Essay: How to teach a class on archive filmmaking *by Juliet Jacques*

Fast Cuts

'The invention of film in the 1890s meant the 20th century could be recorded like none before; the advent of the World Wide Web 100 years later has given filmmakers unprecedented access to historical moving images, making it easier than ever to find an audience for works made using relatively cheap and accessible digital editing software.' This is how I introduce my short course at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London, where I attempt to teach the basics of archive filmmaking in four days. Working with a variety of postgraduate students, some of whom are familiar with filmmaking and some who are completely new to it, I start with a workshop in which we discuss the aesthetic and economic pros and cons of using archives, who is represented in them, how prejudices of the past affect who can document themselves in the present, and different approaches to making works using pre-existing material.

I give my students a list of political documentaries, starting with Esfir Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), which used footage shot in pre-revolutionary Russia and Europe between 1913 and 1917. Sourced from numerous locations, this material was often in poor condition, since there was no centralized film archive under Tsar Nicholas II, although he had employed a private cameraman, whose reels form the backbone of Shub's film. My list ends with Johan Grimonprez's *Soundtrack to a Coup d'État* (2024), a meticulously researched, superbly edited study of how the United States used Black musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Nina Simone to build soft power in Africa (implying a domestic freedom that Black people didn't always have), while the CIA conspired to overthrow radical post-independence leaders, focusing on former president Patrice Lumumba in the Republic of the Congo, who was assassinated in 1961. As an exercise, I show them the first few minutes of RCA graduate Asif Kapadia's *Diego Maradona* (2019), asking how effectively it conveys Maradona's career to anyone unfamiliar with his story by combining scenes of a car driving the footballer through Naples with moments from his emergence as a superstar at Boca Juniors and Barcelona. The students generally enjoy the montage and find it makes sense even if they aren't into football: invariably there are loud gasps at the fight, and ensuing riot, after the 1984 Copa del Rey final that led Barcelona to sell Maradona to Naples.

We also talk about works made by artists, such as Jasmina Cibic's *The Gift* (2021), which, like many of her films, combines Cibic's original footage with dialogue taken entirely from public or parliamentary speeches, transcripts of official meetings and other political contexts. Mostly, though, we stick to works made of existing material that have been shown in cinemas and galleries or at festivals, or using modes of distribution that allow their creators to take a cavalier attitude to copyright, from the video to the digital age. We progress from Guy Debord and René Viénet's situationist *détournement* of Hollywood classics, kung-fu and soft-porn films in the 1960s and 1970s, to the UK's scratch video movement of the 1980s, which emerged as it became possible for artists to not just create their own archives of television footage but also to edit them and share the results on VHS tapes or by screening them in nightclubs – represented by The Duvet Brothers' *Blue Monday* (1984), a four-minute look at Margaret Thatcher's Britain, soundtracked (without permission) by New Order. We follow that line of enquiry to Arthur Jafa's *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016), a short study of Black life in the US that went viral during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. *Love Is the Message*... combined Jafa's own shots with helicopter footage of the 1992 LA riots and, later, police brutality captured on people's phones, all set to Kanye West's 'Ultralight Beam' (2016). The skill of both films lies in how economically they capture the state of a nation, applying Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's principles of montage – that fast cutting between images can represent political conflict and heighten an audience's emotive response to a narrative – to the music video format to illustrate class and race struggles and to demand change.

I also show students my short *You Will Be Free* (2017), made up of archival material taken mostly from film and television, but also amateur footage, video games, photographs and newspapers. It opens with an azure screen, borrowed from Derek Jarman's final work, *Blue* (1993), and a narrator repeating American actor and writer Cookie Mueller's words to her stricken husband, as they were both dying of AIDS-related illnesses in 1989, about how losing your body represents a form of freedom. I decided to use old footage to convey the queer counterculture lost to the virus, with a narrator reflecting on Mueller's idea, and how the US and UK governments neglected the HIV/AIDS crisis because of its disproportionate impact on people they considered undesirable, and the importance of the body to LGBTQ+ people – not just in the pleasures of sex, but also in the significance of community and creativity for people who have always felt like outsiders. I talk my students through the process of making it: how I searched the Mediatheque at the British Film Institute (BFI) to find suitable footage, from children playing in my hometown of Horley to director Nicolas Roeg's notorious 'Don't Die of Ignorance' (1987) television advert with the falling tombstone (produced as part of an AIDS public health campaign by the British government in 1986); how I negotiated a price when I could find the rights holders or replaced certain footage

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Bill Morrison, *Decasia* (detail), 2002, film still. Courtesy: Bill Morrison/ Hypnotic Pictures

Opposite page
Jasmina Cibic, *The Gift*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Below
Andrée Blouin in Johan Grimonprez's *Soundtrack to a Coup d'Etat*, 2024, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Popperfoto; photograph: © Terence Spencer

Found footage should not be treated as inherently 'true': its meaning depends entirely on how it is edited and presented.

when I couldn't; how I shot the still images on 16mm film using a rostrum camera; how I edited it using Adobe Premiere Pro; and how, since it cost just GB£750 in total to produce, it represented a more accessible form of filmmaking.

On the second day, we visit the BFI's Reuben Library and Mediatheque, so the students discover just how much material is in the national archive – more than 70,000 titles, from films and television programmes to old newsreels and amateur footage going back as far as 1896 – and how the BFI might help them to source or license it. With the course attracting participants from across the globe, many are interested in footage from colonial India or Hong Kong, as well as from 1960s and '70s documentaries about diasporic communities in the UK.

On the third and fourth days, the students develop and present an idea for a short film. The results are always incredibly varied: some choose to use their own archives, particularly footage taken with their phones; some delve into their families' VHS or Super-8 collections. Some use material with a Creative Commons licence or that is out of copyright; some make a point of appropriation. Some edit footage with no further artifice; some add a voice-over or music. Subjects have ranged from how the RCA has presented itself in documentaries and promotional material to a controversial football game between Somalia and Saudi Arabia in 1982. Most of the students use found footage, but some take a more tangential approach to the brief, coming up with a project that uses photographs or text, or even – like the Bishkek School of Theory and Activism in *Queer in Space: Kollontai Commune Archive* (2015) – explores an archive of their own invention. The joy of the prompt lies in its simplicity and flexibility: in under a week, students encounter a range of inspirational works, learn where and how to acquire material, pick up the basics of editing and apply these processes to an almost infinite variety of topics, to produce an astonishing range of effects.

There are two filmmakers whose careers particularly represent the wide possibilities of archive filmmaking, and whose work I recommend to my students in its entirety. One is American director Bill Morrison, who made his name with *Decasia* (2002), which set decaying silent footage, recorded on highly flammable and degradable nitrate film, to a contemporary symphony by Michael Gordon. After finding a shot of a boxer fighting a fissure of light where his opponent had once been, he focused his search on similar stock where the decomposition of the material reinforced the sense of life's transience, inherent to watching any old film. When I first saw it, I was struck by footage of a hut burning: as the structure collapses, the film fails, and light consumes the

Bill Morrison, *Light Is Calling*, 2004, film stills. Courtesy: Bill Morrison/ Hypnotic Pictures

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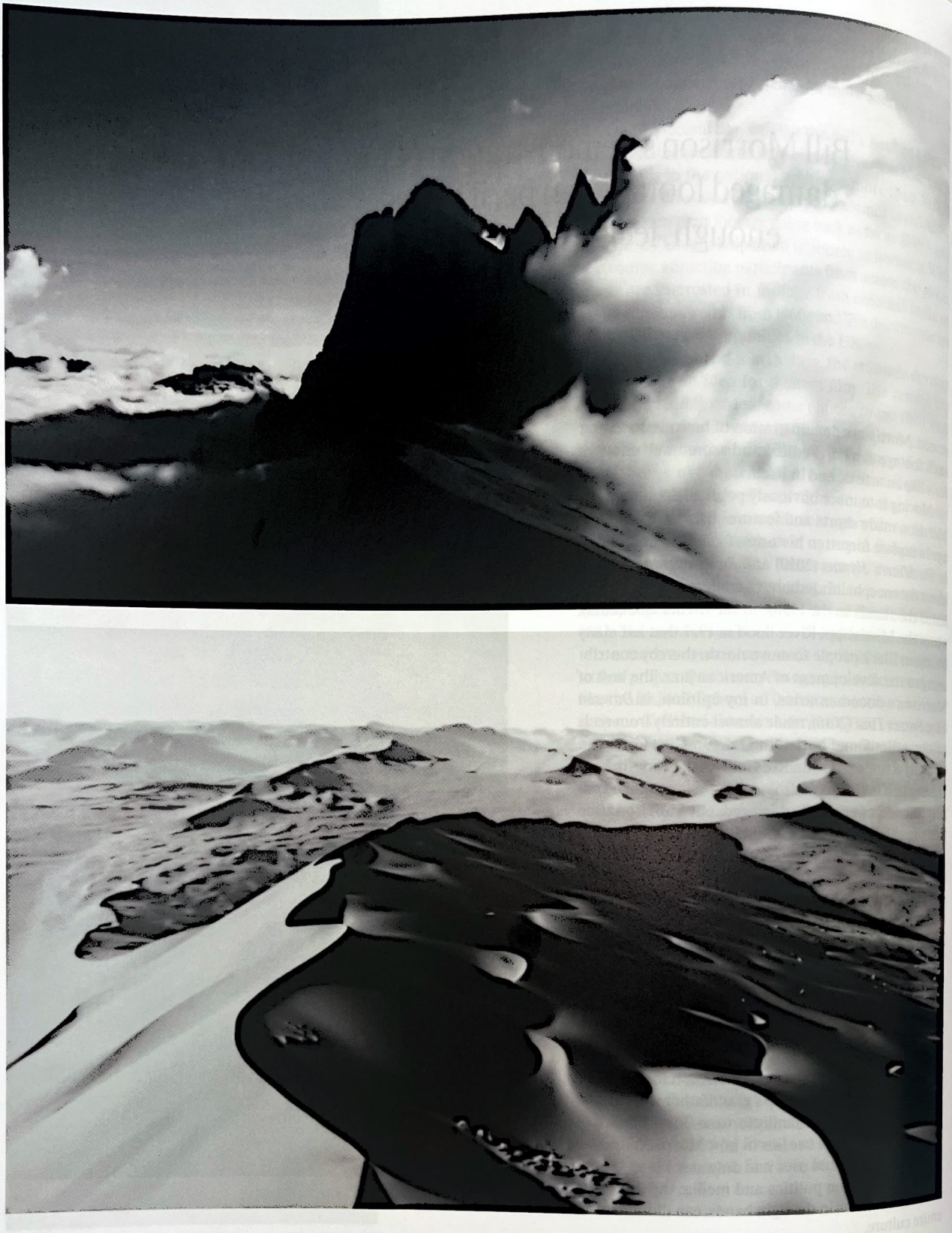
Moving into more obviously political documentary, Morrison made shorts and features using archive footage to explore forgotten histories, from British industry in *The Miners' Hymns* (2010) and *Re:Awakenings* (2013), about the encephalitis lethargica epidemic that incapacitated thousands in the 1920s, to *The Great Flood* (2013), about the Mississippi River flood in 1927 that led many southern Black people to move north, thereby contributing to the development of American jazz. The best of Morrison's documentaries, in my opinion, is *Dawson City, Frozen Time* (2016), made almost entirely from reels of silent film found buried in Dawson City, Canada – a largely abandoned Klondike Gold Rush town – in 1979. Having lain in the permafrost for more than half a century, the reels were badly damaged, but Morrison used them to tell the story of the Gold Rush, which coincided with the birth of film and the establishment of cinema as a source of news and mass entertainment.

The intertitle-style narration looks at early film distribution. The remote Dawson City was at the end of the line, so studios recommended that the townsfolk keep or dispose of the reels that had taken three years to get there, and which they assumed no-one would want to see again. It also discusses colonialism – since the entertainment industry was necessary to retaining the workers who had displaced the area's indigenous population – and links to the origins of 21st century America, telling us how US President Donald Trump's grandfather immigrated to Canada and built the family fortune. The brilliance of *Dawson City, Frozen Time* lies in how Morrison focuses on one local story and uses it to draw out a long history of North American politics and media: the discovery of a single archive, in the right hands, can illuminate an entire culture.

Another director we look at on the course is Artavazd Peleshyan, an Armenian who began his career in the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Peleshyan produces essay films, a genre that has always made extensive use of archival material – a notable example being the work of British filmmaker Adam Curtis, a favourite of my students. Peleshyan does not make straightforward documentaries: there is no voice-over or textual narration, just music

Bill Morrison, *Dawson City: Frozen Time*, 2016, film stills. Courtesy: Bill Morrison / Hypnotic Pictures



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and sound effects over rhythmically edited footage. *Our Century* (1983) presents space travel as the pinnacle of modernity, contrasting the majesty of spacecraft with the boredom (and occasional terror) of life on board, and with the development of road, rail and air travel throughout the 20th century, from early biplanes to the 1937 Hindenburg disaster.

Now aged 86, Peleshyan's most recent – and likely final – film points towards a difficult future: *Nature* (2020) is a visual poem that juxtaposes the beauty and power of the natural world with the threat it poses to human life. As in Jafa's short film, there's a jarring shift in aesthetic and tone when Peleshyan cuts between professionally shot images of the sea, with the sound of crashing waves, and the noise of people panicking as they capture footage on their mobile phones of their towns being destroyed by tornadoes or volcanoes, floods or fires. Using existing footage is not only cheaper and easier than shooting new material: much of *Nature*'s impact derives from the understanding that nothing we see has been staged, heightening the sense of terror. Like Morrison, Peleshyan is dealing with mortality – not just of people, but of the entire planet.

Two films made from the same source material highlight the elasticity of this approach. Andrei Ujică's *Out of the Present* (1995) is a documentary about Sergei Krikalev, the Russian cosmonaut famously stranded on Mir for ten months in 1991 as the Soviet Union collapsed. Ujică combined archive footage of Krikalev on the space station and the dissolution of the USSR with his own shots of Mir in slow orbit, made using the first 35mm camera in space. (An effect that ultimately used up half of his budget.) In 2010, American artist Kerry Tribe produced *The Last Soviet*, which combined a model of Mir's interior, made in her studio, with footage of tanks advancing on the Kremlin in the August 1991 coup attempt. Dealing with the unreliable memory of historical events – since Krikalev had a unique yet obviously distant view of the situation – Tribe constructed his dialogue, read by a male actor, and contrasted it with a female voice giving a Russian-language account of the time. The end result reminds us that found footage should not be treated as inherently 'true': its meaning depends entirely on how it is edited and presented.

With so many people recording so much material now, on phones as well as film cameras – according to a June 2022 report from Statista, 82 years' worth of video content is uploaded to YouTube every day – this type of filmmaking is only set to evolve further. I thought my students would mostly be interested in making historical or political documentaries, but their enthusiasm for creating personal diaries, music videos, comic sketches and other hybrid forms just goes to prove that the possibilities of the archive truly are infinite ●

Juliet Jacques is a writer, filmmaker, broadcaster and academic. Her most recent short story collection, *The Woman in the Portrait* (2024), was published by Cipher Press.

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Artavazd Pelechian, *Nature*, 2020, film stills. Courtesy: © Artavazd Pelechian

Below
Kerry Tribe, *The Last Soviet*, 2010, video stills. Courtesy: the artist