(In)appropriation

Productions of Laughter in Contemporary Found Footage Films

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In contemporary media culture, audiovisual appropriation has become a fundamental aesthetic strategy both on the Internet and in the world of experimental film and video art. Sampling images and sounds originating in various sources—narrative films, documentaries, television shows, radio broadcasts, and so on—and recombining them to produce new, hybrid texts has become a dominant practice that raises questions about the nature of authorship, the stability of meaning, and the apparent pleasures generated by recombinant texts. From “Shining” (Robert Ryang, 2005), a fake movie trailer that transforms footage from horror film The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) into an advertisement for a heartwarming family film, to Christian Marclay’s The Clock (2010), a 24-hour loop film that edits together thousands of shots of timepieces from hundreds of films so that every shot corresponds to the appropriate minute of the film’s 24-hour running time, it is clear that appropriation has become a significant means of engaging the legacy of recordings produced over the last century. The fact that The Clock screens exclusively in art museums and galleries while “Shining” has been viewed many millions of times on YouTube merely reveals the pervasiveness of the practice in both “high” and “low” art venues.

One characteristic shared by many of these works of audiovisual appropriation, high and low, is that they often produce laughter among their audiences. Indeed, having watched both “Shining” and The Clock with an audience, I can attest that each text has elicited at least moments of mirth. And I would argue that one of the reasons for this laughter has to do with the audience’s perception of something both “appropriate” and simultaneously “inappropriate” in the recombination of sounds and images at hand. Of course, what is considered appropriate or inappropriate is always dependent on context. What is appropriate behavior in one context may be utterly inappropriate in another. However, found footage filmmaking, which is dependent on the appropriation of a sound or image from one context and its placement into a different context, inevitably raises the question of propriety. The very ontology of a found footage film is dependent on the viewer’s perception of something “out of place” and therefore, in some way, improper or inappropriate. Moreover, the terms appropriate and inappropriate carry with them connotations of property, of what properly belongs to one person or another; found footage films also transgress contemporary norms about intellectual property, suggesting that recorded images and sounds can belong to more than one owner.

While the repurposing of previously existing film footage is a practice almost as old as filmmaking itself, in the digital era it has taken on a new prevalence and popularity. Significantly, both established artists and anonymous amateurs are actively playing with the boundaries between appropriate and inappropriate usage, in relation both to proper use and to property. Skating just along the boundaries of propriety, these found footage films, which I refer to as “inappropriate films,” may—among other things—make us laugh, squirm with discomfort, or look over our shoulders to see if the intellectual property lawyers may be watching.

In this essay, I examine laughter as a common response to certain inappropriation films, specifically a group of such films currently circulating within experimental film and video art screening venues, including Khan (Daniel Martinico, 2008), Alone (Gerard Freixes Ribera, 2008), The Homogenics (Gerard Freixes Ribera, 2010), Galactic Docking Company (Clark Nikolai, 2009), and Intermittent Delight (Akosua Adoma Owusu, 2007). My focus on this group of films, however, does not suggest that more popular instances of inappropriation (which abound on YouTube and other online sites) are less relevant. Rather, the films discussed here serve to illuminate a set of strategies and effects that extend far beyond the festival circuit. Drawing on Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter as well as the wider discourse on incongruity and humor, I attempt to address the fundamental question of why some found footage films make us laugh. I argue that this laughter is often generated through the blurring of certain boundaries and/or from the recognition of a connection between two (or more) things previously unrecognized, disrupting habitual associations and establishing alternative ones. Of course, this laughter does not guarantee that inappropriation is always subversive of the dominant ideology. Laughter may, in fact, diffuse the subversive potential of inappropriation, offering the viewer a position of superiority or distance vis-à-vis the appropriated document, producing momentary pleasure or discomfort but no sustained critique persisting beyond the guffaw. At the same time, I would argue that such laughter at and with an inappropriation film may sometimes constitute a complex form of critique. Indeed, I suggest that inappropriation is a form of filmmaking that constitutes a particular relationship between viewer and text in which the viewer may recognize that the order of signification in which a sound or image is linked only to a single, stable
meaning has been destabilized—which may make us laugh and potentially spur us to rethink established categorical boundaries.

Repetition and Inelasticity

So, to begin: why do some found footage films—at least sometimes—produce laughter? And, moreover, when and to whom are they likely to be funny? Bergson begins his study of laughter by noting that “the comic does not operate outside the pale of what is strictly human.” He suggests that, although we may laugh at nonhuman animals and objects, we do so only insofar as they remind us of something human. In addition, he points to the way in which comedy may only occur inside a social group within which certain norms have been established. He writes, “Our laughter is always the laughter of a group... However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary.” He notes that the reason that the comic may not translate from one social group to another is that the norms of such groups may differ. Nevertheless, he identifies certain comic tendencies that may transcend a particular social circumstance. Indeed, his theory of laughter is dependent on a particular conception of life and living human beings as “elastic” or adaptable to new circumstances. He suggests that repetition is anathema to our notions about human beings as they are “supposed” to be. Since no situation is ever exactly like those that preceded it, human beings are required to be in a state of constant flux, never repeating themselves. However, Bergson notes, although they “should” be constantly adapting to ceaseless new circumstances, human beings frequently do not adapt fully to each novel situation but sometimes, rather, respond habitually. For Bergson, this occasional inability to adapt to circumstance is the root of the comic. One of his primary examples is that of a person slipping and falling down. It is the mismatch between the heterogeneous flow of life and the rigidity of human habit that frequently generates a comic effect.

Bergson argues more specifically that the comic is often generated when a human being behaves in some way like a machine. By behaving in a habitual and therefore seemingly mechanical manner, a person may come to appear ridiculous because he or she does not adapt to a new situation. Bergson writes, “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.” He continues, “The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself. Wherever there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living... This deflection of life towards the mechanical is here the real cause of laughter.” Indeed, when human behavior appears to be automatic, people appear to be like puppets or marionettes. Since this undermines our sense of human beings as nonrepetitive and constantly adapting, such an appearance must be “corrected” by the social, and Bergson sees laughter as precisely that corrective. From this perspective, laughter seems to be aligned with the dominant ideology, serving to reinforce the status quo in some way.

Although Bergson was writing about the comic in life, theater, and literature, his observations appear particularly relevant to a discussion of any form of recorded media, which by definition is repeatable and precisely not-live. It is even more relevant when discussing inappropriation films, which always entail not only a repetition of the profilmic events through recording but also a repetition of that recording’s use through the contextualization of part of a preexisting text in a new text. Moreover, some inappropriation films make use of the device of repetition within the film itself, repeating a certain segment again and again—often to humorous, or at least disconcerting, effect. Thus, found footage films entail up to three forms of repetition: the reproduction of the profilmic event on film or video, the reuse of the preexisting footage in a new text, and—sometimes—the repeated reuse of the same piece of footage multiple times within that new text.

All three of these forms of repetition are integral to Daniel Martinico’s Khan (2008), a 15-minute video loop of the famous shot from the 1982 film Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan in which an aging Captain Kirk (William Shatner) screams out his enemy Khan’s name. For his film, Martinico looped several tiny segments of Kirk/Shatner’s movements that occur during this shot. As a result, Kirk/Shatner appears to repeatedly twitch and shudder until he periodically erupts with a passionate cry of “Khan!” After each outburst, Kirk/Shatner returns to his twitching, but each time his movements are slightly different since Martinico loops a different segment each time (12.1). For some audiences, at least, this film has produced laughter. Why does this film—at least sometimes—make us laugh? To begin with, I would argue that, even if we are not familiar with the source footage, this film may produce laughter. Regardless of who he is or where he comes from, a man twitching in this particular way is amusing—as well as potentially discomfiting. Kirk/Shatner becomes like a puppet in Martinico’s show, doomed to repeat the exact same minute gestures as well as his enraged scream of “Khan!” until someone presses stop. The tension between the indexical imagery of a living human body and the unnatural, mechanical motions imposed on him by Martinico’s editing blurs the line between human and machine. One of the things being subverted here is precisely the nonrepetitive flow of life. Also relevant to Khan is Bergson’s distinction between “gesture” and “action.” Bergson writes:

Instead of concentrating our attention on actions, comedy directs it rather to gestures. By gestures we here mean the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching. Gesture, thus defined, is profoundly different from action. Action is intentional or, at any rate, conscious; gesture slips out unawares, it is automatic.
the “appropriate” use of this footage (as part of the action of a narrative film) and this “inappropriate” use. Thus, a second part of the humor of this film is derived from our re-cognition—literally, “cognizing again”—of the difference between what seems to have been the intended function of the footage and the new purpose to which it is being put—an awareness and experience unique to found footage filmmaking. Without our extratextual knowledge of the source, this difference will not be as sharply defined, and the film may not be as funny. Thus, I would suggest that it is the viewer’s re-cognition of the appropriated footage in relation to its subverted function in Khan, combined with the blurring of the boundary between the human and the mechanical, that is likely to produce laughter.

While Khan works through the looping of very short segments of video, the films of Spanish filmmaker Gerard Freixes Ribera make use of erasure, multiplication, and exchange rather than looping or repetition. Yet, they, too, demonstrate Bergson’s notion that laughter may arise from an “inelasticity... where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being.” However, in contrast to Khan, which does not suggest any particular ideological critique, Ribera’s work also tends to use manipulations of found footage to question certain ideological assumptions embedded within the source texts. In his 2008 film Alone, Ribera took footage from The Lone Ranger television series (which aired on US television between 1949 and 1957) and digitally erased all of the characters except the title character (and his horse) from the frames, retaining the settings (12.2). After an opening sequence of an empty auditorium taken from Man with the Movie Camera (Dziga Vertov, 1929), an image of a “Wanted” poster with a blank center where the criminal’s photograph should be is followed by images of the Lone Ranger speaking to an invisible Tonto, kneeling down in the grass to examine an invisible body, raising his hands above his head when faced with an empty room, exchanging punches with an unseen aggressor, and finally speaking sternly to an empty jail cell. The absence of both sidekick and antagonist makes the Lone Ranger appear to be a deranged man, talking to himself and his nonexistent friends and enemies. Ribera’s alteration of the space in which the Lone Ranger finds himself—but not of the Lone Ranger himself—makes the character appear “inelastic” and his behavior “inappropriate” to its context. The hero is trapped in an altered context in which he does not quite belong, and he is unable to change his behavior to reflect his changed circumstances. Thus, like Kirk/Shatner, the Lone Ranger appears like a marionette, subjected to forces beyond his control. Indeed, while this film is funny, it also produces a sense of melancholy. What (potentially) reclaims the film for comedy, however, is the structure of the literalizing joke, the fact that Ribera is, in fact, literalizing the title of the show, turning the metaphorically “lone” ranger into a character who is literally “alone.” The pun in general acts to undermine our unthinking acceptance of the meanings of words and language. Our own habitual acceptance of the “Lone” Ranger as merely metaphorically alone is disrupted by the literalization. Moreover, Ribera’s act of literalizing a metaphor also points toward a potential critique of the value placed on the individual hero in US popular culture.

Figure 12.1 William Shatner in Khan (Daniel Martinico, 2008). Courtesy of the artist.

Through Martinico’s editing for repetition, Khan emphasizes the involuntary aspects of Kirk/Shatner’s movements, his gestures rather than his actions, thereby revealing the automatic tendencies that underlie all human behavior.

Of course, this effect could be achieved without the use of found footage by simply looping original footage in the same way. However, as Catherine Russell has suggested, “Recycling found images implies a profound sense of the already-seen, the already-happened, creating a spectator position that is necessarily historical.” Indeed, another part of the humor of Martinico’s film may be that most of us experience the source footage or at the very least William Shatner as “already seen” as well as dated. It is not insignificant that this 1982 film has already become something of a cult classic and acquired a degree of camp value, which already allows for a certain distancing between viewer and text, even in its original version. Shatner, too, is an iconic but campy figure, whose later career has turned on his willingness to make fun of himself in songs and commercials and on late-night talk shows. Moreover, as Mark Mauer notes in his review of Khan, “That one word—that one syllable—that Kirk bellows is maybe the most quoted line that one could ever associate with any version of Star Trek.” In this respect, the already-seen aspect already adhered to the footage even before its appropriation into Martinico’s film. At the same time, for those of us who have seen Star Trek II: Wrath of Khan or any of the original Star Trek television series (Gene Roddenberry, 1966–1969), we know how Kirk/Shatner’s body is supposed to behave, and this becomes the ground against which this—as Martinico describes it—“weird breathing/spastic sculpture” emerges. The recognition of the particular body of Kirk/Shatner emphasizes the distance between
In another film entitled *The Homogenics* (2010), Ribera took footage from *The Dick van Dyke Show* (which aired on US television between 1961 and 1966) and erased Laura (Mary Tyler Moore) and other characters, substituting Rob (Dick van Dyke) for all of the other characters, including Laura. Thus, between two and four Robs appear to interact and converse together. Some of the humor of the piece derives from van Dyke’s performance itself—his physical antics and one-liners accompanied by the original laugh track. However, another level of humor is added by the multiplication of the same character in the same space, arguing with other versions of himself and inhabiting multiple gender roles at once. For instance, one Rob says to another, “Why did you marry me if you didn’t like my ottoman?” The second replies, “I don’t know, honey, but I want you to remember something: I wear the pants in the family.” In addition to the original and intended absurdity of the first line, since both Robs are male (and wearing pants), the dialogue becomes even more absurd and also emphasizes—at least from a contemporary perspective—the gender roles inscribed in the original 1960s series, roles that the show reifies even as it also ridicules them. As in *Alone*, the characters cannot fully adapt to the context that has been altered around them, automatically delivering their lines despite their inappropriateness to the changed context. This mechanical behavior, combined with the confusion of gender roles generated when everyone is wearing the pants, appears to be the basis of laughter in this film. Moreover, the presence of the laugh track, preserved in *The Homogenics*, prompts us to laugh even though this laughter has become dislodged from its original object. The impulse to laugh along, even though the laugh track no longer fits the context at hand, also points to our own automatic tendencies as an audience in relation to this literally mechanical laughter. Thus, in both *Alone* and *The Homogenics*, the revelation of automatism and inelasticity underlying human behavior (including our own), revealed by the repetition enabled by mechanical reproduction and alteration, serves to generate laughter while simultaneously pointing to and potentially disrupting certain ideological assumptions about individuality and gender latent in the original texts.

**Incongruity**

In addition to the tension between human elasticity and mechanical automation, another element at work in many inappropriation films—in different ways and to varying degrees—is incongruity, a concept at the center of many theories of humor going back to Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard. Comic incongruity involves the juxtaposition of two things that conventionally do not belong together;
however, as some theorists have noted, there must always also be a point of congruity between the two things for it to be funny. Neil Schaeffer suggests:

With incongruity we see two things which do not belong together, yet which we accept at least in this case as going together in some way. That is, when we notice something as incongruous, we also simultaneously understand it to be in some minor way congruous.18

Meanwhile, as Paul Arthur has noted, “Found footage collage is... by definition a dialogical operation, pitting two (or more) enunciative agents against each other.”19 Because of the dialogical nature of found footage filmmaking, the combination of multiple enunciative agents holds the potential for producing the unexpected congruities within incongruity that may produce humor. Such contradictory conjunctions are already apparent, to some degree, in Ribera’s Alone, in which the literalization of the “Lone Ranger” offers a “minor” point of congruity against which humorous (and/or discomforting) incongruities may emerge. However, this tension between congruity and incongruity is more evident in certain other appropriation films.

In Clark Nikolai’s Galactic Docking Company (2009), we once again, yet in a very different way, encounter a tension between the human and the mechanical. In this case, however, it is not the mechanical movement of the human body but, rather, the visual similarity between the human penis and the spacecraft that generates this tension. In documentary footage likely familiar to many viewers, NASA technicians and administrators at mission control watch their screens to monitor the launch of a spacecraft. However, in Nikolai’s version, what their eyes follow with such eagerness is not only a spacecraft but also a range of penises and penetrations. Most of these images come from a 1981 gay male porn film, and by inserting these images into the NASA footage, Nikolai’s film both sexualizes and queers this footage, rendering it inappropriate in relation to both the sober discourse of science and progress and to heterosexual social norms (12.4). The film begins with images of spacecraft and mission control operators overlaid with music from the gay porn film Kansas City Trucking Co. (Tim Kincaid, 1976), which conjures expectations of seduction rather than scientific demonstration. After this montage, the film cuts to a close-up of two penises “docking” while we hear mission control operators saying things like “Okay, make it smooth... and around we go... show us a little style... oh, you look good...” and so on. The double meaning of docking, which can refer here to either the process of joining one spacecraft to another or “the act of placing the head of one’s penis inside the foreskin of another’s penis,” the almost already sexual language of the NASA operators, and the visual similarity between spacecraft and penises all constitute points of congruity that make the incongruity between the NASA documentary and the gay porn film hilarious.20

Yet the substitution of the human body part for the mechanical object and the tension between congruity and incongruity do not fully explain why this film may produce laughter. Bergson notes that humor often derives from the revelation of the ceremonial as contrived. He writes:

Any image, then, suggestive of the notion of society disguising itself, or a social masquerade, so to speak, will be laughable... The ceremonial side of life must, therefore, always include a latent comic element, which is only waiting for an opportunity to burst into full view... For any ceremony, then, to become comic, it is enough that our attention be fixed on the ceremonial element in it, and that we neglect its matter, as philosophers say, and think only of its form.21

In Galactic Docking Company, the ceremonial aspect of a spacecraft launch, usually a serious and historical topic, is revealed, precisely as a ceremony with its particular rituals. Moreover, the fact that we have likely seen this NASA footage many times before further heightens our awareness of both its historical status and the absurdity of this fetishized status. Our attention is fixed on the rapt smiles on the faces of the NASA personnel, one man licking his lips as he looks at the screen — now filled with foreskins rather than space vehicles. Suddenly these gestures become inappropriate or, perhaps, differently appropriate and, hence, comic. Moreover, it is once again
the attention to the involuntary gesture even in response to a novel context—in this case, a penis on the mission control screen—that may provoke laughter.12

As a sendup of a nationalistic, patriarchal, and heteronormative institution such as NASA, this film—like Alone and The Homogenics—implies a critique of certain societal norms, deflating the sacred status of the space program. However, this critique is also potentially undermined by the laughter it produces. Indeed, I have noticed a tendency for audiences to laugh at any found footage film that queers an originally straight text. While this laughter may be aimed at the straight establishment, I wonder if it is always so. Why is it so funny to see Harry Potter and Ron Weasley fall in love in slash videos—fan videos that introduce homosexual relationships into previously straight narratives—based on the Harry Potter franchise? In regard to both Galactic Docking Company and the Harry Potter slash videos, there is a heterosexist element to this laughter that declares “gay things” funny. In this case, if laughter serves as a corrective in line with the dominant ideology, then what is being corrected may be, precisely, homosexual behavior.

In addition to sexuality, inappropriation may also deploy structures of congruity and incongruity to engage issues of race and gender. Another inappropriation film that is based on an incongruity brought into relief through a minor incongruity is Akosua Adoma Owusu’s Intermittent Delight (2007).13 This film pairs images of contemporary Ghanaian batik textiles and textile workers with visually similar images from a 1960s Westinghouse promotional film for refrigerator decorations that allow a woman to match her outfits to her largest kitchen appliance (‡ 12.5). The point of congruity is the bright textile patterns, which emphasize a connection between past and present, the United States and Ghana—yet also point to the gap between the contexts in which they were made and used. In this film, the object of laughter is the outmoded gender and fashion conventions of a past moment in American history. In one sequence from the Westinghouse commercial, for instance, a refrigerator decorated with a beige and brown snakeskin pattern appears on the right side of the screen while, on the left side of the screen, a series of objects emblazoned with the same pattern appear in succession: a hat, a shoe, a purse, a glove, and finally a woman wearing sunglasses that also match the fridge. In a very different way than in the aforementioned inappropriation films, a connection between human and machine is enacted by the very suggestion that a woman should dress like her refrigerator. Moreover, given that wearing outfits that match one’s refrigerator never caught on, this sequence reveals the ludicrousness of this attempted fashion. In parallel to the “unmasking” of NASA ritual in Galactic Docking Company, a “social masquerade” is undone. In this case, the elevated status bestowed on any fashion is undermined simply by fixing our attention on a fashion that did not make the cut.

Yet, the effect of the film is not simply a mockery of the women trapped in their Westinghouse fantasy kitchens. Indeed, the visual comparison between the white women dancing with their refrigerators and the African men and women working their looms and sewing machines points toward the invisibility of the labor that produces American consumer products, which continue to be outsourced to workers in less wealthy countries. At the same time, the Ghanaian textile workers look far more intimately connected to their labor of production than the 1960s American housewives to their labor of consumption. While the Ghanaian batiks in the film appear as beautiful objects to be celebrated, the Westinghouse refrigerator décor appears as an absurd way to manipulate female consumers to purchase yet another useless product. Although the film is not easily limited to a singular critique, it draws possible connections between different forms of labor and consumption across time, geography, and culture—while also making us laugh.

The analysis of these inappropriation films suggests two overarching tendencies when it comes to the production of laughter by sampling. First, there is the tendency to refocus our attention on details or gestures we might otherwise overlook or perceive simply as normal. This is most apparent in the (horrified) fascination with the automatic tendencies of the human body, which, through the manipulations allowed by mechanical reproduction, may be transformed into a puppet that blurs the line between human being and machine. By virtue of these inappropriation films, human beings betray their own habitual gestures, thereby revealing the proximity between the human and the mechanical. The manipulation and recontextualization of involuntary gestures expose the underlying habitual nature of human behavior, pointing to the ways in which none of us are ever fully in control of our own bodies. Indeed, editing can transform our unconscious gestures, forcing us to "say" things with our bodies that we did not intend but were
already inscribed within us. Techniques of repetition, erasure, multiplication, and substitution defamiliarize bodily actions and speech acts that might otherwise appear natural. The gesture, detached from intended action, becomes inappropriate and, hence, makes us laugh at the one whose gestures are emphasized, whether it be Kirk/Shatner, the Lone Ranger, Dick van Dyke, NASA officials, or 1960s Westinghouse actors. While this laughter may stem from anxiety about the human body and may ultimately reinforce the status quo by disciplining the bodies onscreen for their inappropriate behavior, it nevertheless draws our attention to the fundamental materiality of the human body and its resistance to our conscious efforts to control it. Moreover, this same attentiveness to gesture over action and form over matter also allows the unmasking of social masquerades. By focusing our attention on the ceremonial aspects of socially accepted behaviors and practices, inappropriation films have the potential to make us re-recognize social conventions for what they are—constructed performances—allowing us to laugh at images that previously held ideological sway.

Second, there is the tendency to find congruities in places where they do not seem to belong, drawing unexpected but surprisingly compelling connections between disparate and incongruous objects. Found footage filmmaking is a particularly apt form for drawing such connections precisely because the finding of the footage so often brings with it a certain sense of surprise—a fundamental ingredient of comic effect. Sexual docking and spacecraft docking both share the same name and certain—unexpected—visual parallels that might not be apparent without Galactic Docking Company. The 1960s Westinghouse commercial just so happens to have certain visual patterns in common with contemporary Ghanaian textile production that would not be visible without Intermittent Delight. Although similar points of congruity could be generated without sampling found footage, such sampling offers the ability to make such connections across time and space, bringing quite different historical, social, and cultural contexts together. It is the distance between these (con)texts that makes the commonalities between them so unexpected and, potentially, so funny.

Thus, it is in their potential ability to refocus our attention, to reveal social conventions as such, and to expose unexpected commonalities that I believe inappropriation films have the potential to generate a valuable critique. While none of these films can be read as straightforward political commentary, they allow us to recognize images and sounds that we may have encountered before. Repetition, erasure, multiplication, substitution, and the establishment of structures of congruity-incongruity are all strategies that make us see a preexisting text differently—a fact attested to most clearly when an audience bursts into laughter. In this, they can be regarded as fundamentally philosophical. As John Morreall has noted:

There is...a conceptual flexibility, an imaginative use of unusual perspectives, that characterizes both philosophy and humor.... In both

Far from being examples of apolitical, postmodern pastiche, these films may bring a "certain mental liberation" that allows us to "shift mental gears to rethink established categories and hierarchies even as we smirk and chuckle. While we may laugh at those onscreen, we may also attend to how their gestures are imbricated in a much wider web of human behaviors, all of which must be interrogated if we are to imagine new ways of thinking and being.

In a media landscape transformed by digital transmissibility, images and sounds are constantly recirculated and reconfigured in their relation to one another, creating endless new patterns of connection like the bits of colored glass inside a kaleidoscope. To locate ourselves within this transformed world, we must attend to how these patterns function—in terms of both how they make us think and how they make us feel. Much of contemporary found footage filmmaking produces laughter, its humor often the source of its pleasure and, hence, its popularity on both the festival circuit and the Internet. Making sense of when and why we laugh when faced with instances of audiovisual recontextualization may offer us insight into our aspirations and anxieties about the human body, our relationship to machines (including the digital technologies that have further enabled this kind of filmmaking), and the instability of meaning when nearly every recording has become available—legally or not—for any imaginable reuse. Bergson's insight that the human body's occasional inability to adapt to new contexts and circumstances may generate laughter has much to teach us in terms of how pieces of found footage (and the human bodies imaged within them) may adapt or not to their new uses. When this adaptation fails, the experience of the inappropriate emerges. And what reads as inappropriate and makes us laugh may reveal that which we take as a given, allowing us to see past the appropriate to everything that lies beyond.

Notes


2. In addition to being a scholar, I am also the director of the Festival of (In)appropriation, a yearly festival of contemporary experimental found footage films, which I founded with my colleague Andrew Hall in 2009 with the sponsorship of Los Angeles Filmforum. The films discussed in this chapter have all been screened as part of the Festival of (In)appropriation. For more information on the festival or distribution information, see http://festivalofappropriation.org.


4. Ibid. 6.
5. Ibid., 29.
6. Ibid., 34.
7. I use the name of the actor and the character because the recontextualizations of the footage seem to confuse the distinction between the two since the narrative in which the character existed is eliminated. As Catherine Russell notes, "Whether the sources of images are 'documentary' or 'fictional' texts, found images are always documents of the profilmic, historical bodies. Decontextualization is the means by which the archive offers up history as a nonnarrative series of bodies and events." See Catherine Russell, Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 258.
8. At the Los Angeles Filmforum screening of the Festival of (In)apropriation held on Sunday June 7, 2009, at the Egyptian Theatre in Los Angeles, the crowd tittered watching Kirk’s twitching and tended to break out into full-fledged laughter whenever he yelled, "Khan!" In fact, his yell seemed to become funnier each time it occurred, as the audience came to expect and anticipate his next outburst.
13. I have elsewhere referred to this recognition as "intentional disparity." See Jaimie Baron, "The Archive Effect: Archival Footage as an Experience of Reception," Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind 6, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 102–120. This experience may occur in relation to any use of archival or found footage as part of found footage filmmaking, whether the film is a documentary, an experimental film, or a member of another genre and whether the footage is "found" at a flea market or in an official archive.
15. Alone can be viewed online at https://vimeo.com/11270686.
16. The Homogenics can be viewed online at https://vimeo.com/11994122.
22. Nikolai noted to me that his film has received a variety of responses, some of which he did not expect. He says that he conceived of Galactic Docking Company as a "dry, formal experiment." He writes: "I find in the U.S. people take their space program very seriously and they think it's funny but are also shocked. In Canada of course we laugh at the U.S. and what it's up to all the time so we just think it's a big joke. In northern Europe though they see it as highly political and subverting the straight white male American domination of space through technology .... What was initially intended to be a dry formal experimental film has turned into both comedy and political subversion." Personal e-mail correspondence with Clark Nikolai, March 6, 2012.
23. Intermittent Delight can be viewed online at https://vimeo.com/43646564.
24. Morreall, Philosophy, 2.