



POLITICS, ANY WAY YOU SLICE IT

Words:
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THE FOG OF WAR: IMAGES FROM ARCHER & BECK'S CLEAN SWEEP



One of the more revealing anecdotes about modern political oratory comes from *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, neurologist Oliver Sachs' 1987 collection of tales from the frontlines of clinical psychology. Sachs recalls watching a speech by the late President Reagan with patients in an aphasia ward and being astonished when they roared with laughter. Why did they laugh at Reagan? Aphasiacs compensate for their inability to comprehend language by becoming highly attuned to subtleties of diction and manner – so much so, Sachs concluded, that “one cannot lie to an aphasiac.” Though they could not understand the president’s speech – *because* they could not understand it – they could read all “the grimaces, the histrionisms, the false gestures and, above all, the false tones and cadences of the voice.” Their natural response to such grotesquerie was hilarity.

The magic of political cut-and-mix filmmaking is that it allows the rest of us “normals” to see and hear as aphasiacs do, to discover the humor in politicians’ rhetorical attempts to manipulate and conceal. And if the basis of comedy is truth, as so many of its practitioners have attested, then these techniques also provide us an awareness of precisely those facts and circumstances which politicians’ speechifying tries to obscure. As an artistic strategy, this is nothing new. The practice of recontextualizing dominant cultural iconography as a means of questioning mainstream institutional society’s assertions and assumptions goes back at least as far as the Dadaists. The Situationist International further formalized the idea, dubbing it “detournement,” while the culture jammers applied it systematically to the airwaves and mass media. The practice isn’t even especially new to the screen, as ‘60s experimental filmmakers like Bruce Conner employed assemblage to address the political landscape of their time. But the explosion of cheap and easy digital technologies has spawned a new, larger generation of splicers and slicers who gleefully appropriate and subvert footage of talking heads and heads of state, often using the fluid delivery system of the Internet to disseminate their work.

Granted, these sorts of tactics have by now become common political currency. Indeed, one might also refer to our information age as the age of decontextualization. Everyone’s a culture jammer nowadays, it seems – just switch on Fox News on any given night, watch the films of Michael Moore, Robert Greenwald and other left-wing provocateurs, or listen to the spin-doctoring of both major parties, and you’re bound to encounter a wide variety of slicing and dicing of the so-called truth. The difference here of course is that the filmmakers mean for you to see the cuts, the disjunctures, the wild incongruities; the disconnect between what you see and what you hear provides a source of humor, and sometimes profound insight.

On the simplest and often most effective level, the culture jammers’ practice involves literally cutting up a piece of found footage – a speech, a newscast – and suturing it back together out of order or with new sound to give it new meaning. The extremity of the current administration’s positions has given cultural remixers plenty of material, while its blatant manipulation of the media has provided the impetus to manipulate the administration right back. Favorite son George W. Bush’s feckless attitude toward policy, peculiar grasp of syntax and status as the sitting US president have made him the current chief whipping boy, while his most prominent and controversial cabinet members, Donald Rumsfeld and John Ashcroft, occupy second and third chair. Other members of the extended neocon family of trickle-downers and shock-and-awers also receive their share of the attention, as do members of the mainstream media who slavishly “report” on Bush administration policy.

One of the most widely circulated recent Bush remixes was British satirist Chris Morris’ *Bushwhacked*, which appropriates the 2003 State of the Union address Bush delivered shortly before initiating hostilities against Iraq, to hilarious and alarming effect. The clip beautifully illustrates the explosively provocative potential of the genre – here, the implied menace of Bush’s trademark smirk is born out when he declares, “Every year, by law and by custom, we meet here to threaten the world,” while Dick Cheney looks on in somber approval and Tom Ridge rises to applaud. *Bushwhacked* also explicitly demonstrates the lineage of these video agitators to audio pranksters of decades past. It’s actually the sequel to a remixed mp3 Morris created from Bush’s 2001 speech announcing air strikes against Afghanistan, in which Bush remarks, “I’m speaking to you from the White House, a place where American presidents have become outlaws and murderers themselves” – which in turn recalled the Evolution Control Committee’s edited speeches of Bush senior, or Ronald Reagan’s spliced-together video assertion, “I was the nightmare of America and the human race,” from Craig Baldwin’s documentary about audio bricoleurs, *Sonic Outlaws*. The inclusion of visual context in this new *Bushwhacked* installment heightens its absurdity and adds resonance by communicating the ceremoniousness of the occasion and those same facial tics and physical gestures which drove the aphasiacs into hysterics.

Houston video artist Aaron Valdez’s *States of the Union* takes a different angle on the same speech, even more potently illustrating the unique power of video remix. Rather than reordering Bush’s phraseology, Valdez weaves together the many moments when Bush says nothing at all, looking like a sheepish,

befuddled Alfred E. Newman as he licks his lips and furrows his brow, his eyes sweeping the crowd while the sounds of audience members clearing their throats and moving their feet echo through the great hall. Valdez paired the remix with Bill Clinton's 1998 State of the Union in which Clinton rifles through numbers like a malfunctioning policy wonk, the implication being that while we may at times have heard more than we wanted from Clinton, we certainly don't hear enough from Bush, that while the former president was a master of words, the current one often seems baffled by them. There are certain words Bush does like, however, and Chicago media designer Mike Nourse isolates those in *Terror, Iraq, Weapons*. Not even a remix *per se* but a "summary" that chronologically catalogs Bush's extensive use of these three words during a 30-minute speech in Cincinnati, the piece zeroes in on the administration's rhetorical bludgeoning of the public with the vocabulary of fear.

In contrast to these caustically funny remixes seeking to expose the vacuity of the president's character or the nastiness of his policies, Jen Simmons and Sarah Christman's poignant *Bush for Peace* strives to imagine the kind of character and policy stance we'd like in our commander-in-chief. It's a response to Bush's declaration of war against Iraq, in which, Simmons explains, "[We] wanted to see what it would feel like to watch Bush declare peace, and be honest." The White House had supplied the networks with a title for the speech, "Moment of Truth," which made them wonder, "What would it feel like to have a real moment of truth?" So the Temple University graduate students transformed Bush's hawkish language into a humble apology to the world. "All the decades of deceit and cruelty have now reached an end," the president promises. "It is not too late to overcome hatred and violence, and turn the creative gifts of men and women to the pursuits of peace. There will be no more wars of aggression against your neighbors. Instead of drifting along toward tragedy, we will set a course toward peace." As he speaks these words, an odd thing happens: Bush's usual sanctimony gives way to genuine gravity. Watching the president's head jerk slightly with each cut, you know the effect is entirely contrived, and this awareness yields sorrow: why can't our leaders and statesmen make statements like this one? "People tend to laugh and applaud for the first minute," Simmons observes. "And then everybody gets real quiet."

Simmons and Christman conceived and created *Bush for Peace* in a single night, with Simmons editing a transcript of the speech and then Christman editing the video, which demonstrates another advantage to this kind of practice: with a good idea and a small amount of effort, it's possible to come up with a big result. Swedish editor and musician Johan Söderberg, a onetime member of the multimedia rock group Lucky People Center, understands this principle and has taken utmost advantage of it with *Read My Lips*. Produced by independent Stockholm-based production company Atmo, this Internet clip series shows the world's leaders from Saddam Hussein to Ariel Sharon lip-syncing to popular tunes. Söderberg has created more than 40 clips now, sometimes coming up with a new one every week. For *The Voice*, he took the same speech Simmons and Christman used, but syncs Bush to a recording of a hypnotist guiding his patient, a blunt suggestion that the president's ambition is to control the minds of America. Söderberg's most popular segment by far remains *Bush and Blair Love Duet*, a send-up of the curious alliance between the Republican president and the Labor prime minister in which the two leaders serenade one another to the tune of the Lionel Richie (Bush) and Diana Ross (Blair) classic "Endless Love" (a concept since taken one step further by English video artist Saam Farahmand, who made the pair croon to Electric Six's disco-sex anthem "Gay Bar"). Like the other remix pieces, Söderberg's mocking lip-sync satires are amusing, but their humor also reveals something bigger. "It's too easy to just make fun of people," he remarks. "In most of my work, I've [done well] if one plus one equals three."

Remixers who add graphical embellishments to their found footage share that desire to create something larger than the sum of its parts. That's the effect of LA-based designer/directors Grady Hall and Mark Hoffman's *Pinocchio*, a 30-second bit that compiles clips of Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Condoleeza Rice and Colin Powell making claims about Iraq's fabled weapons of mass destruction as their noses grow ever longer. It's simple, but as a tool for demonstrating the difference between things as they are and things as they're made to seem, effective. Somewhat further afield is Hollywood animator Davy Force's *MF-47 Newsbreak!*, which starts with a doctored John Ashcroft press

conference announcing new laws allowing the deportation of aliens who aid and abet terrorists; each time he uses the word "alien," Ashcroft momentarily acquires a green alien head. The piece then dissolves into a mix of cable TV clips concerning aliens and UFOs marked by the panicked refrain, "They're coming to get us," another darkly comic commentary on the administration's divisive trafficking in fear.

Still more ambitiously surreal is Austin directing and design duo Jason Archer and Paul Beck's animated trilogy of hallucinatory shorts, *The State of the Union, The Homeland Hodown* and *Clean Sweep*. Working in a patriotic palette of red, white and blue, Archer & Beck produce swirling, painterly dreamscapes filled with the familiar faces and trappings of 21st century militarism – Bushes *père* and *fils*, Cheney, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, floating missiles, oil drums, marching phalanxes of Gumby-like figures in gas masks, and so on – scored by edited speeches of Dubya addressing the nation on drugs or vigilance in the face of terror (and in *Clean Sweep*, Ross Perot on America's schizophrenic relationship with Hussein). Cartoonish and sometimes claustrophobic, these phantasmagorical pieces underscore the distance between our politicians' actions and our reality, and the confusion engendered by that distance.

Some of the most sophisticated and wide-ranging detournements of all have come from New York-based director Stephen Marshall and the team at the Guerrilla News Network, which since its inception in 2000 has been producing hard-hitting and thought-provoking "NewsVideos" that range from straight-on reportage to kaleidoscopic culture jams. GNN exists to provide a radical alternative to a mainstream media, so its sweeping assemblages serve not only as critiques of government's attempts to construct a distorted worldview, but also of the media's complicity in such behavior. Marshall's *S-11 Redux: (Channel) Surfing the Apocalypse* bursts from the screen, mixing clips culled from 20 hours of TV footage recorded from 13 channels over a single month after the September 11 attacks, weaving together the visages and pontifications of Dan Rather, Larry King, Osama bin Laden, Peter Jennings, Colin Powell, James Baker, Tim Russert, Benjamin Netanyahu, John Miller and George and Laura Bush – and that's just the first minute. Over the course of the remaining nine, *S-11 Redux* uses still more political leaders (Tony Blair, Jean Chrétien, Rudy Giuliani, Donald Rumsfeld), talk show commentators and humorously illustrative cable TV clips pirated from everything from *Star Trek* to The History Channel to demonstrate how the Bush-led government and the corporate media went about preparing America for war in Afghanistan and Iraq by insisting that we live in an opposed, polar world of good and evil, Muslims and Christians, their beliefs and ours. Perhaps bleaker still is *Closer: The Fall of Baghdad*, a bricolage of scenes depicting America's 21st century brand of fetishized, seemingly bloodless, videogame war, accompanied by a CNN-style news ticker that chronologically charts America's history of reversals on Iraq and makes horribly clear the true economic and human cost of war.

These are all obviously partisan pieces, produced by artists who are profoundly uncomfortable with the current political climate and troubled by a sense that there's a lot more to the world than what we're shown on the evening news. In that regard, these cultural remixes are created in the spirit of activism, but that doesn't mean they're merely tools of propaganda. They are first and foremost works of art – and like all good art, their purpose is to allow audiences to see the world with new eyes, to offer truths about where we live and who we are that weren't previously accessible to us. "All art

is political," declares Jen Simmons. "It's just a matter of whose politics."



LIAR LIAR: FROM PINOCCHIO BY GRADY HALL AND MARK HOFFMAN