we rip full-length CDs into sound files; we scan as many books as we can get our hands on; we post essays as fast as we can OCR them.” Unlike other file-sharing sites, however, UbuWeb is generally praised rather than prosecuted. This is in large part due to the material on the site itself, which complicates the decision of rights holders to pursue property claims. First, it historically has had limited distribution, relying largely on volunteer labor, donations, and increasingly scarce state funding. An antidote to this interiority, UbuWeb provides a free service of marketing and digital distribution. Second, the rights holders often do not have the time or money to litigate their work’s appearance on Ubu. Moreover, even with the means, artists are often reluctant to treat their work as a commodity if that would be inconsistent with their avant-garde practice in general. Goldsmith suggests that if artists inform him that out-of-print works are going back in print, he will take them offline, and that the low quality of some of the artifacts on UbuWeb is a deliberate strategy:

If John Giorno called me and told me he was putting the Poetry Works stuff back in print, I’d take it down tomorrow because the job would be done. The distribution for these things are extremely marginal in the first place: mostly they just die, or become collector’s items. None of the MP3s on UbuWeb are in print. The Henri Chopin all comes from out of print vinyl. I’d never take an in print Alga Marghen record and put it up, I realize there’s no economy there, and I’m not going to take money out of the hands of people that are doing good work. I’ll put up Real Audio files, but the sound quality there is degraded to the point that it just stimulates sales for the CDs.

Still, there are important exceptions to UbuWeb’s relative freedom from conflict. Take, for example, the discussion “UbuWeb…HACKED!” on the Frameworks mailing list in 2010, in which some experimental filmmakers criticized Ubu for undermining the already waning agency of artists. There Tony Conrad objected to the dissociation of sound from image of his seminal film The Flicker; in response to the posting of “Soundtrack to ‘The Flicker,’ 1965 (MP3)” on Ubu. “Independent films belong to the filmmakers,” he added, continuing that it would be best to wait for culture to mature enough to confront “property ownership at large” without undermining the specific forms of ownership at play in experimental art.

When Goldsmith writes that “if we had to ask for permission we wouldn’t exist,” he succinctly distills the nature of UbuWeb. It articulates itself, neither for nor against, but at a distance from established institutions. It knows that institutions tend toward self-preservation, and that any permission requested to host and disseminate digital copies of artworks would be met first by disinterest, and then obstinate bureaucracy. The statement goes even further, though. Not simply an obstacle, permission has perversely become the only thing that these institutions have to offer. More than a decade ago, Jeremy Rifkin wrote that “ownership is steadily being replaced by access” such that producers “lease, rent, or charge an admission fee, subscription, or membership dues” in order to extract profit. Within this kind of economy, centered on intellectual property, permission is absolutely not given away. UbuWeb stands as a challenge to this role of the art institution as licensor. At UbuWeb, the issue of appropriation and ownership is not marginal, but rather central.

Although it samples entire works, trampling on legal doctrine such as fair use, we still must recognize UbuWeb as something new, as something that may or may not be “art” but which definitively politicizes appropriation. It extends the territory of artistic intervention beyond the page or the frame and into the systems of distribution and reception. More than that, as a useful thing, Ubu is a resource for innumerable students, inside and outside of proper institutions, who are using the site as raw material for projects and practices. It brings the site of artistic production itself into the work, which is crucial at a time when public services and spaces are collapsing.

SEAN DOCKRAY
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Notes

Some Recent Place Compilation

Documentaries
Thom Anderson, writer, director, producer
Los Angeles Plays Itself
Thom Anderson Productions, Los Angeles, 2003, not available on DVD, 169 min.

Terence Davies, writer, director, narrator
Of Time and the City: A Love Song and a Eulogy
Hurricane Films, Liverpool, 2008, DVD, 73 min.

Yael Hersonski, director
A Film Unfinished
Oscilloscope Laboratories, New York, 2011, DVD, 90 min.

Home Movie Day
www.homemovieday.com/
During the last decade, there have been a number of attempts to reconstruct historical places by assembling old film and video footage. The results provide architectural and urban historians with previously forgotten documentary evidence as well as an innovative vehicle for scholarship.

While mainstream documentary film traditions have focused on capturing the present—especially in the classic city films such as Manhattan (Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, 1921) and Chelovek s kinoaparatom / Man with a Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov, 1929)—an alternative tradition focused on capturing the past has also flourished. In his 1964 monograph Films Beget Films, Jay Leyda coined the term compilation film for this genre. The compilation film, according to Leyda, originated in 1898, when Francis Dousblier assembled unrelated Lumière shorts into a bogus documentary of the Dreyfus affair. The form reached an early peak in Padrenie dinastii Romanovykh / The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty (Esfir Schub, 1927), and flourished during World War II (The True Glory, Reed & Kanin, 1945, and the Why We Fight series, Frank Capra, 1942–45). After the war, NBC’s Victory at Sea (1957) established a compilation format that remains the default style of history documentaries on TV. In the last ten years, this format has come into vogue again in theaters. The movies discussed here illustrate some currently popular approaches to urban historiography via archival footage, which might be categorized as credulous, critical, appropriative, or investigative.

The credulous approach, emphasizing what is represented in the footage, tends to present film as a nostalgia-laden artifact to be mined for details. Early cinema’s brief, unedited, storyless, and characterless views of people and places known as “actualities” are sitting ducks for this kind of appropriation (e.g., Ken Burns and Lynn Novick’s 2011 Prohibition). But no movie is safe, and credulous zeal can leach the art out of the achingly intimate drama Sanxia baoren / Still Life (Jia Zhang Ke, 2006) and turn it into a documentary of Fengjie, downstream from the Three Gorges Dam, before being flooded by the Yangtze.

Credulity exploits the ease with which moods and messages can be imposed on footage by narration, music, and other presentation decisions. The footage of Liverpool presented in Of Time and the City (Terence Davies, 2008) becomes moody background imagery for the personal history narrated by Terence Davies. He makes time to cite T. S. Eliot and Andrew Marvell—with Gustav Mahler and Franz Liszt oozing lush musical regret—but omits any information about the places and times depicted. Nevertheless, Of Time and the City has struck a nerve, at least in Liverpool. In 2010, the film’s producer expanded the film’s website into Peoples’ Stories: Liverpool Lives, an ongoing project in which visitors contribute their own memories.

This use of the footage as a backdrop for personal meditations contrasts with the presentation practices at Home Movie Day events. Since 2002, these annual screening events, taking place in dozens of cities around the world, offer movies brought by the audience. However they are not viewed in silence: event hosts engage the audience—usually volubly—in parsing the information in the films: “What car is that? What year did it come out?” When dealing with locally made material, the discussion tends toward identifying places and determining the exact era captured. The result is social tagging done live and in person, as a social event. The intimate aspects of the material are minimized while the public aspects are celebrated.

Operating in a different mode of nostalgia, since 1999 the Library of Congress has hosted online The Life of a City: Early Films of New York, 1898–1906, in which twenty actuality shorts are presented. Each clip is accompanied by information on the film artifact rather than the places depicted. The shorts are streamed without music, sound effects, or narration. On one hand, the Library of Congress presents the shorts in an unmanipulated state, but on the other, it presents them online (rather than on an authentic 1890s mutoscope) in a context that defines them as American history. The pedagogic effectiveness of this presentation is open to question: even if visitors explore the shorts on their own, what will they make of them?

In contrast to these diegesis-oriented approaches, the critical approach emphasizes the footage as representation. While irreproachably cinematic, this can limit the discussion to the politics of representation. Thom Anderson’s Los Angeles Plays Itself (2003) is the urban epic of this genre, presenting almost three hours of Los Angeles as represented in movies and TV. Anderson’s grasp of film history is catholic and universal, and the range of sources is breathtaking—from the obvious (Chinatown, Roman Polanski, 1974), to vintage gay porn (L.A. Plays Itself; Fred Halsted, 1972), to forgotten trash (The Howling II: Your Sister Is a Werewolf, Philippe Mora, 1985). Many of the specific discussions are compelling: illustrating how L.A.’s modernist houses such as Frank Lloyd Wright’s Ennis house (House on Haunted Hill, William Castle, 1959) or Richard Neutra’s Lovell house (L.A. Confidential, Curtis Hanson, 1997) always function as the lairs of villains, with the sole exception of Pierre Koenig’s Stahl house, which is typically the home of a likeable protagonist to whom bad things happen (Why Do Fools Fall in Love?; Gregory Nava, 1998). However, most of the narration could be characterized as Zhdanovism for Dummies, in which Los Angeles is a synecdoche for “the working class,” whose absence from a film equals ideological mystification. Even worse, the clips are treated as illustrations
of a thesis, not as visual artifacts: nuances of Hollywood gloss or indie grit are lost. Finally, there is the barrier of access. By making his movie without obtaining permissions for the use of the footage, Anderson has created a work that cannot be released to theaters or commercially distributed. The rare special screening is the only opportunity to see it.

Some filmmakers do not so much frame the footage as appropriate it for a new work. In the beginning of his New York Ghetto Fishmarket 1903 (2007), Ken Jacobs wittily punctures the credulous reality effect by first presenting the 1903 Edison Company footage à la Ken Burns, that is, spiced up with canned crowd-murmur sound effects and tinny music. The clip is immediately shown again, minus the audio effects, jolting the viewer into awareness of how manipulated the previous experience had been. Jacobs proceeds through a series of twenty-four variations on the relationship of image and audio, handling his material irreverently, exploring the range of meanings and moods it can have. Jacobs repeatedly focuses on tiny gestures of the crowd—the turns, steps and nods captured on film—so that the place is obliterated.

Compilation films often frame footage in a whodunit narrative, treating the documents as a mystery to be unraveled. For example, in 1994 the BFI announced the discovery of a cache of films produced for exhibition at fairs in small industrial towns of North England by Mitchell & Kenyon circa 1900. The 2009 DVD compilation Electric Edwardians finds a balance between respecting these cinematic artifacts and making them accessible. As the viewer watches “20,000 employees entering Lord Armstrong’s Elswick works, Newcastle-upon-Tyne” (1900) and dozens of other century-old actuality shorts, historian Vanessa Toulmin provides a running commentary. It often labors the obvious, but it also points out things most viewers would miss—for example, how the men onscreen aggressively stage-managing passers-by were Mitchell & Kenyon employees.

In 2010 Yael Hersonski achieved a synthesis of these various approaches in A Film Unfinished. As in Electric Edwardians, Hersonski begins with an unexpected discovery: several reels of film of the Warsaw ghetto, shot by a German camera crew in 1942. Absence of documentation rendered the identity of the crew and their purpose unknowable. Hersonski presents the footage within a provisional argument that it was intended for a Nazi propaganda feature to present the ghetto positively. Rather than critiquing this through a narrator, Hersonski introduces several ghetto survivors. She does not present them as talking heads, but places them in a movie theater. The viewer watches the footage with the survivors, and overhears their responses. As their accounts unwind, and often conflict, Hersonski’s movie becomes not only an investigation into a place and time, but an investigation into how movies tell stories.

In 1898, at the dawn of motion pictures, cameraman Boleslaw Matuszewski argued that a “simple band of printed celluloid constitutes not only a proof of history but a fragment of history itself.” More than a century later, at the twilight of photochemical cinema, moving image documents proliferate and accumulate as never before. Fragments of history without doubt, but “proof”? Proof of what? It’s up to historians, especially those concerned with the history of places in the last hundred years, to devise interpretive frames for these vivid but unfixed documents.

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