

Fracking (with) post-modernism, or there's a lil' Dr Frankenstein in all of us

by Bryan Konefsky

Since the dawn of (wo)mankind we humans have had the keen, pro-cinematic ability to assess our surroundings in ways not unlike the quick, rack focus of a movie camera. We move fluidly between close examination (a form of deconstruction) to a wide-angle view of the world (contextualizing the minutiae of our dailiness within deep philosophical inquiries about the nature of existence). To this end, one could easily infer that Dziga Vertov's kino-eye might be a natural outgrowth of human evolution.

However, we should be mindful of obvious and impetuous conclusions that seem to lead – superficially – to the necessity of a kino-prosthesis. In terms of a kino-prosthesis, the discomfort associated with a camera-less experience is understood, especially in a world where, as articulated so well by thinkers such as Sherry Turkle or Marita Sturken, one impulsively records information as proof of experience (see Turkle's *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* and Sturken's *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*).

The unsettling nature of a camera-less experience reminds me of visionary poet Lisa Gill (see her text *Caput Nili*), who once told me about a dream in which she and Orson Welles made a movie. The problem was that neither of them had a camera. Lisa is quick on her feet so her solution was simply to carve the movie into her arm. For Lisa, it is clear what the relationship is between a sharp blade and a camera, and the association abounds with metaphors and allusions to my understanding of the pro-cinematic human.

To dig a bit deeper into this notion of the pro-cinematic human, let us take a pop-culture leap and consider Herman Munster. Herman was a character from *The Munsters*, a popular American television comedy from the 1960s. This television show studied otherness using, as a filter, a mash-up of references to Universal Studios monster movies from the 1930s. In an episode from the 1965 season titled 'Will Success Spoil Herman Munster?', Herman performed a traditional American spiritual to express his particular understanding of experience. For Herman no camera was required – an acoustic guitar and the sincerity of his vocalizing were all that was necessary to reconstruct his meaty and visceral origins (see a clip from this episode at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEpwnRsoj-s>).

The song that Herman Munster sang is a traditional spiritual titled 'Dem' Dry Bones' written by James Weldon Johnson. Johnson composed this spiritual in the waning moments of the 19th century, about the same time that cinema was first invented (see <http://everything2.com/title/Dem+Bones> for the original song lyrics to 'Dem' Dry Bones'). Johnson was a civil rights activist, a songwriter, and the first African-American professor at New York University. 'Dem' Dry Bones' poetically explores a Christian sense of rapture and redemption. The suggestion is that in the after-life our skeletal remains will be miraculously reanimated by God (or Victor Frankenstein – we do not get to choose).

In my youth, the aphorism ‘they are trying to playing God’ was used in reference to either Prometheus or Mary Shelley’s interpretation of that same mythological Greek character which took the form of the scientist Victor Frankenstein and his proto-steam-punk attempts to create life. Perhaps the functioning of a camera is more closely aligned with Victor Frankenstein’s attempts to play God than what we might first imagine. Using a camera we paste together disparate pieces of information to construct a semblance of experience, and what emerges is a perverse expression of that which has been resurrected through the power and tyranny of the camera. Taking this notion of re-animation from the camera to the movie theatre, I am immediately reminded of Stanley Cavell’s assertion that ‘film is the medium of visible absence’ (from his essay ‘Psychoanalysis and Cinema’). The liminality of the screen gives us that which is simultaneously present and absent – nothing less than the undead. However, to be more exact within the context of this discussion, cinematic projection is in fact a projection of our imagination and fantasies stitched together to underscore the constructed nature of identity in ways that would make Victor Frankenstein proud.

Let us take a moment to step back from this kind of sutured specificity and consider a cinematic experience within a larger context. Our first step might be an assertion that art is an inherently human activity; keep in mind of course that in this age of the cyborg defining ‘human’ is becoming slippery. Art, at least for the moment, gives us a valuable barometric read of the human condition, a powerful mirroring of the self both individually and collectively. The next step might be to consider the potential meta-ness of cinema. Like opera, cinema is unique in that it has the possibility of containing so many of the other arts (music in a soundtrack, painting in composing one’s image, theater in terms of the meat-puppets we might employ, etc.). Therefore, one could conclude that if art has a responsibility to give us an accurate, barometric read of the human condition then cinema (as a meta art form) has a particularly unique responsibility in this regard. Perhaps this is why we believe so strongly in the imagination of the kino-eye, even though Susan Sontag in her essay ‘On Photography’ cautioned against such zealous and non-critical views of all things mediated.

To exemplify this zealousness one might recall that when photography was first invented there were Congressional debates in the United States as to whether or not a photograph can, in fact, steal one’s soul. I would argue that those debates were the last time the U.S. Congress discussed anything of intellectual value. Of course these days the Monsanto Corporation (probably with Congressional support) has soul-stealing wrapped up in the grizzly and disturbing form of GMO-modified DNA.

However, there does exist a cultural escape route, if one finds one’s way to the writings of media theorist Gene Youngblood. Youngblood writes that we have the ability to turn off our attraction to mainstream nonsense and secede from the broadcast as a way of simultaneously retreating from one’s addiction to consumer media and emerging into new, participatory, autonomous reality communities (see <http://www.secessionfromthebroadcast.org/>). According to Youngblood, there is a value to media fragmentation located (predictably) in the ‘wild and woolly’ World Wide Web. Although the seemingly endless possibilities of online media options diminishes the naively utopic dreams of past generations, current technologies give us the opportunity to weave together and, most importantly, share with others media worlds (autonomous reality communities) of our own design.

The possibility of employing new technologies to craft individual but inter-connected realities is something that could only be imagined just a short time ago. Think about the autonomous reality communities modeled by artists Sherrie Rabinowitz and Kit Galloway through their telecommunications research in the 1970s and 1980s (quite a few years before the Internet). This research resulted in such projects as ‘Hole in Space’, or their dream of global Electronic Cafes where people might communicate with each other in real time, on a real scale (with sound and image), in environments whose sense of presence Youngblood calls ‘emotional bandwidth’ (see <http://www.ecafe.com/getty/HIS/> for more information about Rabinowitz and Galloway’s work).

Unfortunately, autonomous reality communities are often consumer-driven, as Michel Maffesoli studied in his text *Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. Consider the proliferation of tribalized situations wrestled away from survival or biological imperatives. For example, we might wake in the morning and, dressed in our exercise outfit, find ourselves to be a member of the tribe of Nike. Later in the day we then find ourselves in a coffee shop, now a member of the tribe of Starbucks. When the workday ends we might find ourselves heading home encased in the petrol-driven tribe of Honda, Volkswagen, or Chevrolet. It is important to remember that these capital-driven tribes exist at the ass-end of the promise of Youngblood’s participatory, emotional bandwidth. However, in spite of the multitude of fractured, consumer-based tribes that lure us with the promise of ‘more’, it is still possible to glean value and a sense of self from these somewhat misguided, market-driven communities. In other words, like heat-seeking missiles we hunger for ‘story’ – and for better or worse, we always find it.

Let us come back to our previously discussed pro-cinematic ability to simultaneously assess the micro and the macro in our surroundings. To this end consider Werner Herzog’s film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). Think of the many (disembodied) hands drawn on the prehistoric cave walls in that movie. Think about how the specificity of that ‘I was here’ gesture was paired with other carved images suggesting the grand narratives of history (‘this is WHY I was here’). Also, think about how these stone carvings might not exist far from Lisa Gill’s violent gesture of a movie etched onto her own body with a sharp blade. Additionally, let us not forget the underlying sense of ‘why I was here’ poetically expressed in the song ‘Dem’ Dry Bones’.

Do know that I am mindful about invoking the ‘grand narratives of history’ in these post-historic times. However, the moment is ripe to pause on Carl Becker’s ‘pre-‘ post-historic essay from 1935 titled ‘Everyman, His Own Historian’. In this essay Becker rethinks the recording of history from a different perspective. This rethinking prefigures American historian Howard Zinn’s life-long study of U.S. history from the perspective of the country’s most disenfranchised citizens (see Zinn’s text *A People’s History of the United States*). For Becker (like Zinn years later) we are each our own historic experts. The specificity of our own stories and experiences are highly individual yet necessarily connected. There is power in these collective and collected individual voices.

Note how in *The Munsters* video clip Herman Munster sang (at the end of his cover version of ‘Dem’ Dry Bones’) ‘and that’s how Hermie-baby was born!’ Herman Munster celebrated his own personal story, understanding that his experience was also a meta-experience that was mnemonically contained within the many body parts from which he was sutured together.

Herman's song was a comedic yet respectful nod to his maker – an expression of how profoundly Victor Frankenstein was invested in the storied consequences of collage, assemblage, and montage.

Approximately 75 years before the invention of the movie camera, and years before the pro-cinematic experiments of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* explored the necessarily monstrous results of assemblage and montage. Note the sense of story and 'putting back together' that emerges in Victor Frankenstein's 'filthy workshop of creation' (as described by Judith Halberstam in her book *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*), in spite of the grizzly protests from disparate muscles, glands, tissues, and organs. Frankenstein's scientific imaginings were not unlike what Catherine Russell described in her essay 'Archival Apocalypse' about found footage filmmaking. For her, this cinematic re-assemblage manifests itself as 'an aesthetic of ruins'.

The ruins of grand historic narratives might also be the sub-plot of Becker's essay 'Everyman His Own Historian'. For Becker, part of the unraveling of grand narratives involves each individual's sense of the 'specious present', a phrase that was first popularized by American philosopher William James in the 1800s. For James, this expression has to do with the elasticity of time and event – temporal illusions. These temporal illusions were first studied by James with the aide of chloral hydrate, amyl nitrite, nitrous oxide, and peyote.

Of course we cannot really escape time. James' 'rubber banding' of events is an interesting intellectual exercise but not something that is readily available to us. We can imagine and we can fantasize but, until the Zombie Apocalypse, time is inescapable. Never mind the a-historic claims of post-modernism. We are, in fact, always trapped in time. So, the idea of post-history, while an interesting idea, is undermined in the visceral, meat space of reality. Perhaps this is why a cinematic examination of human experience is so attractive – it is the one place (outside of death) where we can lose ourselves (momentarily) in the specious and elastic present of projected light. It is the place where we can time travel (whether through historic narratives, flashbacks, slow motion, or fast forward).

If this essay focused a bit more on the horror film genre we might explore, in greater detail, one of its basic tenets: the precariousness of human identity and how it can be lost or invaded (see Stephen Mulhall's essay 'Kane's Son, Cain's Daughter: Ridley Scott's *Alien*'). The suggestion here is that an essential sense of self is 'up for grabs'. What follows this loss of 'the essential' is improvisation. For me, that is where the fun begins. When we allow ourselves to transcend conventions cinema then becomes a wildly improvisational and instruction-less activity (perhaps with a little Promethean grand-standing thrown in).

Ultimately, improvisation is all we have. As author Kurt Vonnegut wrote in his book *A Man Without a Country*, '...we are here on earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you different'. This 'farting around' is, of course, a version of improvisation. In cinematic terms Vonnegut's 'farting around' suggests montage (the suturing together of the disparate bits and pieces). What often happens is that the 'putting back together' involves ruptures and mistakes that might parallel the re-contextualization experienced in found footage filmmaking. Again, we are talking about improvisation with, perhaps, a pinch of madness and monstrosity tossed in for

good measure. Cinematically we are cross-threading a screw, we are insisting that the square peg WILL fit in the round hole, and we are ‘throwing caution to the wind’ just to see what story (or stories) might happen. The results of these improvised activities give us pause and an opportunity for reflection and invention.

Thinking deeper about Vonnegut’s ‘farting around’, consider the root ideas of Gestalt psychology in terms of the holistic functioning of the human brain. We take things apart (in some cases with the aid of amyl nitrite or peyote) because it is in our nature to put them back together again (in one monstrous form or another). We simply cannot help ourselves.

Visionary film artist Stan Brakhage insisted that the true nature of cinema exists in the gutter-space between the frames. According to the ancient inhabitants of Herzog’s movie *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, the true nature of being lurks in the dark Platonic shadows of a cavern. Either way it seems that the ‘pulling apart’ and ‘putting back together’ cannot be separated. There is no isolated and autonomous moment of ‘in-betweenness’ as we begin to understand the physics of co-existence and mutuality.

Here I am thinking about a film titled *Splice Lines* (2012) made by the Canadian media artist Clint Enns. This short film is constructed using only the splice lines from Austrian filmmaker Kurt Kren’s celebration of the human body titled *Mama und Papa* (1964). These splice lines represent the literal glue that holds Kren’s shots together and metaphorically (maybe not unlike Brakhage’s ‘between the frames’ assertion) suggest vast and expansive landscapes of the imagination. In Enns’ film it is implied that Brakhage’s ‘gutter space’ serves two functions. Yes, there is a world in there, but let us never forget that this world is also the glue that holds the rest in place, as tenuous as that adhesion might be.

As strained (and tenuous) as the relationship sometimes feels, it seems that un-dependent cinema’s careful and studied examination of the human condition would suffer if it were not in conversation with more popular (and often uncomfortably saccharine sweet) re-constructions of experience that we have come to know as ‘going to the movies’. At the risk of overusing analogies and metaphors we might liken this sense of discomfort with the perpetual state of decay that delineates the whole of the monster in Mary Shelley’s gothic novel.

There is magic in this often strained experimental/popular dialogue, not unlike the illusionist who, before our very eyes, dramatically cuts his assistant in half with a saw and then, in the blink of an eye, returns the two halves to their original human form (a single narrative is collaged together from a sequential group of individual parts). One might go so far as to identify a valuable lesson within this failure – that is, a failure in the dissection and a failure in the deconstruction. Here, the failure might align itself with Vonnegut’s notion of ‘farting around’. In other words, take comfort in knowing that the whole always emerges triumphant through the narrative arc of this particular illusion. I mention this slight-of-hand performance hoping that it might evoke the inherent magic of cinema. There is a magic in movement, a magic in projected light and, taking things a step further, a magic in the monstrous liminality – all of which express the ‘fun and games’ that are possible within the medium of visible absence.

Consequently, one might infer that the true meaning of cinema is only revealed when 'it' is put back together. However, the putting back together only happens because of the all-important 'taking apart'. To this end, the un-dependents – 'the walla group' (as it is called in popular cinema) – must be vigilant and prepared. We must be ready at a moments notice to go proudly and defiantly into the world with fists raised high and our un-dependent/experimental torches, saws, and pitchforks ready to engage, eviscerate, and, from time to time, fart around as we chant 'walla, walla, walla'.

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