

Some thoughts about PANORAMA EPHEMERA...

I have always been attracted to films (and other forms of art and media) that work by juxtaposing self-contained segments with one another to build a narrative that does not need the artificial glue of music, narration or continuity of characters to tie it together. We are used to this in comics, in photography (especially elliptical photography) and in music - think of how we perceive the relationship between different tracks on an album, and from them and their order build a kind of “story.” Semi-autonomous segments. And that is what I did with PANORAMA. I didn't want to hack away at the segments, so most of them are minimally edited. And I wanted to mobilize the “force of the archive” — the impression of a deep and wide corpus of cultural material waiting to be taken up in the present and given new meaning. So it is an assembly, yes, but not a sloppy one; I can't really claim the “art povera” distinction that Craig Baldwin sometimes claims. It was in fact quite intricate and took over half a year to edit.

I am very attracted to structural film, I will leave it at that. I guess I can also say that the greatest influence on me, and especially on this film but really on all my other films too, is Huillet/Straub's CHRONICLE OF ANNA MAGDALENA BACH.

Many people picked up on what PANORAMA was doing, and it received a great deal of attention. Some didn't see what was going on — a few people who see my primary work as archival considered it simply a demo reel, and a failed one at that. But lots of people “got it.” And it continues to have a life - if I could do the 2K reedit, I'd write that file to 35mm so the film would have a longer life. I have not touched it since it was finished in 2004 -- other than to up-rez it to HD (but it is not real HD). I think this is one of my best films and I would like to remake it with the exact same edits, but in 2K. The problem is that the original films are at Library of Congress and they are not yet all accessible for rescanning. So that will have to wait.

For many years I wanted to take on the scope of North American history from the European settlement and conquest into the 20th century. In its finished form the film does this to some extent, but it also addresses issues that are historical but also broader than any specific historical period — questions of human/animal relationships; generational divides and succession; centralization and decentralization; war and peace; the presence of the alchemical elements (earth, air, fire, water) in modern life; acceleration and speed; menace and jeopardy; etc.

I made this film in a funny way. First I assembled some segments using the same title (P.E.) for a screening at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts as part of the first Media Archaeology event, a gathering of archivists/screener/presenters that I proposed and was later organized by Skip Elsheimer and Andrea Grover. And after showing that assembly, which was nothing more than sequences strung together to show the wealth and eloquence of these films, I realized there was a film here, and sat in front of the computer for months making it happen. I first made a paper edit — a very fixed, doctrinaire structure, and then laid down the clips according to the plan. Then I fell into a state I can only describe as somnambulism, and edited away without quite realizing what I was doing. Towards the end I showed a cut to my spouse Megan, who made some very valuable suggestions that really helped the film. And then it screened. When I showed it in Washington, D.C. and my sisters first saw it, they exclaimed that it was autobiographical. And for the first time I realized that I had also made a kind of autobiography.

While some people are more open to spare and simple filmmaking, I think most films (even some experimental documentaries) have far too much frosting on the cake, are filled with distractions, and, most important, continue NOT to try and encourage people simply to look and listen at the images to see what they say. You may not agree, but I think most makers harbor deep (and unspoken) feelings that people are not really open just to looking and listening, and therefore try all sorts of tricks to “make the medicine go down.” But perhaps I am being tendentious. I believe this film is strong, and I think it still has a great deal to offer.

Rick Prelinger via email, November 14 2018