

SprocketKitLingoKit

"I'm a maximalist"

--- **Craig Baldwin**

PART I Intro and Synopsis

RocketKitKongoKit is a documentary about how the Congo was released from colonialism for a brief moment, and treacherously retaken by a puppet leader funded through transnational corporations. It tells the story of the pillage of the land, the poverty of the people, the fomenting of factionalism and combat enhanced through first and second world backing. It follows the trajectory of these events to a hypothetical cold-war Armageddon reminiscent of the feared outcome of the Cuban missile crisis. The five part assemblage consists of four parts history plus one part conjecture.

Not so fast. This is film of multiplicities. Hidden in each moment are instant relations to distant facts and interpretations. "RocketKit" itself mocks the Nazi engineers as boy scouts with their science projects. Its ironic twist is the "KongoKit" (German spelling), i.e. toying with a nation. KKK is barely hidden, drawing the equivalence between virulent racism and neocolonialism. The opening titles flickering out of the computer screen press the kit metaphor further. The film contains instructions and elements to piece together a history. That is what a documentary is, a kind of model kit, realistic detail to scale for the imagination at play. It uses received means to support received views. Baldwin effectively took pieces from many other kits (genre) in order to make this one. So the pieces fit together in this funny way. What details from the kit are missing? What is this a model of?

The voiceover scans history so quickly (Tyner: "...the film buckaroos over large chunks of history") that one struggles to track the story of subjugation and catastrophe. This did happen. But when part 5 begins, one is so out of mental breath from the urgency of the "Plan of Attack" voice, whose pauses between words edited out -- even pauses for breath itself -- that it takes a moment to realize that in fact the tale has veered off into conjecture. That moment is the full meaning of the film. When did history become tale telling? Well, it never was anything else, but the form gives it authority wherein we accept its objectivity -- even when *the images are blatantly lying to us*, as in this film.

P A R T II Situate

Man with a Movie Camera (1929) takes cinema to the speed of sight, to make connections more quickly and with more scope, both at the cut and within the frame, the two boundaries of the silent shot. Vertov conceives of an international language of imagery alone, not based on theater or literature. He vows to show life as it is in a way that shows how life should become. The audience sees itself in dailiness, not dramatized, and the film refers to its own process, not hiding it.

Concurrently in the mid 1920s and 30s, surrealist collage cinema of Bunuel & Dali, Man Ray, Dulac and Cocteau liberates the shot sequence from any rational discourse, however synthetic or revolutionary. This is a means to escape even the anti-theatric and anti-narrative reactions of Soviet Cinema. The cinema becomes a space for collective dream. Cornell, Richter, Deren, and Peterson continue this exploration after the war.

Shot in San Francisco, Christopher Maclaine's *The End* (1953) is a nuclear apocalyptic, picaresque Beat film, full of longing and dread, addressed in voice directly to the audience. In the last tale Maclaine offers the audience a role, or rather implicates the audience in the general malaise: "Here are some pictures. Here is the most beautiful music in the world. What is happening?"

In 1958 Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night*, demonstrates how montage can serve an interior vision. Not only can cinema match the speed of activity, it is the mind's eye unruled by the laws of physics, discovering the cinematic

poesis.

Bruce Conner releases films like *A Movie* and *Report* from the late 50s to mid 60s, which took the conventions of montage which create a narrative forward flow and turn it into an endless series of false moves and digressions, as though feints, trying to see past the surface created by seamless editing to unlock meanings hidden in the sea of images from which standard fair is assembled.

Guy Debord ups the ante of density in 1973 with *Society of the Spectacle*, poring over the surfaces of spectacular imagery with a totalizing voiceover critique, and the situationist technique of detournment, which "does not mean merely randomly juxtaposing incongruous elements, but (1) creating out of those elements a new coherent whole that (2) criticizes both the existing world and its own relation to that world." (Ken Knabb)

So Baldwin inherited these techniques of synthetic montage. Debord recharged montage with activism, but in a direct assault. RKKK's approach is viral. Messages are disguised as or delivered under an authority they seek to undermine. In film Abby Child was also working on the same path, as a documentarist and poet with activist intentions. Both film makers resisted collusion with the authority of documentary conventions, although Child's critical approach adopted musical means, while Baldwin retained the narrative model.

P A R T III "The subject is in a state of flux"

In the 1970s and 80s in a certain branch of avant garde writing coming out of the SF Bay Area and NYC questioned the construction of voice (and ego psychology) as a foundation of lyric. If you write of the experiences and facts of your life or the world using given models or concepts, the 'kits' you're brought up on, you will be participating in thought and action that maintains convention - your experience will be subjugated to ideologies enforced by language itself. From that point of view both lyric poetry and autobiography become problematic. These genre presuppose a prior self writing with the authority of experience. But the representation of experience is distorted by ideology. The ambition to escape a dialectic of representation between

ideology and individual experience risks social unintelligibility or solipsistic isolation. The only facts left in such positivist purge are the ones of the moment of reading, which themselves are ephemeral, non-objective and a-historical.

Writers' solutions to this dilemma presage the development of the "collage essay", as Baldwin practiced -- practically invented -- it as a solution to this problem of engaging history and facticity. Without renouncing convention, post-Language poets and New Narrative writers disavowed the priority of intrinsic self or social self, adopting plagiarist and pastiche modes that treat autobiography or lyric in a kind of double cross against the inherited forms, even casting reportage or confession as a sort of self-plagiarism, against the analytic approach of seeking facts beneath surfaces, rather seeking them through a play of surfaces, or better: facades.

RKKK is this hodge-podge of emulsions, styles, genre. Made of pieces of found footage, it is simultaneously a pastiche of social documentary and a collage of genres. It trades on the surface authority of commercial imagery. As the film opens, there is really no clue that you are not hearing a straightforward account of the moment of liberation of the Congo, while being given illustrative images of celebrants. As the film goes on the objectivity of the picture is undermined by constantly shifting genres, and the changing accents of the narrators.

The writer's use of convention against itself tries to create a parallax with convention to sound the distance to what is ineffable, i.e. not to image it, just measure its location relative to one. And just as the text is NOT representing the self, but rather a represents an activity of negation of the distortion of habit, the film is doing something parallel with respect to history.

P A R T IV The Objective is . . .

Sound film works with sync: sound and picture joined by occurring together, mimicking the integration of senses. Cinema transfers this "lip-sync" convention when voiceover talks about what it's showing. That is how illustration works, sound as caption refers to the image. The synchronous image confers authenticity by reference. The mechanism of cinema is like the Saussurean sign, signifier|signified joined together, but we know that binding (reference) is not fixed. The moment where the film begins to 'slip' is towards the end of part 2, the "fly gestation" sequence. Images of a fly's life cycle seem to depict the vector of disease spreading across Congo, whose name itself had slipped by then to become "Zaire." But as the continuing monologue explains the reason for poverty and disease (historical cause and effect) these images transform into a metaphor for a parasite (the dictator), concluding the sequence with the shot of a petri dish with text, "colony." The hand tilting the infested dish to the camera now represents the foreign powers controlling the puppet oppressing the diseased population. Eventually there is so much play between the picture and voice that it becomes questionable what illustration can be under these circumstances. Questions arise about trusting media, and through this fissure of reference, RKKK creates a phraseology, a new 'kit' of techniques with which to interrogate history and the history of documentary form itself. The film is a jujitsu media machine, fighting convention by a controlled redirection of the force of received imagery, scrutinizing the represented objective. Objectivity is short for an ideal of factual knowledge that we publicly negotiate through alignments of non-coerced behavior. The document attests to history. The documentary is a genre that claims or states history. The fundamental gesture in a documentary is illustration. "The objective" is history. One objective is to tell you something about conflicts in Africa that you might not know about.

PART V

Model for the Present

From **Democracy Now** May 22, 2003

<http://www.webactive.com/pacifica/demnow/dn20030522.html>

The United Nations has asked France to lead a peacekeeping force in the mineral-rich Ituri region of Congo, amid reports of growing atrocities in fighting between rival factions there. The UN has also asked Britain to join the force.

A few days ago, aid workers reported finding the bodies of more than 200 people killed on the streets of the provincial capital Bunia, including women and children. Some of them were decapitated and the hearts, livers and lungs were missing in others. Two U.N. aid workers were also killed this week.

Rival factions are engaged in a bloody civil war, and they are backed by the neighboring states of Uganda and Rwanda. While much of the world's attention has been focused on [sic] elsewhere, millions of people have died

in the war. Between 1998 and 2000, the International Rescue Committee estimates that close to 3 million people lost their lives to war, starvation and disease in the country.

Numerous countries have been involved in the civil war, all of them vying for a piece of the nation's natural resources. At one stage six African nations had troops in the Congo, plundering the country's resources of diamonds, gold and oil and lending support to rival factions.

The Ituri region is also rich in resources. Apart from the region's farmland and valuable cross-border trade, Ituri is the gateway to the Kilo Moto gold field, the world's largest. A Canadian company, Barrick Gold, claims it owns the exploration rights to the gold mine. Former President George Bush Sr. serves as senior advisor to Barrick Gold's board of directors. Interest is also rising in Ituri's oil reserves in the Lake Albert basin. The company Heritage Oil signed a licensing deal last year. It is part-owned by British entrepreneur Tony Buckingham.