a great disservice to the real fascination and richness that the film offers. One can transmit this idea of the film in a sentence, and the listener need not even watch it in order to *get* the radical and imaginative power of this simple intervention. In fact, Cornell had later considered changing the title to *Triste Tropiques*,¹³ a move that would largely strip the film of the sense of a conceptual procedure, replacing it with a greater emphasis on atmosphere.

It may be useful to draw attention to some of the ways in which Cornell's *Rose Hobart* succeeds in inducing a kind of illegibility in the original footage, which is taken from what would have been, for Cornell, a roughly contemporary jungle adventure film called *East of Borneo*, directed by George Melford and released by Universal. Much 'found footage' film-making of the later period is characterized by its use of 'old' footage – material that has, by the time of the creation of the new work, become antiquated, indicative of a past, and often deployed precisely for the ways in which it evokes historical events and periods. Sometimes it is used to evoke historical perspectives, or ways of thinking, understanding and articulating the surrounding culture, society and fantasy. In this respect, *Rose Hobart* bears a closer resemblance to the late twentieth century (and contemporary) practice of 'remixing' roughly contemporary content.

These different types of visual material offer different potentials. Repurposed antiquated and contemporary moving images bring significantly different valences and associations with them. Only imagine the different tones, registers, pressures and resonances evoked by a vintage home movie or public education film in contrast with those of contemporary popular film or music video. So even at this basic level we see that the choice of raw

material distinguishes *Rose Hobart* from the 'classical' period of found footage film-making.

In it, Hobart plays Linda Randolph, an American 'New Woman'¹⁴ who travels to the jungles of Borneo to search for her long-lost (and, it turns out, estranged due to a mistaken suspicion of infidelity on Linda's part) husband Allan (Charles Bickford). She finds him on the small island of Maradu, which is ruled over by the sophisticated but cruel Prince Hashin (Georges Renavent). An embittered and alcoholic Allan has become the Prince's indentured court doctor. Hashin decides he wants Linda and sets about forcibly wooing her. He explains to her that he is metaphysically connected to the island itself, and that if he dies the island's volcano will erupt, destroying everything. At the film's climax Linda fends off Hashin's advances by shooting him, and, sure enough, the volcano begins to erupt. Allan and Linda then make their escape.

Cornell's manipulation of this source material is relatively minimal, yet the interferences that he does perform have significant repercussions. He re-edits the film, adding only four shots from other sources (the opening shot of a crowd looking up at the sky, the shot of the ripples in the pool, an abstract shot of the sky, and a shot of windblown palm trees before an island horizon). This is, therefore, primarily a re-editing of a single source – more of a remix than a collage.

A short section of the film, which begins at a point roughly one minute and forty-five seconds in, is indicative of the way that Cornell re-organizes the visual material of *East of Borneo*. A retrospective eyeline match suggests that Rose and a man in elaborate Eastern dress (we do not know him as Prince Hashin in this version) have been looking out from a balcony at the sky, perhaps looking at the same thing that the crowd in the opening shot of *Rose Hobart* were looking up at. Rose stands slightly back in right of frame, the man stands on the left (fig. 1.1). The image has a strong blue tint, and cheerful exotica music plays, displacing any diegetic sound. Rose steps forward and the man begins to turn to look at her, their movements ever so slightly sluggish, slower than we think they should be. Before these movements can play themselves out, and lead to whatever they seem to be leading to, a jarring cut takes us to another balcony, with Rose, now in a different costume, still in the right of frame, already walking slowly forward. Her gait is unhurried, relaxed, even absent-minded. It is the walk of someone who has nothing in particular to do, who is deep in thought or meditative,

who is open to enjoying the pleasantness of her surroundings, but not overly excited or enthusiastic. The scene carries associations of the post-dinner stroll out onto the balcony to enjoy a balmy evening – all this contained within a glimpse. A few steps and she leans against the wide doorframe, looks around half-heartedly and lets out a sigh (fig. 1.2). She stands, shrouded in shadow, looking out between the jungle foliage that frames the balcony in the foreground. Her pause is drawn out, overlong. She steps forward again, faster than before, moving into light with a look of surprised interest on her face. Something happening beyond the balcony has intrigued her. She leans on the balustrade and looks down (fig. 1.3). We cut to a shot of something falling into a pool, producing an initial plume of water, followed by excessively lugubrious ripples for the twenty-seven second duration of this shot (fig. 1.4). The motion in this shot seems to have been slowed to an even greater degree, though it may simply be more jarring here because the decelerated motion of water is more obviously alien and aberrant. The cut elides any information about the nature of the object that falls into the pond, though Jodi Hauptman suggests that it can be understood to be the moon, as it is a solar eclipse that the crowd is viewing in the opening shot.¹⁵ This reading lends credence to the notion that *Rose Hobart* is a Surrealist film. I will discuss the question of Cornell's relationship with Surrealism in more detail in Chapter Two, but for the moment I would suggest that there is more prevalent, complex and effective aesthetic and imaginative potential involved in not knowing what has fallen into the pool, than in knowing that it was the moon, and there is more to be gained by examining it in this way (rather than writing it off, along with many of the other elements and aspects of the film, as a surreal gesture or juxtaposition).

There is a cut back to Rose on the balcony. She smiles and shakes her head, as if chastising herself for being concerned, mixed with a suggestion of growing acceptance of the wonders around her (conveying a sentiment of 'I should have known . . .'). This works well as a reaction shot to the previous image of the pool. It is not an incongruous match (which would strengthen the accusations of Surrealism) – it is quite possible that Rose looked over the balcony to see something fall into the pool below. But the information we are given only shades in the nature of the event – there is much that we do not know about it. What fell in the pool? Why does the water move so slowly? Why was Rose concerned? And what is the meaning of her reaction?

Figure 1.1 *Rose Hobart* (1936)

Figure 1.2 *Rose Hobart* (1936)

Figure 1.3 *Rose Hobart* (1936)

Figure 1.4 *Rose Hobart* (1936)

We may categorize the major alterations that Cornell makes to *East of Borneo* in the following way:

Speed: Cornell slows down the original footage from 24 frames per second (fps) to 16 fps (silent speed – an easy alteration using the basic editing and post-production technology available to Cornell), not as drastic a shift as those imposed by Jacobs, but its own unique strangeness comes from the fact that it runs at almost-but-not-quite normal speed. At times the slowing is imperceptible, indeed many of the viewers that I have discussed the film with admit to not having noticed the alteration, yet it does undoubtedly modulate the flow of movement, generating a kind of glacial inertia. In this respect, it has much in common with David Michalek's monumental work *Slow Dancing* (2007), which inverts the subtle suggestion of *Rose Hobart* by making its human figures move so slowly that they appear at first to be still, their movements only barely perceptible initially. *Rose Hobart* focuses so much on the movements, poses, facial expressions and muscle movements of Hobart, that this interference induces a continuous appraisal of the difference of this particular human's movement. As Brian Frye describes it, 'the characters move with a peculiar, lugubrious lassitude, as if mired deep in a dream'.¹⁶

Colour: Cornell used a deep blue filter,¹⁷ of the kind commonly used to represent night-time in the silent film period, to alter the colour of the projected image, introducing connotations of sleep, dream and the evocative palette of a nightworld. The use of the blue filter to approximate a tint may also be a nostalgic attempt to reinstitute a stylistic feature that had been lost with the introduction of sound. The extensive range of tints available to film-makers during the late silent period was drastically reduced once an optical soundtrack had to be included on the print. Tinting interfered with the sensitive sound reading apparatus, and so it was largely dropped in favour of the more manageable black and white. Therefore, this may be one of the ways in which we might say that Cornell makes *East of Borneo* into a silent film.¹⁸

Silence: For Cornell, the cinema of the silent period offered a superior mystery, atmosphere and eloquence to the story-worlds afforded by sound film. He himself wrote of the 'profound and suggestive power of the silent film to evoke an ideal world of beauty, to release unsuspected

floods of music from the gaze of a human countenance in its prison of silver light'¹⁹ (I will say more about Cornell's interest in the face of Hobart in Chapter Two). Some films from the silent period travelled with musical scores that had been composed specifically for them, but many did not, and in most cases the random factor of live musical performance, ranging from the distracted pianist to the full-blown orchestra, introduced a good deal of potential for flexible, interpretative play. Jodi Hauptmann describes silent cinema's appeal for Cornell as stemming from a capacity for 'ineffability',²⁰ though this characteristic could also be read as 'openness' – an openness produced by the lack of speech, of words, of the directive force of a sync-soundtrack.

Sound: For the early screenings of *Rose Hobart* Cornell would silence the film, muting the original soundtrack and instead playing a selection of 78 rpm records alongside it. However, partly because Cornell keeps returning to his films and altering aspects, and partly because of the great gap between the first screenings and the later revival of interest of the film, the version that we have now differs in a number of ways. It is based on the later screenings organised in the 1960s by Jonas Mekas and the print that Cornell gave to Anthology Film Archives, and uses sound from an LP of Latin exotica, entitled *Holiday in Brazil* (1957), that Cornell reputedly packaged along with a blue filter and the reel of *Rose Hobart* when lending it in this later period.²¹ Cornell's removal of the soundtrack negates one of the key elements that provides a temporal directionality and narrative propulsion in popular film. By replacing the original soundtrack with a track that has no sympathy for and makes no allowances for the sequence or character of the image, Cornell disrupts the linear directionality of the sequence. While the sequence is, of course, still sequential, it is no longer chronologically determined or determinable with reference to narrative (manifested in speech and dialogue) or to the directive flow of the soundtrack.

Anchoring: Because the footage almost entirely originates from the same source, rather than a collage of material from different sources, the trace of legibility is more emphatically present. We can tell that it was once possible to read it in a much more conventional and familiar way, according to a framework of narrative and spatio-temporal continuity. Cornell succeeds in unhooking, or unmooring, the images from this framework, casting them adrift more than placing them in new relationships.

Costume: Costume changes mark the temporal discontinuities, making clear the ruptures in linearity, the cutting and shuffling of sequence. Rose's presence, her face and body language provide continuity and visual matches, yet her costumes alter. She changes instantaneously between oversized trench coat, evening gown, and an androgynous jungle adventuring suit consisting of jacket, shirt and tie. The impossibility of these linkages disturbs familiar regimes of space and time. It also succeeds in making clear the attraction inherent in dressing a star, and in seeing the multiple versions and variations of style hung upon a familiar body, which progressively reveal some of the potential qualities of that body. While this progressive game of dress-up is usually integrated into the narrative flow of the fiction film, where costume changes usually correspond to causal triggers (a new day, getting soaked, dressing for a ball, sex, etc.) the temporal shuffling that Cornell effects makes explicit the role of film as a placeholder for a compendium of outfits and styles tied to character and star. Unhooked from narrative rationale, this mixing makes explicit a latent characteristic of feature film, and permits the kind of obsessive return that is evident in Jacobs' work.

Narrative: The achievement here is often articulated in terms of the destruction, or at the very least evasion, of narrative. However, this is perhaps to overplay the significance of the act of demolishing the original narrative scheme. To do simply this is to achieve certain qualities arrived at via the aesthetic of randomness – qualities that are, from a certain perspective, understood as magical. Such ascriptions of anti-narrative aesthetics arise from a large body of critical academic work (much of which flows through and from the work of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson) that lauds the impulse to escape narrative, but simultaneously reduces the potential variety and multiplicity of such iterations by consigning them to the ghetto of narrative cinema's eternal Other.²² Yet what Cornell does is more than simply let the pieces fall where they may. For one thing, his logics and strategies of recombination are defined and consistent, and secondly, it is the glimmers of narrative life and fragmentary patches of story-time that imbue *Rose Hobart* with its sense of limitless potential. Indeed it is the tantalizing openings into a story world, coupled with the consistent closing of those openings before they themselves narrow the potential for interpretation and association, which maintain the sense of

limitless possibility, of the eternal, the recursive, and the transcendent in the film.

Tom Gunning writes that '[Ken] Jacobs never simply undermines the filmic illusion in order to reach a sort of neutral material. He is always making movies, dealing with the intricacies of illusion even as he unmasks them'.²³ Just as Jacobs keeps one eye on the unfolding complexities and tensions of narrative, character, attachment and association, Cornell does so to an even greater degree. *Rose Hobart* is not a cold experiment in deconstruction, but rather a rich, loving, infatuated experiment in world-building.

An Aside on Sound

The soundtrack to *Rose Hobart* is widely attributed to the Brazilian bandleader Nestor Amaral. This is mostly correct, but not entirely. The version of *Rose Hobart* that most people will see today, which one may near-instantly turn to on YouTube or UbuWeb for reference, has the Nestor Amaral and His Continentals soundtrack, made up of two tracks from the *Holiday in Brazil* LP.²⁴

This detail tells us something about the way in which proliferation and availability, both blessings of the digital, inscribe this version as primary, when in fact everything that we know about digital versioning should tell us that this is likely not to be the case. It may also have something to do with the viewer's difficulty in identifying popular music from different eras beyond being generically 'of the past'. Another of Cornell's found footage films, *By Night With Torch And Spear* (c. 1942, restored 1979), now circulates across the same Web venues in an edition that includes a soundtrack composed by John Zorn, which sounds as if it could have been recorded yesterday. The recording quality is sufficiently clean, and the character of the music itself marks it as coming from some time after, at the earliest, the mid-1980s. One or both of these factors is enough to tip the viewer off to the fact that it is a modern addition to the film, produced long after Cornell could have contributed, determined or authorized it.

Yet the commonly accepted soundtrack of *Rose Hobart* seems to ring far fewer alarm bells. Perhaps part of the difficulty arises from the fact that it seems to come from the same distant place that the images do, seems so integral to determining the tone and atmosphere of watching the film, that

it is difficult to imagine it being any other way. If we check the details of the soundtrack, however, we discover that it does indeed consist of two tracks by Nestor Amaral and His Continentals, from their 1957 LP *Holiday in Brazil*. This soundtrack was almost certainly chosen by Cornell himself sometime between the original release of the LP and the screening of his films organised by Jonas Mekas in 1963. In the most widely available version of *Rose Hobart*, after playing the Nestor Amaral track 'Corrupção' once, the soundtrack then alternates repeatedly between the two other tracks from the same LP – 'Porto Alegre' and 'Playtime in Brazil'²⁵ – perhaps in an attempt to recreate the original experience of Cornell manually flipping a 78 rpm record (which could hold only roughly three minutes of sound on either side) from side A to side B and back again.

This soundtrack has the legitimacy afforded by the fact that Cornell himself selected the record, yet it also cannot possibly be the music he used for the fabled first screening of the film in 1936. What is interesting is that it has *become* the soundtrack of those early events, implicitly and explicitly in the writings of many critics, and, I would suggest, in the minds of contemporary viewers. This represents a retrospective refitting of history, a re-soundtracking not just of a short film, but of a key turning point in American Surrealism and the history of experimental film. As we have already encountered, and will again, history is continuously being retrofitted. The past is a story written in the present. History is not only written by the victors, it is rewritten by their descendants, erased and written again by the descendants of the victims. And so on.

The Pleasures of Not Reading the Illegible

So what links Jacobs' practice to Joseph Cornell's work? Why might we be able to say that *Tom Tom the Piper's Son*, and *Return to the Scene of the Crime*, develop out of Cornell's work? Both artists adopt a strategy of what I would like to call *induced illegibility*, which is at once a means of revealing the illegible underside of an image, and a documented attempt to read the illegible. Both Jacobs and Cornell structure their films around the dual purpose (and double tension) of making the image illegible (again) and then attempting to read it. They induce, and force, a new way of reading, defacing the original legibility, and in some ways attacking the viewer – in Jacobs' case it is through the intensity of the flicker effect,

the crudely induced two-and-a-half-D, and in Cornell's case it is with broken continuity, cut off eyeline matches and muted half-conversations, the imposition of a new soundtrack, repetition, as well as the sustained sensation of being narratively, temporally, and spatially at sea. Through the attack they place us in a position from which to attempt to read the images again – freshly, and perhaps with less prejudice. However, what we are then presented with is, fairly literally, unreconstructed. They place us in a position to be able to read anew, and then present us with something that cannot be read, something that is at least half unknown and almost totally silent, in the Rancièrian sense of the 'silent witness',²⁶ which I will come to in a moment.

The Legible Image

In *Confronting Images* Didi-Huberman speaks in terms of the legible. He imagines an alternative to the somewhat positivist separation between the visible and the invisible components of images, between that which can be described and that which can only be guessed at, between verifiable articulation and unverifiable (metaphysical) speculation. This alternative:

[...] is based on the general hypothesis that the efficacy of these images is not due solely to the transmission of knowledge – visible, legible, or invisible – but that, on the contrary, their efficacy operates constantly in the intertwinings, even the imbroglio, of transmitted and dismantled knowledges, of produced and transformed not-knowledges. It requires, then, a gaze that would not draw close only to discern and recognize, to name what it grasps at any cost – but would, first, distance itself a bit and abstain from clarifying everything immediately.²⁷

This humble gaze, not quite stalking, but perhaps skulking around its object, must develop its endurance, its powers of attention, if it is to pierce the hard shell of the visible/invisible and look through to the underneath. Didi-Huberman's description of this mode of engagement is reminiscent of Jacobs' special mode of attentiveness, which he works so tirelessly to achieve. This special gaze involves:

Something like a suspended attention, a prolonged suspension of the moment of reaching conclusions, where interpretation would have time to deploy itself in several dimensions, between the grasped visible and the lived ordeal of a relinquishment. There would also be, in this alternative, a dialectical moment – surely unthinkable in positivist terms – consisting of not-grasping the image, of letting oneself be grasped by it instead: thus of letting go of one's knowledge about it. (*italics in original*)²⁸

Through their individual strategies of defacement and attack Cornell's and Jacobs' works attempt to endow the viewer with the ability to perceive illegibility, though he or she is by no means compelled to do so. Such an act is voluntary, and requires a degree of investment. While these two strategies can create a kind of perceptual interference, the subject must be willing – the war between viewer and work must be waged from both sides, and in many cases the work's advances may be met with simple and complete rejection.

Found footage films such as Bruce Conner's *A Movie* deface the original legibility of the image, unhooking film samples from their original context and continuity, but they replace this with a new legibility. This new legibility may be absurd, may be surreal, may seem random – but even apparent randomness is a kind of legibility (we may read something as random and then move on to the next thing, happy that we have correctly interpreted it as random). In each of these cases, one form of legibility is being replaced by another, perhaps contradictory or subversive, form of legibility. Jacobs, I would argue, is doing something else. And Cornell, I would also argue, is doing a very similar something else. In fact Jacobs, to some degree, learnt to do something else directly from Cornell.

Nevertheless, the pleasures of this illegibility exist only in relation to the fact of the possibility of reading them. It is in this respect that Jacques Rancière's model of the photographic image is useful to us. Unlike the Barthesian *punctum*,²⁹ which supposedly exists entirely outside of symbolic codes, linguistic structures – outside of legibility – the pleasure of the Rancièrian photographic image is precisely in the unfulfilled, unfulfillable promise of legibility, of reading and of understanding, of coming to the end of the sentence, the end of the chapter, the end of the book. The *punctum*, which is not so much revealed as encountered, remains always (in Barthes' view) a kind of stumbling block, a lacuna, an accidental black hole embedded in the

image (or at least in some images – Barthes’ *punctum* is largely an attribute of special images), of which we cannot speak, but can retrospectively diagnose (as Barthes does with his examples in *Camera Lucida*). In contrast, it feels accurate to say that the illegibility revealed through the work of Cornell and Jacobs adheres to any old image if we look hard enough – and this would indeed be compelling were it not for the fact that the images that they do focus upon, extract and return to are in themselves fascinating. But we must ask ourselves – would we have known how fascinating they were if we had not been made to see them in such unusual forms? If what we thought we knew of them before we had even seen them had not been disarranged, if our structures of prejudice and pre-thought had not been manually deranged?

‘Intention’ as Aesthetic Component – The Illegible Exam Script

I wish to return to the question of illegibility. As a teacher, my mind turns to pedagogic analogies. Imagine a perfectly illegible exam script, a hastily scribbled essay of the kind routinely forced out of overwrought humanities students to determine their worth. Though no sense can be extracted, it does suggest that there is an order hidden by the inky barbed wire twirls and helixes of indiscernible text. Why do we believe there should be an order, rather than some sort of random, natural, but unlikely, condensation of ink particles on paper? We believe there is an order hidden behind the squiggles because ink has been put to paper by a hand, and because when we stand back, or hold it at a distance from our faces, it looks like text, it has the rough form of text, of an essay.

I like this analogy because it mixes the linguistic with the visual, the ostensibly readable ideas that form the substance of the hidden argument with the unreadable image. But it is also a little misleading, because in the case of the illegible essay there is not only the promise of truth but the guarantee that it is founded in intention, no matter how much we may think otherwise. It originates from conscious thought and intention.

Intention has a bad reputation, a stink of patriarchal determinism about it; but to disregard it outright is to throw out the baby with the bathwater. There is still something useful in the concept as a factor – perhaps not so much in its role as a determiner and resolver of meaning, but as an aesthetic parameter, one amongst many elements that determine the reader’s or

viewer's experience. It is at least as valid as paratextual elements, such as the book-binding, the typesetting, or the critical review, suggested by Gerard Genette.³⁰ A potential meaning lurks behind the vivisected, reformed, re-animated body of *East of Borneo*, a perceived sentence originating from the knowledge that this is an artist's film, rooted in some idea of Cornell as author.

In comparison with an exam script, or a collaged or randomized text (such as a cut-up), the photographic image is bound to a fraught history of theorization based on the signifying, non-signifying and clandestinely signifying properties and potentialities that arise from its peculiar nature.³¹ It suffers from impacted understanding, from too many concepts, many of which can be simultaneously compelling and contradictory. Jacques Rancière offers us something of a way through. His is a philosophy that specializes in taking the middle path, in finding a point of balanced tension between two poles, and demonstrating that one should be happy to occupy such a point, that in fact one had probably occupied this middle point all along. I mentioned earlier the idea of the image that is half known and half unknown – I want to expand upon this a little by drawing upon Rancière's theorization of the image in his essay 'The Future of the Image'.³²

In place of Barthes' binary categories of the *studium* and the *punctum*, Rancière develops a dual poetics, a reversible configuration of complementary aspects. The force of the image exists not in one or the other category, but in the tension and play between two functions of the same element: 'two image-functions – between the unfolding of inscriptions carried by bodies and the interruptive function of their naked non-signifying presence'.³³ He writes that:

Photography became an art by placing its particular techniques in the service of this dual poetics, by making the face of anonymous people speak twice over – as silent witnesses of a condition inscribed directly on their features, their clothes, their life setting; and as possessors of a secret we shall never know. A secret veiled by the very image that delivers them to us.³⁴

Rancière rejects the polarity of Barthes' *studium* and *punctum* because it arbitrarily stratifies the image into two discreet types of information – the signifying and the non-signifying. For Rancière this sacrifices the possibility of art for the sanctity of the pure unsignifying image. He prefers to allow our concept of the image to inhabit a tense spot between these poles, one where

the image simultaneously bears the marks of history, speaks about condition, location, emotion, about the characteristics of the individual moment of being, *and* it also opens out onto the unknown of that specific moment of heterogeneous life or being.

Silent speech, then, is the eloquence of the very thing that is silent, the capacity to exhibit signs written on a body, the marks directly imprinted by its history, which are more truthful than any discourse proffered by a mouth. But in a second sense the silent speech of things is, on the contrary, their obstinate silence.³⁵

In a sense, what Rancière is doing is replacing the *punctum* with two sub-categories: the silent speech of the image (or the legible), and the silent silence of the image (or the illegible). There are things to be read and put away, but sometimes we see things to be read that cannot be put away, that draw us back to them.

What we have then is the possibility of an image that is half known and half unknown, both legible and illegible, but often that illegibility is glossed over or covered up. Both Cornell and Jacobs work to reveal and relish the newly discovered illegibility of their chosen images.

But to return to the illegible essay for a moment, which offers us a little more mileage with regard to the question of intentionality as supposed characteristic and invisible quality. If the essay demonstrates the potential for knowledge of a predetermined yet hidden design to *colour* an experience of illegibility, it somewhat avoids the question of the character of that experience beyond the knowledge of its provenance. What is there in the experience of reading the essay apart from the knowledge that it is meaning made illegible? Is there anything at all to speak of?

In this respect it invites comparison with Jacobs' *Perfect Film* (1985), his found film of media coverage of the public response to the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965. The film is perfect because it was already perfect, finished, not requiring manipulation, intervention, addition or subtraction, when Jacobs found it. The film consists of two unedited interviews following the assassination, one with a black Harlem resident, one with a white police representative. Jacobs discovered the footage, already crudely spliced together, on a reel purchased from a junk store (the reel itself being the main intended purchase – the film on it just a leftover). However, when Jacobs

viewed the film he found what he described as ‘an unintended non-designed, mindless, film. And I didn’t tamper with the evidence’.³⁶ There is value to be found in the unintended, but the act of finding it, and knowing when one has found it, is in itself a creative act.

✱

Cornell compels us to see the history written on Rose’s body. By tracing one of the most striking shots of Rose in *Rose Hobart* back to its origin in *East of Borneo*, we may begin to see the kinds of qualities Cornell was drawn to, and those that he wished to capture, accentuate, and share.

Almost three minutes into *Rose Hobart* we see a mid-shot of Rose dressed in a wide-lapelled overcoat. She looks intently, gravely, at something or someone out of frame-right (fig. 1.5). The slight slowing of motion from 24 fps to 18 fps endows her with an enigmatic repose. We wait for some indication, some break in her features that would signify her feeling or intent, but such a break is withheld for a few moments longer than seems natural, making her into a stone-cold ‘bad-man’, or a Western hero. When

Figure 1.5 *Rose Hobart* (1936)

the break comes it is a fleeting downward look, eyelids almost closed, the physical performance of a thought, quickly recovered from. Her eyes flit back and she has snapped into another performance. She speaks through a smiling mouth, plainly a forced amiability. We do not hear her words, of course – all the better to witness and analyze the emotional contours of her physical performance. When she has said her piece her eyes look down once more, in thought, impenetrable because we do not know what she has said, nor who she is talking to or why she might be coy or deceptive with them. Again, this look seems to last longer than it should. The mystery becomes magnetic, drawing our attention to the body-shell of Rose that contains sentience, emotion, and intent. Through observation we can detect this vital energy, but never quite read it, consume it and file it away. Now a series of rapid changes: her downward look, with downturned mouth perhaps indicating concern or sadness, straightens and hardens suddenly back into that first, unsinkable gaze. This lasts only a moment, a step on the way back to the performance of friendliness (perhaps even seduction). But a curious tick disturbs the flow – in between grave intensity and seductive friendliness she cocks her head slightly to her right (a little like a dog does when it hears an interesting noise). It is as if she is re-aligning her head, but we have not really noticed it move out of alignment. She smiles again and offers another phrase of apparent re-assurance, and we cut to what the eyeline match tells us she was looking at/who she was talking to – a brief glimpse of a man in rich Eastern robes, who, through some rough trick editing, seems to disappear backwards through a door with dazzling speed, like a flame extinguished or a bright wisp of smoke sucked out of the room.

There is something incredibly compelling about this short shot of Rose performing before the camera. There are multiple layers of performance of course – Rose is playing Linda, who is playing compliance to the disappearing Prince, which generates some of the complexity and reflexivity of the performance in *Rose Hobart*. But there is also something else, some extra quality that lurks behind this sequence and lingers after – an unarticulated question, left unanswered. Cornell has extracted and elongated this moment, presenting it in such a way as to draw forth and make plain its intense heterogeneous difference, its communication and its silence, what it says and what it withholds. But how much of this is already there in *East of Borneo*? To what degree is this mystery available in the original text?

The source of the footage comes late in *East of Borneo*, after Linda and Allan have attempted to escape from Prince Hashin's jungle palace. Having been re-captured, each is taken to a different room, Linda allowed to be alone and Allan under heavy guard. The Prince comes to visit both, to gloat and threaten. The section I have just described from *Rose Hobart* is taken from his visit to Linda, which precedes his visit with Allan, and comes immediately after the final shot of their capture in the jungle. In that final shot we watch the Prince order Allan taken back to the palace, then, smiling, he offers to escort Linda back. She says nothing, but stares up at him intently, defiant yet acquiescent. No guards are needed to hold her, as they are for Allan. The Prince takes her hand and leads her away, her face unchanging, her gaze still directed to that same spot (as if she were a zombie) as the shot fades out. It is difficult to tell what emotions were embodied in that long intense stare – perhaps hatred, anger, fear, maybe even a touch of respect or infatuation, as if she had been glamourised by the Prince's evil power.

In the next shot we see a well-adorned arm tugging on a bell. Cut to Linda, collapsed face-down on her four-poster bed, alerted by the ringing. Still wrapped up in the slightly oversized trench coat she wore in the jungle she gets up from the bed and steps backward, away from the door, composing herself, her face still frozen in an intense blankness. The film gives her time to just look, and think, to live internally. Then when she is ready she says 'come in'. Hashin enters, still maintaining the pretense of civility and gentility – 'I hope I'm not intruding. I just come to tell you that dinner will take place as arranged. You can be ready in half an hour?' Linda thinks for a moment, her eyes flitting downward, and she claims she does not think she is very hungry. A cut back to Hashin, who says he 'couldn't possibly give up the pleasure' of her company. Cut back to Linda who looks down again as the Prince continues to speak on the soundtrack, elaborating all of the treats he has laid on for the dinner – 'music, dancing . . .' Cut back to the Prince who continues his increasingly insipid spiel. Then finally back to Linda, who suddenly changes her tune, pretending agreement and happiness. She consents to changing her clothes and coming to dinner. A pause, her smile falls, and with one more flit of the eyes and a cock of the neck she brings it back – 'in half an hour?' Her final words here playing the game of courtship. The Prince confirms with satisfaction and retracts, very slowly, backwards through the door.

Those intriguing moments of Rose's performance are there, but they are subsumed within the narrative, speech, soundtrack, and to and fro editing. Still, the striking strangeness of her multilayered behaviour, the curious balance between outward blankness and hints of inner turmoil are there to be seen, there to register and draw one back for a second viewing (if one is so inclined – I will take up the question of cinephilia in Chapter Three). Cornell performs a few key interferences that alter this scene significantly, drawing out the core of strangeness by whittling away the crowding folds of narrative and speech. The Prince is largely removed. We do not see him in the jungle before the scene, nor do we see his hand ringing the bell or his entry into Rose's room and greeting. The shot-reverse-shot of their conversation is deconstructed, forcing all of Rose's half of the exchange together into one continuous performance. I have already discussed the effects of slowing down the motion speed, but there is also the key function of replacing the soundtrack, and consequently removing the speech. The re-edited shot of Hashin retracting out the door, which goes from being very slow to supernaturally quick, is an unusually immoderate and stylized example of Cornell's incision into the body of the film.

Cornell's achievement lies in spotting this moment, in identifying it, and, through the crafts of re-editing and collage, revealing and releasing these wild intensities.

Found Footage and Interpretation

A collection of fragments is mounted, placed in front of the viewer for consideration. This is the basic principle of collage. A collection of film fragments may also be mounted for presentation, (though the material must be ordered as a sequence, given a linear duration rather than a flat simultaneity) and placed in front of the viewer for consideration. And what is to be considered? The relationship between the fragments, certainly (this is the principle of montage), but not just this. We are also asked to consider the contours and intensities, the atmospheres and energies, the faces, movements and meanings of each individual fragment, in a much more concerted, explicit and direct way than is usually the case in narrative cinema (and, indeed, was the case with regard to *East of Borneo*, and the original sources of much found footage work).

Histories and conceptualizations of found footage film-making have often focused upon the semiotic, on the new meanings produced through the re-editing of a film source, the collision of samples from numerous sources, or simply the re-presentation of an un-manipulated source in a new context. In each of these cases the materiality of the medium is said to come to the fore. This is one of the defining features of the genre for William Wees, outlined in his authoritative study on the subject, *Recycled Images*. He writes that:

whether they [found footage films] 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.³⁷

Within many frames of critical reference, this drawing of attention to the materiality of the medium, the processes of editing, and the instrumental use of appropriated moving images, is automatically understood as the initial (if not only and sufficient) move of a critique (of mass media, capitalist ideology, corporate industry, pop culture . . .). This argument often takes the form of a round trip, ending up back where it started. First it asserts that the found footage mode de-contextualizes the source material, thereby inviting the viewer to look at it in a new way (opening the box, as it were). Then it suggests that the underlying reason for this operation is the larger conceptual ideal of critiquing the culture from which the source material sprang, targeting specific issues entangled with and embedded in the source material (closing the box). This has the effect of re-stabilizing the footage, re-reducing its chaotic potential, re-enlisting it for a defined goal at least partially outside of itself. In some sense, the found footage material could be anything – the primary thrust of its significance is the fact that it *stands for* critique – simply by existing it initiates and effects critique. But it is also integrated into a new sequence, one that has a meaning of its own.

At the heart of this model of found footage film-making is a version of the principle of Eisensteinian montage (or the Kuleshov effect). Place two disparate shots together and the viewer will read each one in relation to the other, often imposing meanings that would be unlikely were either shot

viewed on its own. Though it performs a revolutionary task, this formula reifies the footage back into a statement of intent, a delineated meaning, one that contravenes the original intent behind the footage. One can, of course, choose to read it however one wants, but the guidelines are there in the text itself, asking to be followed.

Wees, however, makes room for other kinds of found footage films. In the introduction he surveys the range of found footage styles, beginning with the kind that simply re-present a found text, or re-edit it in some way. One can see why Wees chooses to do this – it makes sense to begin with the most basic manifestation of the genre, which also helps to determine the limits of the definition, and he too references Jacobs' *Perfect Film*. This film and *Rose Hobart* are repeatedly used as starting points for studies of, and introductions to, found footage. It is perhaps also the case that there is an attraction to the possibility of getting these kinds of works out of the way early on, because they are the more difficult to talk about, in order to move on to the more digestible categories.

Bruce Connor's *A Movie*, on the other hand, is a seminal work in the history of found footage film-making that has had a wide and long-lasting influence, and lends itself more easily to examination. Rob Yeo, in a brief survey included in the catalogue for the recent exhibition *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video*, writes that '*A Movie* is a prime example of how seemingly random film footage can be recombined to develop complex concepts and construct a larger logic'.³⁸ It represents the 'second beginning' of found footage film-making, thirty years after *Rose Hobart*, admittedly the one that stuck. It sets the pattern for an understanding of found footage rooted in the ideal of concept creation through the collision of appropriated fragments. Yeo summarizes this well in his final statement: 'By subverting narrative structure, manipulating the "official story," and questioning the controlling elements of our world as represented through media, found footage filmmakers challenge the foundations of filmic language, conceptually undermining permanence, stability, and linearity'.³⁹ One of the most memorable links in *A Movie* is a perfect demonstration of the montage principle; a grainy fragment of a soft core porn film featuring a woman (who looks like Marilyn Monroe) stripping is followed by a fragment featuring a submarine captain looking through a periscope. Next we see a torpedo fired, followed by an explosion. We move from a direct linkage (the submarine captain spies the stripper through the periscope and excitedly

fires a torpedo) to a metaphoric linkage (the torpedo and explosion figure phallic desire and orgasm, linked to war and violence).

Histories of found footage tell us much about the implicit value attributed to different kinds of texts in different periods. I would like, now, to connect these histories, and Cornell's troubling presence, to the present day, and examples of appropriation and collage germane to today's audiovisual media and technologies. Eduardo Navas' recent attempt to theorise contemporary approaches to the 'mashup' focuses on semiotic, interpretative, and mechanical functions. It makes value judgements about different types of mashups based on their awareness of what they are doing, and implies that they should be actively and consciously doing something, saying something, meaning something through the application of mashup techniques. In comparison, the uncritical mashup creator does so naively and for personal pleasure (presumably gained from enjoyment of the resultant mashup, as well as in the exposure to, and potential praise from, an audience that also views and recognizes the cleverness and skill of the mashup). The term 'mashup' is an Internet-age denomination for a similar kind of collage aesthetic to that which is at the heart of found footage film. It first arises in relation to music, and a series of high-profile remixes that 'mashed' two popular hits together, the first significant example of which was the Freelance Hellraiser mashup of Christina Aguilera's *Genie in a Bottle* with The Strokes' *Hard to Explain*, wittily entitled *A Stroke of Genius*.⁴⁰ The popularity of this mashup, which gained traction with an attendant music video that mashed up the original videos for the two singles, can be attributed partly to the technical spectacle and novelty of the achievement of this seamless mix of two familiar hits, and partly to the choice of tunes (Aguilera's clean-cut pop thrillingly mixed with the rawness of the then new and exciting reinvention of guitar rock, The Strokes), and partly to the inherent catchiness of the resultant hybrid. This was followed by a wave of similar pop mashups, presented and read as 'the new thing' (somewhat ignoring the history of hip hop and sample-based music up to this point). The second meaning of 'mashup' that Navas identifies refers to the mashing together (or one might say overlaying or interconnecting) of data and visualization sources available on the World Wide Web, in order to create dynamic, customized information clusters.

The key distinction that Navas makes is between what he calls 'regressive' and 'reflexive' mashups. Music video mashups are predominantly regressive,

because they conform to Adorno's conception of the entertainment product that serves, primarily, to fill the subject's leisure time with cheap pleasure. They do little more than 'simply point back to the "greatness" of the original track by celebrating it as a remix'.⁴¹ Data mashups are usually reflexive, however, because they allow users to create individual, customized clusters of dynamically interrelated data gleaned from numerous sources. They are created by the user, and they serve the user's individual purpose. They are defined by their functionality and individuality, and so seem to run counter to the homogenized and ultimately useless nature of mass media entertainment texts such as *A Stroke of Genie-us*.

Navas' delineation demonstrates the still persistent notion that popular entertainment texts are universally uncritical and therefore useless beyond the cheap hit of pleasure they provide (if not directly bad for you because they are instruments of subjugation). In his words, 'in the end [musical] mashups are a special kind of reflexive remix that aim to return the individual to comforting ground. As Adorno would argue, they support the state of regression that gives people false comfort'.⁴²

Yet, as much as Web 2.0 provides a multiplicity of opportunities for interactivity, input, remixing, and customization, the vast number of sources and venues of remixable data are predominantly controlled, and their possible uses defined and limited, by the corporate powers that provide both the data sources and the venues for remixing them (indeed, a small number of corporate media giants provide the most pervasive sources and venues). The examples of user-created mashups that Navas' provides include news feeds to keep track of eBay prices and bids, combinations of local maps and rental resources to help find a new apartment, and maps combining 'city streets with information on specific businesses or other public information.' (Navas, 169) These are activities focused on shopping and consumption. This is not surprising, as the possibilities for user utilization of the 'natural resources' of the Internet are curtailed by the fact that they are not natural, but rather predominantly owned by corporate content-providers, those with the resources and frameworks necessary to be able to develop mapping, directory and bidding systems.

The basic thrust of this argument, which in this case explicitly harks back to Adorno and the days of straightforward cultural critique and evaluation, crops up more and more frequently in contemporary attempts to categorize and evaluate the vast complex of 'user-generated content'. Critics at pains to

demonstrate the merit of an individual remix text (and implicitly the merit of paying critical attention to such texts), do so by demonstrating the active, critical or creative work that the creator or text is doing. However, they often do this by highlighting the lack of critical awareness in the majority of remixes, thereby positing conscious critical activity as the sole guarantor of value.

This argument is itself founded upon the notion that it is some original, integral and unchangeable meaning invested in the remixed text or texts that is being instrumentalized and used to create a new meaning that sits on top of, and comments upon, the original meaning or meanings. Kim Middleton likens the work of the critically active remixer to the work of humanities academics⁴³ (suggesting the connotations of critical distance and secondary commentary) and in the very same issue of the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* Paul J. Booth writes that 'In concrete form, the mashup takes data from two or more different inputs and mixes them together in such a way as to create a unique, third form without loss to the meaning of the originals'.⁴⁴ The Cornellian model of the remix, conversely, implies no such notion of an original meaning that can be toyed with, and if it does anything, it takes part in the endless alteration of meaning across texts, across time, and across viewers and viewings.

Likewise, *A Stroke of Genie-us* may not be a particularly laudable example, but I would suggest that music and video mashups of popular culture texts, even those which are not self-consciously critical, are capable of offering valuable experience and insight, and performing uniquely creative, subversive, and, yes, pleasing operations.

Navas' argument equates reflexivity and critical reflection with functionality. It assumes that surface activity (or 'interactivity') is somehow inherently reflexive, progressive, subversive, and therefore implicitly superior to simple mashups. I do not want to unduly undermine Navas' argument, as it is specific and limited to a contemporary constellation of digital remixing methods. However, I believe that it is indicative of a wider, and still present, prejudice towards texts that demonstrate heightened activity and legible, critical, assertive points and connections. This ignores the potential value inherent in the act of simply identifying and revealing the underlying vital energy of an image through recombination and re-contextualization, and the creative potential involved in finding ways to 'see things anew', to look with new eyes at the seemingly banal. This operation is, in fact, not so simple.

Illegibility and Play

In Malcolm Turvey's recent *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition*, he examines a body of films and film-makers (including Jean Epstein, Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs, and Siegfried Kracauer) that aimed to reveal something about reality to the viewer, to help the viewer to see the true reality of the world around them. This was a revelationism of the invisible that emerged parallel to classical film theory's emphasis on film's capacity to capture truthful and reliable (and in this way revelatory) images of the world. Turvey points out that the four theorists mentioned above actually suggested something beyond this, that film had the 'ability to uncover features of reality invisible to human vision'.⁴⁵ There is, then, a history, albeit a neglected one, of using film to reveal hidden potential meaning, of using film as a technological-aesthetic means of inducing new ways of seeing.

Cornell's film work, both that of the early found footage period and the later documentary period (which I will discuss in the third chapter), approaches a similar ideal, though I would suggest that the goal is the revelation of multiple possible realities, the true realities of many worlds folded together.

In order to understand this quality I will look at a number of theorists whose work congregates around the question of the image that wants something, that engages the viewer, and whose critical approaches are attempts to find alternatives to (or in some cases, approaches complementary to) ideological critique, semiotic analysis, and scientific method. Not always as a rejoinder to flawed systems, but often as an attempt to satisfy a sense that something was also missing from these accounts; that something about the artworks was being glossed over in the headlong rush toward interpretation and critique.

In the work of Didi-Huberman, Rancière, W. J. T. Mitchell, Hans Georg Gadamer, Henri Bergson and Felix Guattari, we find an unacknowledged agreement on the destructive nature of over-emphasizing a model of engagement as knowledge transfer, of the encounter as calculable exchange. For them there is still (more or less) the possibility of discourse, of shared meaning, even of identifiable and verifiable meaning. There is, for them, still the possibility of education based on knowledge transfer, and aesthetic engagements with predetermined outcomes. However, the danger they identify is the prescriptive notion that this is all there is, or, to put it more categorically, that this is ideally all there should be.

For these theorists, Western thought has followed a trajectory that increasingly eradicates the value of all that occurs outside of and before articulable meaning. We may call this ‘outside’ the *non-narrative*, the *non-representational*, the *non-discursive*, the *non-linguistic*, or the *contingent* (the way in which we already understand the character of this substance is well-indicated by the number of negatively-defined descriptors that we use to name it – we do not know what it is, nor perhaps do we want to know, but we know what it is not).

For Hans Georg Gadamer, ‘play’ characterises the relationship between viewer and artwork. The model for all of our social rituals is the game, but it has a specific resonance in its application to the meeting of the viewer and the artwork. The reciprocal movement that occurs between the player and the game is also the to and fro movement of engagement with an artwork. This stresses the continuously modulating relationship between work and audience. Rather than seeing the work as something fixed that we simply view, this model portrays the engagement with the artwork as involvement in a process, in which the viewer plays a significant, creative role. However, this does not succeed in simply shifting the act of creating meaning onto the side of the viewer. The game itself has a power over the player. The player must play within its rules – it thereby delimits the field of play, constraining the production of meaning. The work of art exists not as an object to be viewed, but in the engagement of its specific kind of play.

If we examine how the word “play” is used and concentrate on its so-called metaphorical senses, we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end. [. . .] The movement of playing has no goal that brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition. The movement backward and forward is obviously so central to the definition of play that it makes no difference who or what performs this movement. [. . .] It is the game that is played – it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays it.⁴⁶

In this to and fro motion that occurs between the viewer and the artwork there is what Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons. In the engagement between

viewer and work there is a meeting between the horizon of understanding of the work and the horizon of understanding of the viewer. This entails and implies both a pre-existent meaning in the artwork, and a creative reading that is brought to the piece by the viewer. In this meeting those horizons are often stretched, increased.

Knowledge is not an objective quantity for Gadamer; indeed it is the scientific tendency toward objectification of language and experience that he rails against in his major work *Truth and Method*. For him knowledge is not simply accumulated through perception. Rather, the confrontation between viewer and work constitutes a unique experiential event that results in a broadened horizon of understanding for the viewer. And indeed we could even say that the film gains a broadened horizon through the act of the viewer's viewing.

The emphasis is taken away from the positivistic ideal of a determinate and verifiable understanding, a clear interpretation or reading of the work, and placed upon the dynamic interpretative relationship that is forged in the viewing. For Gadamer, a different, yet equally valid, reading of a work will occur each time we view it. Our experience of the work will continue to modulate through consecutive viewings due in part to the changing conditions of viewing, but mostly because of the change in what we ourselves bring to the meeting. Meaning is never set, and certainly not subject to some elusive 'correct' interpretation.

This Gadamerian understanding of the event of encountering the artwork is consonant, I believe, with the approach of Georges Didi-Huberman elaborated earlier, but also with W. J. T. Mitchell, who chooses a different metaphor to approach a similar model of the relationship between viewer and work. He asks 'what do pictures want?',⁴⁷ a question that allows him to posit images as desiring subjects, as things that want something of the viewer, but whose desires are not always determinable as clear and limited sets of meanings. Pictures, more or less, want us to consume their potential for meaning, to play out association and significance as far as they will go, or we are willing to go. This is not to open up every picture to an endless glut of association – pictures set one on a path, and individuals follow those paths in different ways, often dependent on how well they know the terrain already, their class, location, generation, etc.

Bergson, who was so fundamental to Pierson's reading of Jacobs' idiosyncratic process (and consequently, my reading of Cornell's), shared

with Gadamer a distaste for the scientific distillation of the world, its physics and its history, into calculable fragments, discrete packets of information to be filed and transferred. He was attracted instead to the notion of the continuum, and set against mechanistic clock-time a multiplicity of interrelated durations, a conceptualisation that implies a world full of individual durations meeting, temporarily overlapping, and separating, much like Gadamer's horizons.

Jacques Rancière, too, rails against what he calls 'the logic of the stultifying pedagogue, the logic of straight, uniform, transmission'.⁴⁸ He, like Gadamer, attempts to recover the spectator as an active participant, not one that is made active by the provocations of the work, but who brings his or her creative powers of interpretation and association, creative powers of feeling, with her into the auditorium. In *The Emancipated Spectator* he responds directly to the contemporary fashion and ideal in theatre of eliminating the passivity of the spectator in order to make them examine the socio-political context of the experience, to activate and prod them into thinking about the relationship between their own lives and the work before them (an ideal with a lineage stretching directly back to Brecht). This admonition to induce an active reflection on the artwork and the place of its event within the context of a wider world of culture and politics is not so far from the pressure on the remix to be self-reflexive if it is to be of any value at all.

In contrast, Rancière stresses that this model of interaction perpetuates the value-laden binary of the passive and the active, maintaining the implication that, without the work to provoke the viewer into active thought, the viewer might not think at all. However, for him the viewer has always had the capacity for activity, even before any Brechtian revolution. He writes:

The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way – by drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them.⁴⁹

The viewer performs the act of creative interpretation, potentially resulting in an endless flow of meaning and association. However, this is not the key to eliminating the distance between the event of experience and the possibility of discourse, a distance which often goes unacknowledged, and which, precisely through being ignored, lies at the root of much dissatisfaction with many critical and analytical methods. Felix Guattari, modulating Pierre Klossowski's description of painting as 'a mode of non-discursive expression', suggests that 'on the side of utterance, the apprehension of a painting is discursive, whereas on the side of the content it happens that it ceases to be. The whole point is to define the concrete operators enabling us to go from one to the other'.⁵⁰ For Guattari, the work of criticism and analysis is to understand and describe the back and forth, reciprocal process between immediate experience and interpretation, between content and discourse. He continues with the assertion that:

The aesthetic rupture of discursivity is never passively experienced . . . This rupture is induced by operators which I will call concrete machines. These machines both disassociate and gather up the expressive matter, 'polyphonize' them (as Bakhtine would say). They transversalize them, that is to say, they make forms and deterritorialized processes, which I will call abstracted machines, move through their different levels.⁵¹

Many works intentionally subvert legibility, or the possibility of discourse, in order to set up a field of interpretive play, where multivalent sources of significance and expression are made to 'move through their different levels'.

One might suggest that the problem with many definitions of the Modern and the Postmodern is that, while they endeavour to account for the emergence of the abstract, the complex, the self-reflexive and conceptual, they often focus on abstract qualities external to the works, on assumptions that are being interrogated, propositions formed of the signs that are brought into play, and on the conceptual ideas being conveyed, that are often reduced to the equivalent of morals, thereby reducing the works themselves.⁵² Not enough attention is given to the power of affect itself, to being disturbed, to the thrill of consuming a work through the senses, to the fields of experience respectively opened up by the revolutions of the Modern and Postmodern.

Cornell forges a link, a bridge between the Romantic, the Modern and the Postmodern, between the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, through to a contemporary culture of the remix, one that can only be adequately understood in the context of a history of engaged spectatorship, of experience, rather than in terms of a series of dialectical revolutions masterminded by the Artist. His use of appropriation brings to the fore these questions of meaning and the ideal model for the relationship between viewer and work. How are we meant to read *Rose Hobart*? As a conceptual exercise containing a number of self-reflexive propositions regarding stardom, Hollywood narrative, and the subconscious? Or is there more that it desires from us? More that is embedded through illegibility? A kind of play that is designed to reward an emancipated spectator, or, better still, that is designed to emancipate?