

The Sight of Music:
The Jawa Videos of
Jubal Brown and
Tasman Richardson
by
Ulysses Castellanos

v tape

The 2011-12 Vtape Fellowship Essays

3 essays produced in association with the
Curatorial Incubator v.9:

GOING SOLO:

On the unfamiliar beauty of solitude

The innovative mentoring project Vtape's Curatorial Incubator continues to generate crucial writing and analysis of contemporary media arts. Julia Paoli - then a recent graduate of the curatorial program at Bard College in New York, now assistant curator at the Power Plant in Toronto - was awarded the Curatorial Incubator residency for 2011-12. Her solo exhibition of Aleesa Cohene included single channel projections as well as site (and scent)-specific installations at Vtape. Paoli's monograph on Cohene's work is being included in an up-coming catalogue on the artist's work published by Kunsthochschule für Medien in Cologne.

When Paoli was selected, three other emerging curators - Ulysses Castellanos, Alvis Choi, and Ebony Haynes - were awarded Fellowship opportunities which included support for their research and professional editing for their essay on the artist of their choice.

We extend our appreciation to the editors for their work on these texts: artist and writer Luis Jacob worked on Ulysses Castellanos' essay about the early works of Tasman Richardson and Jubal Brown (JAWA Collective); Steve Reinke, artist and academic currently teaching at Northwestern University in Chicago edited Alvis Choi's essay on Rodney Werden; curator and Assistant Professor in the Criticism and Curatorial program at OCAD University Andrea Fatona edited Ebony Haynes' essay on Wendell Bruno.



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by Ulysses Castellanos

In George Lucas' 1977 film *Star Wars*, the Jawas are a species of rodent-like, dwarfish creatures that troll the sands of the desert planet Tatooine in search of machine parts, particularly android parts, which they then repair and recombine into new droids that they sell to other creatures. The Jawas wear thick hooded robes that cover most of their bodies. They peer at the world from the darkness of their hoods through amber-colored disks that are rumored to be pieces of glass that protect their eyes from sunlight. They travel their desert world in giant "Sandcrawlers", tank-like motorized fortresses that were left behind by mining companies from other worlds that deemed the metals found in these desert sands to be not worth the bother, and so vacated the planet in short order. These undesirably smelly creatures, who, with their nimble skinny fingers "repurpose" barely held-together droids for resale, are the namesakes of Jubal Brown and Tasman Richardson's Jawa Collective. The adoption of this industriously imaginative yet highly unsavory species from *Star Wars* to identify their fast-paced, rhythmic, cobbled together digital Frankenstein's monster of a video editing style is no accident, for it is the perfect allegory for what the Jawas do. In the words of founder Tasman Richardson,

Jawa began as a violent reaction to the misuse of video as a literal, narrative, identity focused and time-based medium. Fast, rhythmic edits of sex and violence, both catered to and encouraged the dissipation of the attention span of its audience. Today, Jawa video seeks to transform and re-contextualize mainstream media. It has evolved into audio-visual musical and composited layers in which the clips are the source of both what is seen and heard. The sound track is now and always will be the image track.¹

As the above statement indicates, the Jawa artists maraud across the wastelands of contemporary cultural landscape in search of video elements that they can then repurpose into a recombinant form that subverts the easily-digestible, sellable and gettable images found in television shows and films. Something that is intrinsic to the cutup style of Jawa is the fact that, unlike the conventional editing style of music videos, where the moving image is synced to a preexisting soundtrack, the Jawa artists compose music using the audio track of the video footage itself.

This way of working is the inverse to that of cartoon music composer Carl Stalling, whose neurotically frenzied musical compositions became the basis for Walt Disney's *Silly Symphonies*, in which Stalling would write a score that would be handed to Disney's animators who would then create a cartoon around it. Later, during his tenure at Warner Brothers, and while working on the music for the *Looney Tunes* shorts, Stalling had access (and was contractually obligated) to use material from Warner Brothers expansive music



collection, and this enabled him to create elaborately complex soundtracks that were pastiches of themes taken from other compositions in every musical genre imaginable, performed by a thirty piece studio orchestra. In other words, Stalling invented the idea of sampling long before sampling technology was even conceived of.

Stalling developed the concept that music could be composed in "cells" as opposed to longer themes. Thus, his music is a combination of many different styles cut up and recombined much like the micro edits in a Jawa video. Moreover, Stalling's work with cartoon music brought to light a crucially relevant principle: that to quote a small "snapshot" from a preexisting musical composition within a larger piece creates in the listener's mind the effect of having experienced the quoted work in its entirety

In a parallel development to the sampled digital juggernauts of producers like The Bomb Squad (Public Enemy) and The Dust Brothers (The Beastie Boys' *Paul's Boutique*), Stalling's "cellular" style of composing was adopted in the 90's by groups like John Zorn's Pain Killer and Spy vs. Spy, Mike Patton's Mr. Bungle, and the Japanese noise band The Boredoms. These artists composed music that was disjointed and was made up of lateral connections between micro thematic cells in styles as disparate as rockabilly, the free jazz of Ornette Coleman and the Grindcore Metal of Cannibal Corpse, combined with the operas of Richard Wagner, the Spaghetti Western soundtracks of Ennio Morricone and a fistful of Daffy Duck thrown in for good measure.

Whereas the above composers have worked exclusively in purely musical terms (which can themselves be programmatic and suggestive of images) Brown and Richardson work back to front, as it were. They begin with the image, and the sound evolves from the collision of the audio tracks from the video elements. This sound is percussive and violent; the musical genres that come closest to it are breakcore, the apocalyptic drum n' bass of Panacea, and the punk-infused techno death of Atari Teenage Riot. In this bricolage of rage, the message of the Jawa style is loud and clear: that underneath the hazy, sugary images of the publicly accepted pop cultural landscape, there lies a dark underbelly that is more horrifying than anything John Carpenter or Wes Craven could ever imagine.

In an interview with Jubal Brown in 2007, I asked Brown to explain his rationale for a film screening that he curated at *XPACE*. Brown's choices were particularly jarring in that both films, in their own way, were extreme: The first one through its graphic depiction of a brutal anal rape and murder (Gaspar Noé's *Irreversible*, 2008), and the second, through its nearly pornographic display of unabashed cuteness (George Miller's *Babe 2: Pig in The City*, 1998). When asked about his choice to show both films back to back (*Irreversible* first, followed by *Babe*), Brown replied: "I can't think of anything more terrifying than a little talking pig"² This is quintessential Jawa.

Jubal's tongue in cheek retort illustrates a salient feature of the Jawas: They are sardonic,



irreverent tricksters, whose creations can be funny and amusing even as they are unsettling and terrifying. In Brown's video *Teletubbies Rising* (1999) we are first confronted with the adorable Teletubbies as they run around in a green field filled with colorful flowers amidst mirth and laughter and, one imagines, a certain joy for life. This image quickly degenerates, however, as the first manic guitar riffs from *Helter Skelter* by The Beatles are heard, and the Teletubbies begin to convulse violently (an effect achieved by speeding up the footage, and quick, frantic trigger cutting) as bloody swastikas emerge from the television screens on their stomachs. No other image could better exemplify the *modus operandi* of Jubal Brown. The words "Rise", "Death to Pigs", "Healter (sic) Skelter" and "War" (which was actually carved into Leno Labianca's stomach with a sharp object by one of the Mansons) shoot out from the Teletubbies' stomachs, accompanied by a psychotic "Gabber" bass beat³. These jagged red words, which the Manson Family members Susan Atkins, Tex Watson, Patricia Krenwinkel, Clem Grogan and Leslie Van Houten wrote (in their victim's own blood) on the walls of the Tate and LaBianca homes after murdering their occupants, expand on the screen like a cancerous sore, subsiding momentarily, only to reappear with renewed vigor as images of washed out hardcore porn are intercut with the colorful, demon-possessed Teletubbies, culminating with the "Baby Head" that appears in the original show, but sporting a rotating red swastika (Brown's addition) on its forehead, like "the mark of the beast" to the tune of *I'll Never Say Never to Always* (from *The Manson Family Jams*, 1969) the most happy-go-lucky of the Manson Family songs.



Jubal Brown - "Teletubbies Rising"



The coupling of the Mansons with the Teletubbies is a big joke, and the visual equivalent of a kick in the balls. The Manson Family affair reads like a chapter taken straight out of Kenneth Anger's *Hollywood Babylon* (it only gets a few lines at the end of said book), it is so absurd as to seem almost inconceivable, like the first accounts of the events leading to the Iran Contra Scandal.

Charlie Manson, a career criminal, rapist, white slave trader and car thief, had just been released from prison. He recruited a group of teenage hippies in San Francisco's Height Ashbury district. This became "The Family", Manson brainwashed his followers through the constant intake of drugs, indoctrination and nightly orgies, and turned them into automatons who were convinced of Manson's divinity as the return of Jesus Christ.

An aspiring recording artist and a friend to both Dennis Wilson (of The Beach Boys) and producer Terry Melcher (Doris Day's son), Manson was not satisfied with being a singer/song writer and cult leader. He wanted to rule the world. To this end, he set out to unleash "Helter Skelter", his own version of Armageddon.

Fueled by his interpretation of the *Book of Revelation* in the Bible and by the lyrics of songs from the Beatles' *White Album*, (*Helter Skelter*, *Revolution 9* and *Blackbird* in particular), Manson set out to destroy the world. The plan consisted of going to the homes of wealthy white people, and killing those people in as brutal a way as possible. The killers would then write Black

Panther slogans on the walls of the crime scene, in order to frame African American militants for the murders. This would lead to an all out race war, which, according to Manson, the African Americans would win.

During the mayhem that would ensue, Manson and the Family would weather the total annihilation of the white race by hiding in the desert inside "The Bottomless Pit"; a mythical place described in the *Book of Revelation*, but which Manson believed to be a real place. Once the African Americans would rise victorious, Manson would come back to the surface, seize power and enslave them.

As unbelievable as it sounds, this was the impetus that led to the Tate / LaBianca murders. The trial that ensued was the longest in U.S. judicial history up to that point. It was a veritable media circus that lasted 9 months, from July 24 1970 to April 19 1971. By the conclusion of the Trial, Manson had entered the popular culture and become a hero to skinheads and misfits everywhere (as well as the subject of books and films, and the namesake of the slogan "Charlie Don't Surf", which appeared in countless t-shirts and posters from the 1970's to now)

Like the Mansons, The Teletubbies are also a "family", and they also live in a magical land (not as mythical as Spahn Ranch or the "City of Angels", but magical nonetheless) the Tubbytronic Superdome. With its green rolling hills, giant pinwheel windmill and talking flowers, the Tubbytronic Superdome resembles The Shire from



J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, if one were to visit under the influence of psychedelic mushrooms. The Teletubbies have names like Tinky Winky, Dipsy, La-Lu and Po. They have a "house keeper", a giant vacuum cleaner by the name of Noo-Noo, and they were designed with a toddler target audience in mind. The Teletubbies move like toddlers; they speak with a sort of baby talk proto-language, and they leave the adult viewer sort of numb (which makes it a perfect show to watch under the influence of drugs, much like that other popular children's show from the nineties, *Pingu*).

By colliding the Manson Family murders with the Teletubbies, Brown points to the absurdity and humor in this great human tragedy: That the constant coverage of such a tragedy can burlesque its violence to the level of a Punch and Judy puppet show. And he also creates a scenario where these two seemingly disparate elements (A media circus for grownups and a TV fantasy show for toddlers) can coexist and ultimately repel each other, like a bad organ transplant. "We don't need your pabulum-sucking bullshit, we want the harsh reality for fuck's sake!" Charlie's lunatic gaze seems to convey to us from the bad acid trip imagery on the screen "Because the world is too sicko and too violent for this baby-talking crap!"

And in this series of jump cuts, the entire napalm- covered carnage of the late sixties and the head-in-the-sand optimism of the nineties flash before our eyes in a technicolor swirl, and make us think about the absurdity of our species, because the quotation encapsulates the totality of the event. What we are witnessing is Hell, and Jubal Brown is the Virgil to our Dante Alighieri.



Jubal Brown - "Teletubbies Rising"



To be sure, Brown and Richardson were not the first to have plundered existing footage to construct videos or films. American artist Bruce Conner created assemblage films in the 1960s, the most notorious of which, entitled *REPORT*, was made up of footage of the Kennedy assassination that Conner filmed directly from his TV screen, combined with newsreel footage, stock images of matadors killing bulls, Kennedy meeting the pope, and television commercials, combined with a soundtrack made up of the recording of the live radio reports from Dallas Texas and Washington D.C. as the Kennedy drama unfolded, interspersed with periods of complete darkness and irritating stroboscopic effects that mimic the sickly glare emanating from a television set.

More recently, Oakland-born artist Craig Baldwin's 2008 film *Mock Up On Mu* is a tour de force of collage film making. Consisting of his own footage shot with live actors intercut with thousands of bits of footage taken from what seems like an infinity of obscure Sci-Fi and educational films from the fifties and sixties, *Mock Up On Mu* is part documentary, part speculative fantasy, and part schizophrenic conspiracy theory that makes (historically corroborated) connections between L. Ron Hubbard (science fiction writer and founder of Scientology), Alistair Crowley (A.K.A. Baal, The Great Beast), rocket scientist Jack Parsons, Lockheed Martin (largest weapons manufacturer in the world) and Marjorie Cameron (actress, occultist and wife of Jack Parsons), but sets these relationships in a fictitious moon base from the future called Mu. It is a masterpiece of baroque editing and the seamless blending of pre-existing and newly shot footage.

These precedents aside, what is unique to the Jawa style is the fact that almost from the beginning, it has been a completely digital undertaking that relies exclusively on non-linear, timeline-based editing software for its production. In the words of Jubal Brown: "We started out using analog A/B roll editing, but the videos were too dirty and multilayered, not exactly what we wanted. It wasn't until 1997, when we started using the software Audacity (sound editor) and DDClip (early freeware video and sound editor) That the Jawa style really took off; we just went into a totally different direction".

Like the Serialist music of Arnold Schoenberg, the Jawa technique necessitates an adherence to strict mathematical and formal rules. As Richardson states in his *Jawa Manifesto*:

Your freedom of expression is further constrained by the technology, which imposes a slow distillation process. Instead of building up to something we've already anticipated, you find your vision is quickly made subservient to the source material at hand. You are left to work in stumbling steps, cajoling these factors and obstacles into something like what you imagined, although the execution will never be exact to your mental picture. Working with the puzzle pieces, while each piece is unknown you can trust that they will interlock if you follow the strict frame-counting technique.

Jawa was founded in North America using NTSC video with 29.97 frames per second and 640x480 resolution. So, the Jawa cut-up method relies on edits or jump cuts every 4 frames, or a multiple of that. When edits are made at the 2 or 1 frame



point, they must be used in groupings that equal the same length as a 4-frame cut (e.g., two 2s or four 1s). To slow the tempo, edits can be made by multiplying four - every 8th, 16th, or 32nd frame.³

This violent way of editing, intrinsically musical in nature, like the counting of beats in a bar in accordance with the laws of a composition's time signature, would have been quite difficult, if not nearly impossible to carry out at this level of intricacy before the advent of non-linear video editing and wave (sound) editors. Looking at this in visual terms, non-linear editing is to Brown and Richardson what vector software is to Takashi Murakami. Like Adobe Illustrator, which enabled Murakami to blow up or reduce an image as large or as tiny as desired without any pixel deterioration, non-linear editing is what has afforded the Jawas complete control over a diminutive, cellular edit, without having to readjust the entire composition as was previously the case with linear editing suits like the Strassner Editing System. It was the arrival of open source, freeware, non-linear, non-destructive editing technology that also gave rise to the "total war" (to borrow the title of one of Brown's videos) assemblages of the Jawas.

Tasman Richardson's epic video *Shadowplay* (2006), which bears a direct relationship to the found footage narrative works of Conner and Baldwin, tells the story of the moving image, from the birth of celluloid, to its apotheosis during the advent of the televised image. After an inter-title that reads "Toxic Volatile Processes" (a reference to the manufacturing process of film



Tasman Richardson - "Shadowplay"



stock) Richardson proceeds to dismantle the utopian vision of post-war America by bombarding the viewer with a blitzkrieg of historical footage depicting sound and image recording technologies, segments from classic horror movies like Murnau's *Nosferatu* as the quintessential vampire prances menacingly on suburban rooftops through a sea of television antennas, collided against cheesy TV commercials for (what else) television sets, and John F. Kennedy getting his head blown off as the universe incinerates in an apocalyptic cloud fueled by a 70s disco backbeat and Howard Beale (played by Peter Finch) delivers his "I'm mad as hell and I'm not gonna take it anymore" speech from the 1976 satirical film *Network*, inciting the TV viewers of America to stand up and "Stop The Insanity" (to use the famous catch phrase of fitness guru and infomercial queen Susan Powter). Beale's words, taken out of context, now ring as hollow as discarded Barack Obama "Hope" and "Change" placards; his call to action becomes a fake wood paneling veneer, a cipher that can be used to lend artificial significance to just about any stance (political or otherwise).

And this is what the Jawas bring to the table: The awareness of the fact that images are just that - images. By re-cutting and repeating sequences of re-contextualized video within a digital mayhem of sight and sound, the Jawas are making us aware of the smoke and mirrors, the "shadow-play", to which we are constantly being subjected. Like a Zen Buddhist monk that raps a novice's head with a bamboo stick in order to prevent him from falling asleep during meditation, Brown and Richardson provide us with a



Tasman Richardson - "Shadowplay"

much-needed whack in the head, while at the same time inducing a mind-numbing whirling dervish-like trance upon the viewer. The Jawa style is indicative of the "opposites attract" axiom. It is problematic in that it does the opposite of what it pertains to do (it numbs us when it's supposed to jolt us), while at the same time accomplishing *that* very thing. Jawa videos are best experienced on a large screen and heard through dance club quality speakers, with loud subwoofers that drive every jackhammer beat to the back your skull. It is a physical, visceral experience,; yet after a while, it becomes as soothing as white noise.

Paradoxically, out of the rigid methodology of the strict Jawa frame-counting technique, the most extreme, nausea-inducing, sublime images and sounds are born. Like a visual and sonic commando on a seek-and-destroy mission, Brown and Richardson brutalize the image and force us to look at the present, creating a cellular reality, in which this moment is nailed down, cut and slashed, disfigured and dismembered. And in this immolation, we can find new meanings. ■

Endnotes

¹ Richardson, Tasman - *Jawa Manifesto*, pg 7

² Interview with Jubal Brown for *Artist Field Recordings*, Thursday July 3, 2007

³ Gabber is a subgenre of techno, originally from Rotterdam, that features a driving, violent, high BPM rhythm characterized by a relentless jackhammer beat in which the kick drum and the bassline are one and the same, much like the marriage of video and sound in Jawa editing.



Tasman Richardson - "Shadowplay"



⁴ Richardson, Tasman - *Jawa Manifesto*, pg 6

⁵ Interview with Jubal Brown, Monday June 11, 2012

BIOGRAPHIES

Jubal Brown is a video maker, multi-media artist, organizer, and writer based in Toronto. His work has been exhibited in England, Scotland, Holland, France, Belgium, Africa, Hungary, the U.S. and Hamilton, Ontario. His organization involvements include: co-founding the JAWA Collective, pioneers of the sex and death machine-gun editing style; co-founding the PO-PO seditious action team responsible for Toronto's legendary WASTELAND event series; co-founder of ART SYSTEM Cultural Center in Toronto 2000-2003, where he served as Director; co-founder of the multimedia label FAMEFAME, notorious for producing, programming and promoting experimental, audio/visual culture, 2002-2007. Recent projects include the relational aesthetics instances UNKNOWN UNKNOWN and The Land of the Lost.

Tasman Richardson is a video artist, electronic composer and graphic designer. For over a decade he has exhibited or performed extensively throughout the Americas, Europe, North Africa and Asia. He lives in Toronto, Canada. His work focuses on tele-presence, appropriation, synesthesia, and JAWA editing (of which he is the founder). tasmanrichardson.com

Writer: Ulysses Castellanos is an artist working in performance, video and painting. Born in El Salvador, he lives and works in Toronto.

