

Let's Get Found: Music Sampling, Found Footage and My Life in the Bush of Ghosts

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Introduction

Recycling, remediation, convergence, remixing, sampling: such is the vocabulary characterizing much of our current mediascape. In the YouTube age, creating something, not out of nothing, but out of something already created, has become intensified by electronic digital technology. This point and click, copy and paste, remix-made-easy technoculture seems the flipside to what Ivey and Tepper call the "Pro-Am" audience, where the distinction between professional and amateur artist no longer holds (2006: B6). One of the aims of this essay is to highlight and partially historicize the sound and image recycling so rampant today, by considering some of the links between found footage filmmaking and music sampling.

My focus is the collaboration in 1981 among David Byrne, Brian Eno and Bruce Conner, where Conner produced two short found-footage films for two songs from the watershed album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. This film/music intersection crystallizes the moment where pre-digital "high art" found footage and sound transform into the digitized, more accessible world of sampling, remixing, and mash-ups. A consideration of the production back-story to these works, along with their cultural context and aesthetic investments, helps establish the genealogy of contemporary sampling strategies. Moreover, these music-films elucidate the relationship between sampling and postmodern theory, posing the question of whether (or how) modernism retains its critical edge in a more democratized, popular mode.

In revisiting this particular intermedial text, we explore the utopian promise of sampling. Music and image sampling can be performed and/or read as a pedagogical gesture. Like scholarship, sampling is a form of research, recasting past texts in a new light. Indeed, much academic discourse on found footage and music sampling emphasizes this pedagogical dimension. For example, in their wide-ranging cultural critique, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin theorize the ubiquitous concept of "remediation." The authors define remediation in terms of a "double logic," between transparent, live immediacy and reflexive hypermediacy. Yet the authors also emphasize the connotations of the term's root: to reform, to heal, to improve upon (2000: 44). Though they do not discuss sampling per se, their theory regarding the contemporary

prevalence of remediation is built upon a metacritical relation: remediation implies that to recycle media is to study it.

All of which readily pertains to sampling, which seems more popular and accessible than many of the other media practices they discuss. Some of the following interpretations of sampling (whether sound or image) articulate the promise of pop pedagogy. Michael Atkinson characterizes found footage film as "akin to psychoanalysis—culture studies at its most therapeutic" (1993: 79), while Tricia Rose interprets hip-hop samples as "highlighted," challenging the listener to "know these sounds, to make connections" (1994: 89). In his ethnographic study of sample-based hip-hop, Joseph Schloss unpacks the concrete ritualistic significance of "digging" into the vinyl archive (2004). Over twenty years ago, Stan Brakhage argued that, despite the initial impulse to "laugh superficially" at Bruce Conner's films, their essential gist is "commentary" (1989: 131, 143).

Of course, it would be naïve to idealize sampling across the board in this way. We know that context is everything, and in the context of commercial exhibition, such pedagogical potential often becomes diluted if not entirely undermined. Any pedagogical effect of sampling likewise depends greatly on the viewing and listening context, a tenuous circumstance at best to rely upon for reflexive reception. Since sampling is a form of assimilation, it is perhaps more vulnerable to avant-garde practices, both aesthetically and politically. According to Chuck Tryon, today's YouTube-driven movie mash-up culture, despite achieving a "critical intertextuality," always supports the "wider promotional culture" being parodied (2009: 155).

Beyond furnishing a fertile site for considering the pedagogical potential of sampling, the *Bush of Ghosts* films also invite a critical comparison between music and image sampling. Are there differences among assemblage, collage and sampling? How is music sampling typically deployed, in contrast to image sampling? How are the two forms of sampling received? What are the distinct characteristics of the operative interplay between repetition and difference? What happens, as in the case of the *Bush of Ghosts* films, when music and image sampling work together through the same text? Adrian Danks acknowledges the critical lacuna regarding sound in most found-footage scholarship (2006: 248). Yet even in the approaches to found-footage soundtrack he proffers, he makes no mention of music sampling. Despite its permeation of popular culture, such double-pronged sampling seems off the scholarly radar, which is why Conner's *Bush of Ghosts* films, produced 30 years ago, remain so provocative.

The Music

The creators of the *Bush of Ghosts* album, Talking Heads frontman David Byrne and electronic musician Brian Eno, embody the advent of postmodernism: the re-inscription of avant-garde practices into more mainstream forms. The music on the original *Bush of Ghosts* LP therefore looks both forwards and backwards, spanning over 50 years of found sound experimentation, yet inaugurating (along with early hip-hop) the popularization of music sampling. Eno in particular had been collaborating on various found-sound projects throughout the 1970s.

Though not released until 1981, *Bush of Ghosts* was created in 1980, in between two landmark Talking Heads albums (both produced by Eno), 1979's *Fear of Music* and 1980's *Remain in Light* (the latter often considered the band's masterpiece). By integrating African and funk rhythms into their signature urban new wave sound, both albums represent a break from the band's previous work. Byrne and Eno wanted to push this envelope further. As reported on the website publicizing the CD reissue in 2006, Eno and Byrne, inspired by Borges, aimed to create an "imaginary culture" through music, by mixing various found voices into their own instrumental "soundtrack." In fact, many of the tracks had originated in recordings Eno began in New York in 1979, where he experimented with capturing (or sampling) vocals from radio broadcasts and mixing them with African-inspired rhythms. Byrne's contribution to the finished product, however, is distinctive, especially regarding the album's incorporation of sampled radio evangelists, which Byrne found "mesmerizing and exotic" and which "tapped into an older, weirder, more Gothic America" (Sheppard, 2009: 329).

Byrne and Eno were drawn to the idea of East meeting West, not as an idealized fusion, but as a deconstruction of the relation between the two binary terms. Eno describes *Bush of Ghosts* as "fourth world music," where diverse non-Western musical sources are "sympathetically" collaged to create "something danceable" (Tamm, 1995: 161). Such a deconstructive (rather than "new age") impulse is expressed in the cutting-edge primacy the work gives to sampling. Sampled voices take center stage on an album released just prior to the widespread availability of digital samplers, which, according to Nelson George, first hit the US market in 1981 (2004: 439). Byrne and Eno used analog technology (specifically two tape machines). The first machine dealt with found voices, including ethno-musicological field recordings, previously released Arabic compilations of Lebanese and Egyptian singers, and sundry religious and political radio chatter; the second dealt with their original music. The production of the music was likewise characterized by an innovative "sampling" approach to instrumentation: "percussion could mean anything, including objects that happened to be lying around in the studio" (Sheppard, 2009: 330). Musicians from diverse stylistic

backgrounds also passed through the recording sessions to contribute anonymously; that is to be "sampled." The real prophecy of *Bush of Ghosts*, however, is how it foregrounds sampling through the found vocals, thereby challenging conventional standards of creative authorship and authenticity. While some rock bands had previously used sampling and tape loops in a supplemental manner, here the sampled voices were the stars. According to the *Bush of Ghosts* website, some fans complained about being misled, since Byrne and Eno do not actually sing on the album.

Bush of Ghosts therefore ushers into popular music an entirely different register of possession and authenticity. On the *Bush of Ghosts* website, Byrne explains a kind of Derridean inversion: rather than emotions preceding and determining the production of a song, the song, for Byrne, can precede and determine the production of emotion. Thus, the sampled voices engender new emotional meanings, over and against their original intention and context, by virtue of being remixed. Like so much of sampling's prehistory (Marcel Duchamp, John Heartfield, John Cage, William Burroughs, Andy Warhol and Cindy Sherman all come to mind), such an approach to voice and music turns authenticity upside down and inside out. This approach has been most widely embraced by hip-hop music. Whether through the live turntablism preceding *Bush of Ghosts* or the flood of digital sequencers in its wake, hip-hop artists, according to Andrew Bartlett (2004), deploy sampling on almost every level of creativity and production, infusing it with historical and cultural authenticity. Indeed, the *Bush of Ghosts* website features a quote from Public Enemy's producer Hank Shocklee, acknowledging his debt to this music. Furthermore, critical essays posted by David Toop and Paul Morley celebrate *Bush of Ghosts'* ingenuity through reference to a catalogue of artists influenced by the album.

At the same time, a critical eye and ear should be brought to the "audio-visionary" discourse surrounding *Bush of Ghosts*. While the album represents a remarkable cross-cultural gesture in the wake of late-1970s Middle East political crises and the onset of the Reagan/MTV era, it also highlights the fact that white culture is the funnel through which other cultures must pass. *Bush of Ghosts* perhaps unwittingly recalls Edward Said's seminal notion of Orientalism, (with his book of that title originally published in 1978, three years before the album's release). According to Said, the term Orientalism designates the imperialistic practices and attitudes of the Occident toward the Orient. Brief discussion of this hugely influential theory sheds necessary light on the micro-politics of *Bush of Ghosts'* conception and production. Said's distinction between "latent" and "manifest" Orientalism is particularly relevant here. Said argues that latent Orientalism is characterized by "unconscious positivity" and envisions the Orient in terms of "eccentricity," "silent indifference" and "feminine penetrability" (1978: 206). Thus, while *Bush of Ghosts'*

manifest Orientalism might be non-existent, its latent Orientalism represents a slippery but persistent thread. Later, discussing T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1922) and E.M. Forester's *A Passage to India* (1924) (not unrelated literary precursors to *Bush of Ghosts*), Said emphasizes how the Orient "must be made to perform" and how the Orientalist becomes the sympathetic agent ensuring such activity (*Ibid.*, 238-239). Latent Orientalist links with *Bush of Ghosts* are apparent in the well-intended if ethnocentric mega-spectacle "We are the World" (1985). Can we imagine African musicians sampling Byrne and Eno speaking or singing, putting music to these samples, and then releasing the album to widespread accolades as a phenomenal intervention in the history of music production? Such a question is not meant to demonize *Bush of Ghosts* as neocolonialist, but rather to take note of (or not to repress) the Orientalist structures that exceed the designs of conscientious artists like Eno and Byrne. In this regard, the source of the album's title is revealing, which was borrowed from a 1954 African novel neither Eno nor Byrne had read but encountered after the album's completion. They simply liked the sound of the title and felt it captured the music.

On the other hand, there are some who would argue that in the contemporary cultural landscape, globalized and digitized, the concept of Orientalism is less relevant than it once was. For example, a more progressive angle on the concept behind *Bush of Ghosts* is theorized in Josh Kun's recent notion of "audiotopia," where music is understood to construct and deconstruct space, thereby remapping cultural and national identities (2005: 22-23). Adrian Danks tends to idealize the aesthetics of recycling as a truly democratic and globalizing practice, one that erases all kinds of boundaries and infuses public images and sounds with private meanings (2006: 242-244). While there is no doubt some truth to this perspective, one must ask, how does privilege figure in such privatizing of public domain (a phrase that suddenly has an unsettling neoconservative ring to it)? "Appropriation" sounds hip from inside hip-hop culture, but it also possesses an economic and racial subtext: Picasso sampling African art; Elvis sampling black music, exotica muzak sampling the tropics; Paul Simon sampling South Africa and Brazil.

In any case, beyond the way it reflects such geopolitical questions, *Bush of Ghosts* also anticipated many recent copyright battles waged against hip-hop artists and fake-trailer mash-ups. Back in the early 1980s, Eno and Byrne made every effort to get clearance for the sampled voices they used. Most contemporary theorists of digital sampling culture, however, do not take this position; they question copyright laws and see sampling as a legitimate challenge to corporate and government control of art. In an eloquent essay titled "The Ecstasy of Influence," novelist Jonathan Lethem argues that "all art is sourced," and that "digital sampling is an art method like any other" (2008: 42). From this perspective, it makes more sense to treat sampling as a "gift economy" rather than a market

economy lorded over by "corrupt" new copyright laws. Sponsored by the corporate lobby and directed largely against hip-hop artists, these laws, Daphne Keller explains, continue to erode rights to fair use and First Amendment justifications for sampling (2008: 145). Kembrew McLeod defended the right to sample in the face of corporate control in his documentary *Copyright Criminals* (2009), which considers the unfairness of copyright law. However, *Copyright Criminals* itself became subject to a copyright lawsuit in 2010. Further analysis of copyright law and sampling is presented in Craig Baldwin's found-footage film *Sonic Outlaws* (1995), which explored avant-garde band Negativland's legal disputes with U2's record label. Brett Gaynor's documentary *RIP: A Remix Manifesto* (2008) proved even more controversial. Shrewdly taking a middle road, the *Bush of Ghosts* website invites consumers to become producers, granting legal access to download any two songs, remix them and then re-post them.

The Films

According to Bruce Jenkins, Bruce Conner brought the modernist strategies of Cubism to film during the 1960s, a time when personal psychological cinema dominated both the avant-garde and the European New Waves. Instead of employing the avant-garde's first-person cinematic mode, or the pseudo-realism of Hollywood's third-person point of view, Conner's films work through a "second person" voice, addressing the viewer directly by "liberating the materiality of film" and "unmasking the ways in which meanings are constructed and conveyed in a culture" (Jenkins, 1999: 186-187). This conception also applies to Conner's approach to sound and music which, like his distinctive assemblage visual aesthetic, is founded upon "finding" new audio-visual mismatches.

Conner reportedly took special delight in putting images to music. During production of his most famous film, *A Movie* (1958), Conner was listening to Respighi's "Pines of Rome," which he decided worked as the soundtrack, perhaps yet another way he incorporated the filmmaking process into the film itself (*Ibid.*: 189). Similarly, *Cosmic Ray* (1961) is a mystical, Cubist riff on a Ray Charles song. One iteration of Conner's *Looking for Mushrooms* (1959-67) features a Beatles soundtrack; while his *Permian Strata* (1969) combines footage from an early silent-era Biblical film with Bob Dylan's "Rainy Day Women #12 and 35," thereby punning the phrase "getting stoned" and highlighting Conner's subversive sense of humor.

It is therefore not surprising that V. Vale describes Conner as "the father of the MTV-identified music video" (2010: 224). Beyond these early pop-music films, Conner became involved in other audio-visual projects that anticipated today's sampling culture. One such example is the North American Ibis Alchemical Light Company, an experimental production

company in San Francisco committed to staging multimedia rock concerts using projected slides and films. As Jenkins reminds us, Conner's 1970s psychedelic phase reflects his long-held interest in "anti-movie" modes of exhibition and collaboration; *A Movie* was originally designed to be continuously projected as a loop, but this proved too expensive and cumbersome (1999: 189-198). In the next period of Conner's career, leading up to the *Bush of Ghosts* films, the collagist became an enamored (if over-aged) participant-observer of the Bay Area punk music scene, publishing photos of punk bands in the zine *Search and Destroy*. Music-inspired films continued to appeal to Conner's creative impulses. One of Conner's unfinished films was a documentary about the gospel group The Soul Stirrers, comprised mostly of live performance footage. The film apparently consumed Conner throughout the 1980s (the period after the *Bush of Ghosts* films), achieving in places what most of his other films do through collage: something "empty" or presumably disposable "becomes filled with a sense of presence: immanence, mystery, spirit" (Boswell, 1999: 82).

Long before *Bush of Ghosts*, Conner seemed destined to collaborate with Eno and Byrne. Conner had already made the performance film *Breakaway* with dancer Toni Basil in 1966. Fifteen years later, Byrne claims he and Eno conceived of the *Bush of Ghosts* music as a soundtrack to a television dance program featuring her work. During the 1970s, both Eno and Conner had worked separately with avant-garde musician Terry Riley, a pioneer in using tape loops and found sounds. Just prior to the *Bush of Ghosts* recording sessions, Eno produced new wave band Devo's 1978 debut album *Are We Not Men?* Later that year, Conner made a hilarious found-footage film to Devo's single "Mongoloid," keenly visualizing the band's campy retro-futurism.

It was one of Eno's engineers on the Devo album, Patrick Gleeson (an accomplished music composer in his own right), who introduced Conner to Byrne and Eno in San Francisco during the final mixing of *Bush of Ghosts*. Soon after the album's completion, Byrne invited Conner to make films to the first two songs, "America is Waiting" and "Mea Culpa." Reportedly, Conner worked entirely on his own, letting the music guide his assembling of the found images. Here we have an interesting instance of a filmmaker privileging the music over the images. Such would be the guiding principle behind the new music-video era, where songs would be creatively visualized to enhance revenues. *America is Waiting* premiered in 1982, not long after the launch of MTV. While the early MTV archive possesses its own reflexive (if innocuous) irony, the subversive pastiche of *America is Waiting* apparently went too far outside the box of conventional marketing acumen of the time. The record label opted not to purchase the *Bush of Ghosts* films for promotional purposes. Indeed, *America is Waiting* seems more in tune with the digital sampling culture of many years later.

America is Waiting

There are a variety of impressive ways Conner's film visualizes the music. The key line that repeatedly loops throughout the song is "America is waiting for a message of some sort or another." Invoking an impatient, arrogant nationalism, the sampled voice likewise betrays a sense of anxiety. This latter connotation is reinforced by the somewhat melancholic keyboard melody that dances across a stumbling rhythm track comprised of scratchy, muffled electric rhythm guitar and a host of noisy percussion. The film captures some of this predominant scratchy percussion through the flicker effect and black frames Conner inserts throughout. Indeed, we might interpret the film's scratches, flicker effect and black frames as the "ground" into which Conner splices the found images, paralleling the music track's function as the foundation onto which Eno and Byrne dub the found voices.

The editing is also striking in its enhancement of the music. Eisenstein's legacy permeates the film. Intellectual and graphic associations drive Conner's approach to the discontinuous cutting, which at times matches quite precisely the rhythm of the music. Adrian Danks reminds us that Soviet montage is a crucial stylistic precursor of much found-footage cinema. More significantly, Danks rates Conner as the found-footage forerunner of the "rapid fire editing" that "simulates television remote control or the point and click hyperlink of the Internet" and that possesses a "musical precision of rhythm, motif and tempo" (2006: 244-249). At the same time, the film contains asymmetrical delays in some of the cutting, where one shot cuts to the next on the off beat. In other words, at some points the rhythm of the editing does not keep time consistently. Such asymmetrical rhythm can also be heard in the rolling snare-drum sound, which seems to stop and start at random. In this way, Conner creates a visual correspondence with the sense of the rhythm track tripping over itself, or stumbling forward. Even more dramatically than the found voices, Conner's approach to recycling this footage, found primarily from Cold War-era military and consumer culture, foresees today's remix aesthetic.

Looking more closely at the beginning of the film further elucidates some of these aesthetic dynamics. The first measures of the song are accompanied by an establishing shot of what appears an early Cold War-era radar station located in the desert. The second shot cuts to one of the radar instruments. Again, as the scratchy song stumbles through its repetitive rhythm, Conner uses a kind of looping jump cut on the radar instrument. This is reminiscent of Eisenstein's celebrated jump cut early in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), where the frustrated sailor smashes the plate. There, Eisenstein expands time, rendering the gesture symbolic, also foregrounding the role of editing in expressing the revolution. Here, Conner reinvents such a jump cut by emphasizing its looping quality: time

becomes almost hyper-condensed, generating a brief sense of droning repetition (the radar rotating all day). Equally important, and in contrast with the Eisenstein jump cut, is the sense of glitch, of something going wrong. From this angle, we can likewise contrast Conner's looping jump cut with those popularized by Godard, which are equally reflexive but involve a playfully anarchic form of storytelling. Conner's looping jump cut applied to this particular found footage becomes a kind of camp exposition, exaggerating the image of the instrument so that we question it, or at least see it with some detached humor. It likewise doubles for the electronic assemblage driving the music, which is highly mechanized on the one hand (pre-electronica) but also subject to fits and spasms, to differences within the repetitions.

As mentioned above, Conner introduces in this first sequence the black flashing flicker effect that recurs throughout the film and that works so effectively with the music. This flicker effect should be viewed in relation to the decontextualizing impulse underlying sampling. Inserting these single black frames according to the music's rhythm becomes not merely a reflexive gesture (its more typical effect in avant-garde films), but more importantly an icon of the space of sampling, the "someplace else" or new context for the sampled materials. In other words, the flicker italicizes the fact that these images are found, sampled. It therefore seems appropriate that the film's initial black flickers transition to a shot of the nation's capital, accompanying the first utterance of the song's sampled refrain: America is waiting for a message.

Here Conner deploys another technique that meshes effectively with the audio sampling. Using reverse motion on the American flag blowing in the wind, Conner renders the flag blowing first in one direction, then the opposite. This suggestion of circular motion clearly serves as political commentary: it implies that American leadership is contradicting itself, or going in circles. This image captures the looping quality of both the music's rhythms and sampled voice. The emphasis is now less on glitchy differences within repetition and more on the kinship between repetition and propaganda or dogma: as words and images are repeated, they become ideology, ideas accepted as truth. The remix strategy of both the found image of the flag and the found voice *about* the flag ironically exposes the flippant circular logic that often characterizes the manufacturing of patriotism.

America is Waiting continues to develop such notions with a densely layered assemblage of 1950s Cold War imagery. Again, let our starting point be the sampled voice:

Taking it again, again, again

Well we ought to be mad at the government not the people

Laderman

I mean what're you going to do?

No will whatsoever, no will whatsoever

Absolutely no honor or integrity

I haven't seen any citizen stand up over there and say hey wait a second.

As suggested by these lines, and by my previous commentary on its opening, *America is Waiting* invites the viewer to experience a sardonic double-take on communications technology, consumer society, patriotism, militaristic grandstanding and the culture of war. Though the source of this sampled voice is reacting to the 1979 Iran hostage crisis (discussed further below), Conner digs into the soil beneath the surface of such seemingly reasonable indignation by stringing together a vast array of 1950s cinematic detritus that poetically reveals much about the formation (chronologically and structurally) of American national and cultural identity. Danks identifies the 1950s era (or more broadly, postwar through mid-1960s) as the most commonly utilized archive for found-footage film art, since much of contemporary America's subconscious seems to reside there (2006: 243). One striking montage sequence later in the film links the promotion of deodorant with shock therapy. A further memorable scene includes flashing snippets of Hollywood cowboys intercut with eerie, high-contrast images of soldiers training into bunkers. Another intercuts a bouncing-needle and measuring dials with boys straight out of *Leave it to Beaver* playing with war-game toys.

Near the end of the film, Conner superimposes question marks across footage of American citizens reciting the Pledge of Allegiance (Silva, 2010). Such a gesture becomes yet another way Conner sketches provocative links between the early chapters of the Cold War, and its reboot during the early Reagan years. While the music on *Bush of Ghosts* (and "America is Waiting" in particular) engages a collage ethnography of contemporaneous political inflections, Conner adds a visual richness by performing a collage archeology, one that asks us to hear these captured Reaganomics/New Right audio blips in relation to shattered, remixed images from the Eisenhower worldview. It is worth mentioning that a kind of feature-length version of *America is Waiting* came out a year later, namely Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader and Pierce Rafferty's *The Atomic Cafe* (1982). Comprised entirely of archival footage that recorded the emergence of the nuclear arms race, *The Atomic Cafe* remains a seminal cult film for its black humor and "sampling" approach to music and documentary film clips. The film also dialed into both the contemporaneous punk sensibility and the anti-nuclear arms movement that haunted Reagan's early grandstanding. A few years later, Michael Rogin's book *Ronald Reagan, the Movie* (1988) provided further evidence

that Reagan's political persona was constructed from a "sampling" of his previous acting roles in Hollywood Cold War films.

Watching *America is Waiting* today, one is likely struck by how the film seems to remix sounds and images not only from the past (1950s and 1980s) but also from its future, especially our post-9/11 Patriot Act culture. The film parades unofficial, even unconscious images from the so-called war on terror. On this note, it is worth recalling an incident surrounding the initial release of the album. One of the original 11 songs, "Qu'ran," was built around samples of Algerian Muslims chanting from the Koran. In deference to a request from a British Islamic organization, which considered the piece blasphemous, Byrne and Eno agreed to omit this song for the LP's second pressing in 1982 (the initial CD release in 1986 contained "Qu'ran," though later editions did not). With hindsight, it might seem that Byrne and Eno were bowing to censorship, abiding by religious institutional authority just as they abided by the rules of copyright. Viewed in context, however, Byrne and Eno's gesture seems ahead of a different curve. Rather than play the Eurocentric sampling game and collect "data" freely in the name of Art, they display a notable respect for restrictive religious tenets with which they probably disagree. Despite my earlier speculations about its latent Orientalism, the album also clearly engages a progressive, or at least open-minded, sense of inclusion. In this way, both their decision about "Qu'ran" and the album as a whole articulate a world-music paradigm that does not assume Western attitudes, implicitly celebrating secularism and unbridled appropriation. If Byrne and Eno were intuiting tense relations between the West and Islam (the Intifada, Iran/Contra, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, numerous armed conflicts, 9/11, and the Danish cartoon controversies were all to come), Conner too was intuiting the viral nationalism of the George W. Bush regime, which, after all, makes Reagan and Eisenhower seem rather moderate.

Mea Culpa

"America is Waiting," the album's lead song, is followed by "Mea Culpa," which features the scrambled looped refrain, "I made a mistake," sampled from an anonymous radio broadcast exchange between what the liner notes gloss as "an inflamed caller and a smooth politician." The other sampled singing voice evokes non-Western spiritual chanting. According to Eno biographer David Sheppard (2010), the identity of the original source of this vocal remains elusive, as this track is one of the earliest songs begun by Eno, dating back to 1979 and evolving through numerous remixes and reinventions. Sheppard speculates that this vocal might be something Eno recorded late at night in New York on his wide-band radio, effected or slowed down; or possibly something added by one of the many ad hoc musicians who contributed to earlier versions of album tracks, but went uncredited. Built around the idea of conceding guilt and

asking forgiveness, this song might be understood as an answer to "America is Waiting." The song's haunting Middle Eastern melody and steady groove become a soothing counterpoint to the neurotic bounce and reactionary pitch of "America is Waiting."

It therefore makes a certain aesthetic sense that Conner's film for "Mea Culpa" is substantially more abstract than *America is Waiting*, utilizing what appear to be educational science films detailing the movements of sub-atomic particles, or possibly electronic currents. Containing further examples of the flicker effect and high-contrast black and white, Conner's *Mea Culpa* achieves a subtly optimistic suggestion of East/West reunion. Additionally, the subversive, ironic edge so blatant in *America is Waiting* seems more covert in *Mea Culpa*. As the scrambled, looping voice of apology starts the song, Conner begins with a simple white square (a frame within a frame) against a black flickering space. As the song's seductive rhythm track begins, this square rotates into a line which itself rotates into a point, playfully morphing dimensionality itself. Once the drumbeat begins, this single point proliferates into many, all gliding in asymmetrical patterns. Part of the film seems to be a diagram of electrical currents in a light bulb; at one point positive and negative (plus and minus) signs appear. Molecular dots seem to be dancing to the music; some imagery suggests heat rising. The interplay between the two found vocals (one a subterranean low-end chant, the other a high-end scrambled confession) is rearticulated in Conner's rendering of images originally intended as scientific, into highly abstract and mystical images. A pulsating solar image concludes the piece, in which a white circle radiating rays of dots displaces the square images that open the film, perhaps intimating an evolutionary movement from the hard geometric lines of science and enclosure to a more organic and open form.

This play of darkness and light (or circle and square, or positive and negative) that permeates *Mea Culpa* can be situated within Conner's larger body of work. Such formalized duality, according to Peter Boswell, is not a "static" black and white world, but rather one full of ambiguity and tensions. Especially through the lens of *Mea Culpa*, we can appreciate how this "struggle between dazzling illumination and tenebrous obscurity" becomes a high-contrast vision that does not reveal easy narrative polarities. Unlike the filmmaker's "high-density narratives," where fragments of recognizable footage both encourage and discourage narrative sense (this would be *America is Waiting*), *Mea Culpa* is more exemplary of Conner's "optical overload," which I take to mean a more abstract approach characterized by "high-density mark-making." The result, like *Mea Culpa*, is a "highly structured" state of "perpetual flux." Boswell even links this "shadow play" aesthetic to Conner's elusive and self-reflexive persona, where he enters the bright spotlight of one artistic medium, only to disappear and re-emerge someplace else (1999: 26-27).

Indeed, one might link the abstract graphics of *Mea Culpa* with the very abstraction defining digital (as opposed to analogical) representation itself, where source information becomes transformed into a numerical series of binary oppositions (zeroes and ones). Whether by design or default, *Mea Culpa's* imagery evokes the look of the process of digital reproduction. At the same time, it lucidly demonstrates how such abstract "0/1" visuals can challenge Western notions of knowledge—especially when accompanied by such an alluring, hybridized music track. *America is Waiting* overflows with potential symbolism due to the provocative remix of its plethora of analogical, culturally-grounded found footage. *Mea Culpa*, in contrast, is harder to speak about, more primal and primary, comprised of non-representational yet highly evocative figures. [\[1\]](#)

Conclusion

One thing confirmed by Conner's *Bush of Ghosts* films is how irony underlies much film and music sampling. The very act of sampling a sound or image seems to depend intrinsically on the critical, often humorous distance essential to irony. Such irony helps render sampling more commercially palatable to postmodern media and culture, but it also contributes to the potential pedagogical effect described earlier. Hearing sounds and seeing images recontextualized becomes an opportunity for pleasurable learning, something approaching carnivalesque research.

With this in mind, let us conclude by taking stock of an interesting string of post-*Bush of Ghosts* ironies. For starters, the "indignant radio talk show host" of "America is Waiting" turns out *not* to be a right-wing talking head (as many suppose), but one of the few liberals on the airwaves at the time, as well as the first African-American to host such a political radio talk show (Ray Taliaferro, of San Francisco's KGO). The sampled voice here educates us that ironic similarities often exist across superficial differences (irate liberals can sound just as nationalistic and arrogant as irate conservatives).

Secondly, there is the recent phenomenon of David Byrne recycling the sampling on *Bush of Ghosts*. While touring in 2008-2009, he performed the *Bush of Ghosts* song "Help Me Somebody," singing the part of the original's sampled voice, a heated sermon by a New Orleans preacher. What we have here is an ironic reversal of the traditional hierarchy elevating real origin over artificial copy (Lastra, 1992: 83-84); that is, Byrne's "real" voice copies the artificial (pre-recorded) one. This is not unlike the irony surrounding live lip-syncing, where a pre-recorded voice pretends to be "live" (Wurtzler, 1992: 92-93). Yet Byrne singing "Help Me Somebody" becomes doubly ironic, since the "original" pre-recorded voice was someone else's, one that belonged to an entirely different context. Byrne's rendition of "Help Me Somebody" opens up a Pandora's

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box of remediation, problematizing any conventional sense of authenticity. By singing it, Byrne remediates the sampled preacher's voice, which had previously been mediated numerous times: by the *Bush of Ghosts* album; by the radio broadcast from which it was sampled; and by the sermon genre, as well as the church where it was originally performed.

Lastly, there is some instructive irony surrounding Bruce Conner's legacy (he passed away in 2008). The internet, and digital culture in general, would appear to represent the fruition of Conner's life's work as an assemblage artist. The ultimate venue for remediation, the internet has become the premier window through which we access music, films, photos, television and video, not to mention a majority of the commercial and institutional world. Everything and anything can be easily copied, pasted and remixed to the tune of all manner of personal and political inflections. For better or for worse, Conner's found-footage filmmaking practice seems a crucial precursor, in both tone and style, not only to the internet mash-up, but also the collage paradigm guiding so much of popular computer culture.

According to Silva (2010), however, Conner insisted that none of his films be available for viewing on the internet. Beyond the degradation in image quality and viewing experience he perceived, he also felt there was a crucial, substantial distinction between the mass distribution and accessibility of the collage rampant across today's Web, and the more conceptually careful and meticulous collage he undertook as an avowedly underground film artist. While such an attitude might reflect high-art elitism and film purism, there is something to be said for film art not rushing full throttle into the digital fold. Likewise, we might heed Conner's cue and resist, or at least question, the "anything goes" remix frenzy. Instead, let us seek out and celebrate producers and consumers who engage what we might call "deep sampling" along the lines envisioned by *America is Waiting* and *Mea Culpa*.

We should therefore rediscover Conner's *Bush of Ghosts* films as anticipating what Henry Jenkins (2006) aptly calls our "convergence culture." These *Bush of Ghosts* films of 1980 point to the future, toward the more unconventional ways music and film have recently intersected: how song titles and lyrics get into films; how film dialogue and sound effects get into music; the cinematic as a musical concept and genre; music soundtracks to unmade, imagined films; film history as fodder for musical identity; and so on. Perhaps most significantly, these two modest, marginal films foresaw the potential for audio-visual sampling to teach and delight.

Notes

[1] Unlike *America Is Waiting*, which is difficult to find, *Mea Culpa* is available on the re-issued *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* CD, in QuickTime format. However, for those inclined to stay true to original formats, 16mm prints of both films can be rented from Canyon Cinema.

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