

In Between Lost And Found: The Films of Matthew Buckingham

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The ways in which found footage film approaches the archive is discussed by Catherine Russell as a film practice in which both "retrieval and recycling" are foregrounded.([n1](#)) Here, there is not only an engagement with historical artifacts as found footage, but also a recurrent questioning of the archive itself as representation. The assumed authority of the archive and historical representation is targeted by the destabilization that occurs through found footage film practice.

In the films of Matthew Buckingham, investigating archives and conceptions of the archive is a predominant discourse. While *Situation Leading to a Story* (1999, 20 mins.) is the only film using actual found footage, both *Amos Fortune Road* (1996, 21 mins.) and *The Truth About Abraham Lincoln* (1992, 19 mins.) engage historical material while employing a combination of specific texts (Amos) including photographs, illustrations and different historical accounts with new footage (*The Truth*). All three films are immersed in a negotiation of history and memory, recycling the past as a means of engaging with representations in the present.

Buckingham's emphasis on history and memory is central to his engagement with debates on documentary as representative of objectivity, authenticity, truth, fiction and fact in relation to the moving image. This in many ways mimics ethnography, which also aims at the same goals. Russell remarks, "found footage is a technique that produces 'the ethnographic' as a discourse of representation"([n2](#)) Ethnography, as Russell has defined it, is deployed by Buckingham in different ways in the three films but always as a means of exposing the vulnerability of ethnographic discourses reliant on objectivity and authenticity. In *Situation* the voice-over constantly digresses, from what appears directly relevant to the images on screen to more personal issues related to finding and researching the films. Similarly in *Amos*, the central character's search for information on Amos Fortune, an African slave, is ultimately based on two fictional biographies. In *The Truth*, competing discourses become a loud cacophony in debunking myths about Abraham Lincoln. Each film, in different ways, denies the possibility of transparency in representation.

In *Situation*, four films are projected one after the other with only minimal intervention by the filmmaker.([n3](#)) These films are 1920's home movies depicting a wealthy family strolling on a lawn, a bullfight, a cable tramway construction in Peru and the building of a four-car garage. The four found films used in *Situation* are not part of any archive, but rather, they are fragments, detritus found on the street. In his attempt to make a connection between the films, looking for the same people in each film for example, Buckingham eventually concedes "that the four films had been thrown out--they were connected to each other in this way--someone did not want them."([n4](#)) In the final throes of deterioration, these discarded films, "delicate and brittle" and giving off a "pungent odour" (possibly vinegar syndrome), are disassociated from their original context as home movies. In this process of detachment these four found films have neither fixed meaning in and of themselves, nor in their relationship to each other; their connection is immersed in contingency, brought together through an emptying of value. Any connection these films might once have had must remain elusive and accidental. Therefore, *Situation* is related to chance. After finding old films in the street Buckingham presents them in such a way as to allow the viewer to have his or her own chance encounters.([n5](#))

In *Situation*, any original story remains unattainable. Buckingham creates the space for the viewer where perceived chance encounters between his text and these unwanted films create a gap for meaningful production to occur; it is in this gap that he suspends the idea of finding and retrieving while the viewer makes connections where none ostensibly exist. While each film is composed of multiple shots, jumping from different locations, people, etc., the films are not re-edited but are shown one film after another, the first and last being no more or less important than the second or third. While this minimal procedure invests *Situation* with a surface calm, the gap created between the projected images and the dialogue situates meaning as being constantly in transition rather than fixed.

In her discussion of documentary practices, Trinh T. Minh-Ha writes:

[I]f life's paradoxes and complexities are not to be suppressed, the question of degrees and nuances is incessantly crucial. Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and, when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but rather empties it, or decentralizes it.([n6](#))

In *The Truth*, there are at least six narrators presenting information--fact and fiction--intermingled in a humorous mix.([n7](#)) These multiple narrators provide statements and events connected to Lincoln,

regarding his role as historical figure and the more quotidian aspects of his life, and are followed by an inter-title of "T" (true) or "F" (false) as the case may be. For example, we find out that Sarah Bernhardt prevented Mrs. Lincoln from falling down a ship's stairs and that, remarkably, the brother of Lincoln's assassin saved Lincoln's son from being run over by a passenger train. Using a combination of architectural models, photographs, drawings and a female actor in long coat, tall hat and beard of Lincoln, the film is both reminiscent of and an effective critique of educational films.

In *The Truth*, the multiple narrators act as a reference point to the refusal of "any single source of authority," articulating the unreliability of any archival project by emphasizing how historical narratives are constructed in the guise of authoritative educating texts. By posing questions concerning the process of constructing narratives--combining apparently irrelevant details in the context of a historical narrative--Buckingham queries the way in which certain discourses are foregrounded in relation to Lincoln. For example, the statement "Abraham Lincoln is known as the great emancipator because ending slavery was his primary concern as President," followed by the inter-title "F," is followed by "Abraham Lincoln said 'If I could save the union without freeing any Slave I would do it,'" along with the inter-title "T." Buckingham weaves numerous statements concerning Lincoln and the abolishment of slavery, into a historical narrative that deals with Lincoln as a historical figure and the mythology that surrounds him, arguing for a negotiation of history in all its complexity. What is constantly reiterated in Buckingham's work is the difficulty of separating the presentation and process of events and historical facts.

In contrast, in *Situation*, the dialogue accompanying the projected films explains how Buckingham found the films, along with his research in trying to resolve where the films originated from. Though the voice-over could, perhaps, be momentarily associated with the narrative voice of authority of standard documentary film practice (what Minh-Ha refers to as the "almighty voice giver") (n8), the narrator displaces the authoritative voice by constantly acknowledging his lack of knowledge in relation to these found films. While we may understand Buckingham's desire to distance himself from the "almighty voice giver" of colonial discourse, this strategy could be construed as a compromise, avoiding any clearly defined strategy of political engagement with these found films. However, Buckingham's political commitment is most evident in the politics of representation and the necessity of the viewer's own intellectual negotiation as a central concern to any political practice. Buckingham's unwillingness to direct meaning becomes dependent on using and maintaining the gaps between voice and image, at once allowing the viewer the space to insert his or her own ideas while indirectly providing a structure conducive to the development and emergence of not only different historical narratives but also an engagement with their link to the present.

Critic Lytle Shaw, in discussing *Situation*, refers to researching the material as an "off-screen activity." (n9) This "off-screen activity" and the importance of the unseen is also a strong dynamic in *Amos*. In this film, a young woman, Sharon, works with a group of children in New Hampshire. Over the summer the children perform a play in different towns. Each day, as she drives the same roads, Sharon notices a historical marker at a busy intersection. Although she can only ever manage to read the first two words--"Amos Fortune"--she becomes curious and later finds out from one of her students that Amos Fortune was an African slave who bought his freedom in 1769. Most of the image track concentrates on what Sharon can see from her car as she drives through New Hampshire. The sounds we hear consist of the car engine, the tapes being played in the car, or the sound of the radio. All information about Sharon, the children's play and Fortune are given as texts, either in the form of intertitles or superimposed on the image.

The quotidian aspects of Sharon's life become merged with what we are told about her, like the argument she has with her girlfriend or what she finds out about Fortune. Yet all the action that moves the narrative along happens off screen. In one scene, the viewer watches Sharon driving while the text tells of her asking a diner waitress about Fortune. In weaving the everyday practices of Sharon--a fictional character--as historical investigator, into an account of Fortune the narrative as a representational strategy is firmly tied to the context of that narrative's production and construction.

Buckingham's negotiation of lost histories, memory, the archive and the ways in which narrative and fiction are intertwined are arguably dependent on what is excluded from view. As *Amos* advances we are given more information about Fortune; we are told that he had a leather tanning business, he helped found the local public library and upon his death in 1801, at the age of 92, he bequeathed \$233.85 to the public school system. Though at one point Sharon is informed by a woman at the gas station that Fortune's house has been torn down, she notices a sign on one of her journeys that reads "Amos Fortune's Homestead." We are told, but not shown, that Sharon saw a Pontiac in the driveway. Later, as she walks through a graveyard and finds Fortune's grave, we see a still image of the tomb of

Willa Cather, who is also buried in that graveyard, whose 1925 novel *The Professor's House* Sharon had been reading.

The only factual information that remains about Fortune are 17 receipts belonging to him, one of which was for himself. All of these receipts are hidden from view "in a closet behind a bulletin board in the public library." Likewise, in *Situation*, Buckingham presents archival imagery only to disrupt its immersion as a form of visual evidence of a past that we supposedly have privileged access to. In *Amos*, the archival imagery is excluded from view and the 17 business receipts remain hidden. The question posed by hiding Fortune's receipt/s is one that confronts assumptions concerning visual evidence: what possible knowledge resides in the visual presentation of these documents beyond a framework for translating/interpreting them? In refusing the spectator's "look" at the factual record of Fortune's existence, the film renders the framework of the narrative unstable. This opens up questions concerning historical narratives, especially toward the end of the film when one inter-title explains how Sharon found two biographies on Fortune, both of which were works of fiction.

Buckingham's strategies of destabilization place his film work within an allegorical practice. The films point toward negotiating a certain way of occupying history. Not only do the images shown in the found films function allegorically but, also, the actual materiality of the films contains traces of historical occupancy, what Russell refers to as an "aesthetic of ruins." (n10) In her study of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, Susan Buck-Morss explains that "in allegory, history appears as nature in decay or ruins and the temporal mode is one of retrospective contemplation." (n11) Considering this in relation to *Situation*, the negotiation of the past, memory and history occurs not only through what is represented but also through the actual decaying film stock. In 1916 Eastman Kodak began putting date codes on its film stock, allowing Buckingham to situate the age of three of the films by looking at the symbols on the black emulsion by the sprocket holes. It is the materiality of the film stock that situates an indexical link with the past.

A hidden indexical link with the present occurs when Buckingham re-films the material in order to prevent further decay. The material then acquires a new date and code. The "lost" indexical relationship between what is represented on film with a particular moment in time and a presence in front of the camera is conventionally attributed to the transition to digitalization. (n12) In this argument, the replacement of standard film and photography with digital processes is seen to challenge the perceived authenticity of the photographic/film image and re-open questions of the images' veridical nature. However, throughout the history of photography/film, techniques such as double exposure, superimposition, collage, ghosting and subliminal effects have all been processes of destabilization in relation to fixing the real. It is this indexical link, in all its instability, that has been exploited to excess by documentary practices relying on a rhetoric of undisputed access to the real. This position is usually dependent on a naive prioritization of the visual in which truth is reduced to what is visible. As Minh-Ha writes, "truth lies in between all regimes of truth," and while Buckingham does not engage with an irrelevant retreat from the "fact" of the document, neither does he use the found films to present a questionable authenticity of the image. (n13) As Russell explains "the found image doubles the historical real as both truth and fiction, at once document of history and unreliable evidence of history." (n14) In *Situation* the dialogue travels from the known to the uncertain and then to a reinsertion of these "home movies" through a social history of home movies in the United States and, later, to the impact of U.S. mining interests in Peru.

The "situation leading to a story" in the title becomes Buckingham's account of U.S. capitalist interests in Peru. Tracking the history of the Cerro de Pasco Copper Corporation (CPC), from 1901 to its nationalization by the Peruvian government in 1974, Buckingham tells of the exploitation of the miners, the residents in the region of the mine, as well as the environmental pollution produced by U.S. industrialists. Due to the serial presentation of the films, this information is given while the viewer watches the foundations of the four-car garage being dug. While hearing the narrator's historical description of U.S. capitalism in South America, the growing prosperity and upward mobility signified by the garage is linked to events in the Andes mountains, where we are told, "With the encouragement of CPC, The Peruvian government passed a law in 1926 exempting all copper and zinc production, i.e., CPC, from paying taxes for the next ten years."

Buckingham's emphasis on discursivity initiates a questioning of the formal narrative codes of documentary film, while also challenging narratives of history. Rather than abandoning a historical dimension or maintaining historical amnesia, the film's formal elements develop and allow for an ethnographic exploration of the found visual material through many discourses. This formal instability unravels the material while resituating it in larger, more complex narrative structures. This contemporary emphasis on discursivity however allows for critiques such as Grant Kester's where he

refers to "discursive determinism [as the] reductive belief that 'discourse' or dialogue in and of itself has the power to radically transform social relations."(n15) However, Buckingham's discursive strategies, rather than being aligned with a bogus relativism, constantly target the problems of representation as a practice, for example the ways in which certain representational processes actively attempt a closing down of intellectual enquiry. The discursive becomes a way of mobilizing historical "fragments," such as the history of CPC's involvement in Peru, to strategically relate to contemporary global economic power relations.

In linking *Garage*--the last film in *Situation*--to CPC's mining interests in Peru, Buckingham highlights an excess in mobility (the four-car garage) and the privilege of attaining and maintaining distance. The privilege of anonymity is linked to socio-economic power relations. In presenting these films, he offers a mediation of the impact of home movie-making in the early years of its inception. Buckingham, in referring to a book published by Kodak entitled *How to Make Good Movies* (1938) remarks, "the book says that exposing motion picture film will become as automatic to the enthusiast as driving a car."(n16) He references this link between movie-making and car ownership, referring to Kodak's Model A camera, introduced in 1922, and how it was comparable in price to Ford's Model A car. The moving image is linked to the mobility of the car: both are used to conquer distance. We see this explicitly in the tourist film called *Guadalajara*, where the distance traveled to attain the moving images, specifically the bullfight, is paradoxically announced and denied through the recorded film event; *Guadalajara* and the recorded bullfight is made repeatedly available, overcoming spatial distance and time passed.

Buckingham's "retrieval and recycling" of historical narratives is dependent on a reflexive account of his own narrative production and in doing this he concerns himself with histories of his own practice--experimental film. Tom Gunning's work on early cinema helps elaborate on some of the discourses in the work. Here Gunning links what he calls the "cinema of attractions" to certain practices of the avant-garde. A cinema of attractions refers to the way in which early cinema placed emphasis on showing or exhibiting rather than the prioritizing of a fictional world by narrative cinema.

Presenting a visual display of driving as an attraction, (and pre-empting the link between the camera and driving made in *Situation*) the car and driving are foregrounded from the very start of *Amos*. Similar to early cinema the film addresses the spectator in a different way to that of narrative cinema. In his discussion of engaging the spectator, Gunning writes, "Attractions' fundamental hold on spectators depends on arousing and satisfying visual curiosity through a direct and acknowledged act of display, rather than following a narrative enigma within a diegetic site into which the spectator peers invisibly."(n17) The instantaneous display of driving, though its significance is not immediately apparent, helps foreground the film itself as a mediation of narrative similar to a journey--an unfolding through time.

This display also allows Buckingham to link the way in which the past is manufactured for consumption by the nostalgia industry and to historicize that process of production when we discover toward the end of the film that "the historical marker" made for *Fortune* "was put up in the 1920s when new Hampshire began promoting automobile tourism." This historical marker is the only visual reference to *Fortune* in the film, however, it always remains in the background, visually inaccessible due to the busy traffic. Buckingham manages to articulate within the film's construction that the narratives of history constructed by tourism are not only inaccessible but actively produce a historical amnesia, almost maintained by the historical markers they employ.

In his writing on early cinema Gunning also refers to the ways in which actors acknowledged the camera, creating a different relationship with the spectator. While the sensational spectacle often associated with early film is hardly a characteristic of *Situation*, there are important intersections. While acknowledgment of the camera is a dimension of the "home movies" re-presented in *Situation*, it is the way in which Buckingham presents these films that most noticeably highlights what Gunning refers to as "a cinema that displays its visibility."(n18) The space of presentation is foregrounded beyond the amateur approach apparent in home movies' "look at the camera" as it is Buckingham's voice-over as narrator/lecturer that emphasizes the process of mediation involved in representation. Rather than using the films as "raw material" to be re-edited in the construction of his own narrative, the serial presentation of one film after another, combined with the dialogue being dislocated as it is from the image track, disperses the expectation of a linear narrativity.

Peter Gidal's account of structuralist/materialist film and its anti-illusionist strategies suggests that "when one states that each film is a record of its own making, this refers to shooting, editing, printing stages, or separations of these," placing great emphasis on the process of the specifically cinematic.(n19) However, this emphasis becomes an ontological blind spot because of the way in

which the "specifically cinematic is taken to be primarily the picture track."(n20) Situation can only exist as a "film" of Matthew Buckingham by positioning itself in the destabilized space between audio and visual.

Buckingham's persistence in developing and maintaining a gap between sound and image is arguably related to the importance placed on the viewer's intellectual activity. In Roland Barthes's essay, "The Third Meaning" the author refers to the third or obtuse meaning as the one that exceeds his interpretation, at once "persistent and elusive."(n21) For Barthes it is what allows the "filmic" to emerge. While he suggests that the filmic resides in the still, he also remarks that within the "classical paradigm of the five senses, the third sense is hearing (first in importance in the middle ages)."(n22) Later in the essay Barthes discusses Sergei Eisenstein's comments on the possibilities of audio-visual montage, suggesting that "the basic centre of gravity is no longer the element 'between shots'--the shock--but the element 'inside the shot'--the accentuation within the fragment."(n23) Within Situation the basic center of gravity not only foregrounds film as fragmentary but accentuates, through the dialogue's relationship to the image track, a process of fragmentation. In negotiating the process of its own production, Situation displaces the centrality of the image track. Rather than a formal record of the home movies' own making, Situation oscillates between a historical record of these early home movies' "own making" and an account of the making of Buckingham's film. All of these accounts are arbitrary, possibly fictional and fragmentary.

An emphasis on the fragmentary also occurs in Amos where at different points within the film we view stills rather than moving images. These stills emphasize the way in which the film negotiates different forms of cinema, from a narrative unfolding to the instantaneous presentation mentioned above. The stills function as a space between these two positions "by instituting a reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical."(n24) Buckingham's mediation negotiates different forms of spectatorship; the "invisible" voyeuristic spectator theorized in 1970's film theory that is employed to account for how spectatorship operates in classic narrative cinema is toyed with in his refusal to give us any visual realization of the "enigma." Though the main narrative concerns Fortune, Buckingham refuses to show the spectator any artifacts connected to him.

Throughout these three films the centrality of history and memory and the ways in which they are framed and articulated by the archive is apparent. There is a constant reworking of the document as material evidence while maintaining an importance on archival and research practices. It is not that the original context becomes irrelevant but rather that our access to it is always mediated in and through representation.

Buckingham uses contingency, the unfixing of meaning and the ephemeral as elements in his own labor process. Here an aesthetic responsibility toward the creation of and maintenance of an intellectual space for the viewer becomes central, allowing the time to ponder, reflect and think not only about the material presented but the ways in which we narrate it and construct it into cohesive units. By examining the ways in which representational processes close down intellectual enquiry, Buckingham uses the ephemeral and accidental to reestablish a commitment to a historical project that is aware that a political or critical space cannot exist without one.(n25)

NOTES

(n1.) Catherine Russell, "Archival Apocalypse: Found Footage as Ethnography" in *Experimental Ethnography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 238-274.

(n2.) *Ibid.*

(n3.) *Re-filming them to arrest further disintegration, he also slowed the films down to 24 frames a second rather than their original speed of 16 frames (silent speed).*

(n4.) Matthew Buckingham, *Situation Leading to a Story* (dialogue from film) 1999.

(n5.) *Although concentrating here on the films as screened events, all three films have also been presented as installations that create different temporal and spatial dynamics depending on the location, etc.*

(n6.) Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning" in *When The Moon Waxes Red, Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 41.

(n7.) See also Gregory Williams, "Matthew Buckingham" in *Frieze* no. 46 (May 1999), pp. 98-99.

(n8.) Minh-Ha, p. 36.

(n9.) Lytle Shaw, "How to Make Good Experimental Ethnographic Films: Matthew Buckingham," *Greater New York Exhibition, P.S. 1 Museum, New York, Spring 2000, Writers Web Project* (www.ps1.org/cut/java/writers.html).

(n10.) Russell, p. 238.

[\(n11.\)](#) Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press, 1997), p. 168.

[\(n12.\)](#) Arguably one of the more pressing questions in relation to digitalization is not presence/absence in front of the camera but rather how the means of production, i.e., digital editing software programmes, are pre-packaged and pre-determined. Here experimentation is based on knowledge of particular packages that offer pre-configured effects controlled by large IT corporations. For a discussion on this see Paul Willemen, "Of Mice and Men" in 292 no. 1, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh College of Art, 2000), pp. 5-20.

[\(n13.\)](#) Mirth-Ha, p. 30.

[\(n14.\)](#) Russell, p. 252.

[\(n15.\)](#) See Grant Kester, "Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art" in *Variant* (supplement) No. 9 (Winter 2000).

[\(n16.\)](#) From Matthew Buckingham, *Situation Leading to a Story*. Full title, *How to make good movies; a non-technical handbook for those considering the ownership of an amateur movie camera and for those already actively engaged in movie making who want to improve the interest and quality of their personal film records* (Rochester, NY: Eastman Kodak Company, 1938).

[\(n17.\)](#) Tom Gunning, "Now You See It, Now You Don't: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions" in Richard Abel, ed., *Silent Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), p. 75.

[\(n18.\)](#) Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde" in Thomas Elsaesser, ed., *Early Cinema, Space Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), p. 57.

[\(n19.\)](#) Peter Gidal "Theory and Definition of Structuralist/Materialist Film" in Michael O'Pray, ed., *British Avant-garde Film: An Anthology of Writings* (Luton: University of Luton Press, 1996), pp. 145-170.

[\(n20.\)](#) See Peter Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes" in O'Pray, p. 137.

[\(n21.\)](#) Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning, Research notes on some Eisenstein stills" in Stephen Heath, trans., *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 52-68.

[\(n22.\)](#) *Ibid.*, p. 53, n.1.

[\(n23.\)](#) *Ibid.*, p. 67.

[\(n24.\)](#) *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[\(n25.\)](#) Thanks to Matthew Buckingham for background information on his films and to Brian Hand for his critical comments regarding this essay.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Stills from *Situation Leading to a Story* (1999) by Matthew Buckingham.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Still from *The Truth About Abraham Lincoln* (1992) by Matthew Buckingham.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Installation view of *Situation Leading to a Story* (1999) by Matthew Buckingham.

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By Orla Ryan yski

ORLA RYAN is an artist and writer who has recently co-edited *The Glass Eye*, a book on artists and television.