

May 29th 2014

# Past is Prologue: Alex Muir

Lucky Pennies: Fiction Video at the Dawn of  
the New American Morning

# Lucky Pennies: Fiction Video at the Dawn of the New American Morning

The Sony Portapak comes onto the market in 1967 in the midst of a moment charged by the idea of counter-culture. Martha Rosler, among others, describe how video becomes a key tool in the arsenal by means of which artists and activists launch an assault on the manipulative biopolitical machinations of the establishment or propose forms of life beyond or outside of it.<sup>1</sup> Much of the contemporaneous discourse, retrospective historicization, and (indeed) extant practice of those early years position independent video in pronounced opposition to the culture industry. It is a medium for narcissistic or personal exploration where television is impersonal. It is a new phenomenological exploration of vision and projection where television is numbing, and poses a structure of consumption and spectatorship that is reified and given. It exposes marginalized truths where Hollywood and Burbank are committed to sustaining illusion. Both limited access to the means of manipulation (various forms of editing technology) and a healthy contempt for the social effects of these processes ensure that video is an earnest and sincere form of representation well before it is dissembling or duplicitous.

Here in Vancouver — here at the

Western Front — and elsewhere, we know that video is and always has been amphibious; functioning as a platform of experimentation and extension for many cultural producers who work in other forms. Frequently invoked as a flagship medium of postmodernity—in many respects integral to the dissolution of a modernist emphasis on disciplinary purity and autonomy—it is not surprising that some of its own histories as a relatively discrete medium remain faint. An investigation of a particular video work, or artist, associated with the Front will, almost by definition, shoot centrifugally outward into other reaches of a nebulous cloud of aesthetic, social and political considerations and influences. Nevertheless, drawing a provisional frame around parts of this body of work has been the premise of the research that informs this screening: what kind of ‘movie-makers’ and ‘movies’ have found a home (or at least a pied-à-terre) at the Western Front, historically? Do the works we find here exhibit aesthetic tendencies that are significant or even somewhat unique with respect to dramatic cinema? Many works related to this corpus have experienced a revival of interest in the last five years or so. With respect to a socio-aesthetic zeitgeist, this revisitation makes sense; internationally, there are countless contemporary producers exploring video’s potentials as a medium for dramatic performance and narrative. More specifically, in spite of considerable social and technological gaps, there are many works that are formally resonant with or empathetic to the irreverent, often parodic, sometimes kitsch aesthetics that characterize many videos in the Western Front’s archive. The connection is evident enough, but situating these works within

an overarching aesthetic genealogy specific to the moving image remains an obscure task. There are likely a number of reasons for this, but here I want to suggest that the initial push to distance video from television and film generates a discursive drag that stalls considerations of video on these terms for some time.

### **Neo Realisms New Waves**

The term 'new wave' has been used to historicize a number of emergent, often geographically - bound communities of filmmakers over the past 70 years. A plausible historical narrative could describe how groups of producers rise out of conjunctures characterized by generational clash, sociopolitical trauma and flux, technological innovation, and changes in access to the means of production and reception. If such producers can be related to a local commercial film industry at all, this relationship is typically angular and partial. Works are not made by the same methods and means; and the films reflect these differences in their resulting forms. At least for a time, these vanguardist waves produce new contents, new characters and relationships, they explore novel locales, and often propose novel perspectival configurations by which these places and doings are mediated. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope is useful for conceptualizing how the works of Agnes Varda or Pierpaolo Pasolini (for example) differ from their forebears and commercial contemporaries. The term is related to the idea of genre, but specifically attuned to the way generic tendencies accumulate to represent worlds that are ontologically distinct in their treatments of space and time. Can such a term serve

us here? How might the Front ply to a new wave narrative?

With respect to social history, the building itself still holds many traces of the kind of communal coherence that animates other scenes. It has been an exceptional space that could potentially support and stage all phases of production and reception. Cinema is a materially taxing enterprise—particularly those performative modes that maintain some form of diegetic border between lived and taped reality. Significant and by no means ubiquitous State support notwithstanding, likely the only reason that many of these works were possible to create at all is because a number of individual artists have been willing on countless occasions to work on one another's ideas in interchanging roles: as videographers, production and post-production technicians, editors, musicians and, importantly, as performers. Tapes were made in a production context of relatively scant means that oscillates wildly between the amateur and the professional. These deficiencies, however, have frequently been integral to innovation and invention.

What kind of 'realism' do the works hosted at the Front develop? In his study of global new waves, James Tweedie characterizes several of these movements as pedestrian in nature. Against the backdrop of a late modern era committed to incrementally expediting the global movement and management of people, goods, and information, Tweedie points to urban flaneury as a hallmark feature of the French new wave: "the lugubrious pace of the pedestrian, rather than the racing automobile or careering train, momentarily sets the tempo for cinema.

These characters both move and linger in space; they walk with a demeanor that defies the period's dominant metaphors of circulation, communication, or flow".<sup>2</sup> The anti-heroic subject positionings that pertain to such a realism are applicable to the Front-related video under scrutiny, but with these practitioners at this later stage in the long history to which Tweedie refers, the plebianization displayed is more precisely and encompassingly related to the mediascape rather than the cityscape. These works are a significant armature of an ongoing engagement with the world of images—a fascination with media realities, vernacular and personae, celebrity and mimesis. Alongside contemporaries and collaborators in Toronto and California, such as General Idea and Ant Farm, the Western Front draws pop art into the fields of video and performance. This is to affirm, again, that this work is not exactly resistant to "the period's dominant metaphors," rather, the veracity and reproducibility of these metaphors are tested in a number of circumstances. While Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker insists that the response of these artists is "fully articulated in the real-world politics of the Kennedy and Carter campaigns and the media war over Vietnam," the strategy is largely one of infiltration rather than opposition.<sup>3</sup>

### **Every time it rains, it rains pennies from Heaven**

What is striking about these attempts to mimic the language, gesture and scene of popular media forms is that they occur during an era in which these very forms were undergoing profound paradigmatic and scalar changes. Hollywood's classical studio system had been in slow but steady

decline since the beginning of the post-war period. As Mike Gasher recounts, by the recessionary years of the early 1970s, the major studios "began to divest themselves of their production facilities—for example, Twentieth Century-Fox sold the land that is now Century City in Los Angeles".<sup>4</sup> Consequently, this is the period when 'Hollywood North' begins to emerge, as the studio is supplanted by location shooting across the globe in economically favourable places like Vancouver. Centralized Fordist production gives way to the now familiar organizational paradigms of the neoliberalizing era: flexibility, globalization, and specialization. The major studios begin to make less films themselves, consolidating efforts and "attention to individual film 'spectaculars'"—the new era of Blockbusters like *Star Wars* and *E.T.*, designed not only to draw audiences back to the multiplex but also to extend themselves into the fabric of the everyday in new insidious incarnations (tie-ins, merchandise, etc.) . The global cultural terraforming involved in such ambitions was significantly aided by waves of industrial deregulation initiated by the Reagan administrations of the 1980s. Anti-trust laws, which had been incrementally weakening the major studios since the 40s were now being overturned, thus facilitating the reconstitution of these studios within vertically and horizontally integrated "trans-industrial media conglomerates".<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to say that while the Western Front staged elaborate performances in front of a camera, the context of their productions had very little to do with the modes that were rising to dominance in the mass-media fields they were impersonating. If the advent of consumer-grade video

equipment is a hallmark of the era of media democratization, it is much more viscerally clear how this democracy relates to documentarian practice; how does it extend into the janus-faced art of cinematic storytelling? Historically, illusionism tends to be a well-heeled endeavour.

If artists in and around the Front were not generally a part of the postmodern Hollywood production context, they were nonetheless very interested in it. Rather than a disavowal or an explicit deconstruction of the world of commodified imagery, many tapes instead extend shards of its representational logic onto ad-hoc terrain. Objects of representational fetishism (props, images, affectation) are staged within a series of profane configurations, offering up all the different possibilities for bad or intermittent mimesis. Works and performers over-identify with the magical promise of the image world—inhabiting a subject position comparable to fan-fiction.

They act as ideal consumers, misunderstanding only that their engagement was never meant to exceed spectatorship—or at least not on their own terms and within their own means. This is not to suggest that the videos function only as failures. Rather, these fictions are viscerally unnerving to watch as much for the moments where we feel our reflexive representational expectations foiled as for when we feel through or in spite of the tenuousness of our mimetic grounding—as the phantom limbs that facilitate cinematic suture or spectatorial gestalt ache on the command of an apparently unsanctioned authority. With an abiding interest in pataphysics and the historic

relationships between science and magic, the video works of producers like Hank Bull and Patrick Ready, Liz Vander Zaag, Susan Britton (and so on) have plumbed the depths of technological mystification and modern alienation. What exactly have we internalized, by now? To what extent is disentanglement even possible? As Peggy Gale has noted with respect to the work of both Eric Metcalfe and Kate Craig, while persona is an indelible dimension of many videos in this constellation, “an interior ‘other’ self is never available as an option”.<sup>6</sup> Gale reads the following quote in *Delicate Issue* (1979) as Craig’s challenge to “the confessional idiom of early video”: “The closer the subject the clearer the intent. The closer the image the clearer the idea. Or does intimacy breed obscurity?”<sup>7</sup> The inadequacy or naïveté of the scale of spectacle on display may betray a merely personal register in moments—in an age of super stardom, any more than 15 minutes of access to the stage of representation is the privilege of wealth and celebrity alone. But if these videos are autobiographical, it is chiefly in the sense that they out our curious relationship to images and our spectatorial fantasies.

### **Handling Quicksilver**

*“What’s interesting is the oscillation, the movement inside and outside the institutions, the liminal edge, the marginal, the relationship of the legitimate world with a parasitic, subversive, reject culture that congregates around its gates.” – Hank Bull “The Reception of Electricity”<sup>8</sup>*

As Lowell Darling’s “archaeological” exploration of backlot detritus makes most explicit, the works featured in this screening describe an art world existing

on the underbelly of Hollywood. The ambivalent exploration of and attempts to engage within this world are roguish or picaresque. The picara is protean; she “assumes whatever form the world forces on [her], and this a-personality is typical of the picaresque world, in which appearance and reality constantly mingle, making definition and order disappear”.<sup>9</sup> During a period that saw an exponential shift in the amplification of images, the Western Front fosters a number of works that find synecdochical means of tenuously inhabiting these emergent fetishes. Series of half-digested tropes of classical genre narratives are spun out to speculative effect. By trickery or happenstance, the rogue can briefly appear to be the classical heroine that she is not, but any meteoric rise is only ever temporary. As Stuart Miller describes, the Picara’s “fate is in the lap of the gods, but the gods are continually dropping it. Haphazard revolutions of good and bad fortune are her lot, and in the senseless and unstoppable whirling, we may be made to feel the instability of our own fortunes”.<sup>10</sup> This volatility of fortune speaks to the mercurial positioning of video during our era as well: it is at once essential and yet utterly disposable. As Renée Baert wrote in 1986, it is “a medium in search of its own authority. Its form is confounded by its myriad functions. Its language is a hybrid of derivations. Its identity shifts uncomfortably between its status as art and its ambitions as television.”<sup>11</sup> The Western Front has functioned as an artistic sanctuary space where this discomfort has been intuitively exploited repeatedly with results that continue to confound.

1. Martha Rosler. “Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment”. *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*. Eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer. (New York: Aperture, 1990), 31.

2. James Tweedie. *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 90.

3. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker. “Westcoast Performance: Praxis Without Ideology”. *Vancouver: Art and Artists 1931-1983*. Ed. Norah Kembar. (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1983), 300-05.

4. Mike Gasher. *Hollywood North: The Feature Film Industry in British Columbia*. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 49.

5. Eileen Meehan. “A Legacy of Neoliberalism: Patterns in Media Conglomeration”. *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*. Eds. Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 38-58.

6. Peggy Gale. “Eric Metcalfe: Performing the Self”. *Return to Brutopia: Eric Metcalfe Works and Collaborations*. Ed. Scott Watson. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Gallery, 1992), 49-62.

7. Peggy Gale “The Use of the Self to Structure Narratives”. *Western Front Video*. Ed. René Blouin. (Montréal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 1984), 14-19.

8. Hank Bull. “The Reception of Electricity”. Lecture, Universität Bremen. Bremen,

Germany, June 5th 2014.

9. Stuart Miller. *The Picaresque Novel*. (Cleveland, OH: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1967). 28.

10. Stuart Miller. *The Picaresque Novel*. 70

11. Renée Baert. "Video in Canada: In Search of Authority". *Vidéo*. Ed. René Payant. Montréal, (QC: Artextes, 1986), 42-54.

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## List of Works

**Lowell Darling, *Hollywood Archaeology* (1976), 21:17**

**Susan Britton, *Casting Call* (1979), 37:29**

**Andrew Paterson, *Basic Motel* (1980), 22:41**

**Eric Metcalfe and Hank Bull, *Duster* (1991), 39:37**

*Courtesy of the artists and the Western Front Media Archive.*



The Western Front gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the BC Arts Council through the Government of British Columbia, the City of Vancouver, our members and volunteers. The Western Front is a member of the Pacific Association of Artist-Run Centres (PAARC) and the Independent Media Arts Alliance (IMAA).