A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FOUND FOOTAGE PHENOMENON IN NORTH AMERICA 1994-2019

by

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ABSTRACT

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Beginning as an underground scene across Canada and the USA, a collection of comedians who sourced ephemera from VHS tapes, and transformed it for comedic effect, would go on to create the found footage phenomenon. This thesis chronicles a 25-year history of how Derrick Beckles, the Found Footage Festival, and Everything Is Terrible! created a subculture that would influence the next generation of American alternative comedy. These actors of the phenomenon would clash with the traditional TV ecosystem that birthed them, at a time when that industry was threatened by the rise of the internet. But, crucially, the phenomenon demonstrates how nostalgia can be utilized as both a livelihood for those who showcase ephemera, and as a critical weapon of satire for those artists looking to criticize elements of American politics and society. The utilization of nostalgia by these actors offers an invaluable insight into how they operate as artists.

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The subjects of this paper - for their initial inspiration and, in some cases, continued access for interviews both casual and formal - cannot go overlooked. I owe a great debt to Joe Pickett, Nick Prueher, Dimitri Simakis, Nic Maier, Lehr Beidelschies, Derrick Beckles, and Davy Rothbart, with whom I had the pleasure of spending many hours in discussion over zoom, facetime, phone calls, text messages, and in-person at bars across Milwaukee, Austin, Brooklyn, and Birmingham, AL.

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PREFACE

To provide full and transparent disclosure - outside of the interviews I was able to conduct with Joe Pickett and Dimitri Simakis, I have a close working relationship with Pickett and Nick Prueher, as they produced my feature-length found footage documentary *A Life on the Farm*. I have also been able to spend time with Dimitri Simakis, Nic Maier, Lehr Beidelschies and Derrick Beckles because they were among the interviews for that film, alongside Pickett and Prueher. It was forging these relationships, and learning about everyone's creative developments, that inspired me to write this thesis. I have tried to ensure neutrality throughout my documenting of their histories, and have done my best to fact-check any anecdotes imparted to me either through social interaction, or in the more formal, recorded interviews. I believe this thesis to be objective in its reporting of historical events, many of which can only be confirmed by the subjects themselves, as no written record exists. I briefly mention my documentary in the thesis only to provide a relevant and important example relating to the careers of Pickett and Prueher.

Introduction

Found Footage, beyond its literal definition as “footage that is found”, constitutes a medium of both exhibition and storytelling, in a number of different forms. When most people hear the term, they immediately associate it with the subgenre of horror cinema, and films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield*, seeing it primarily as a storytelling device in a fictional medium. However, second only to this widely accepted definition is the phenomenon of sourcing, transforming, and exhibiting actual found footage. It not only puts the focus on the footage itself, and the context of its origins, but implicates the actor who discovered the found footage and chose to exhibit it, as they become part of the footage’s journey out of necessity. Whether they choose to purely showcase the footage, or transform and turn it into part of their artistic expressions, these showcasers have actively determined themselves as a potential destination for the found footage’s journey from creation to rediscovery. Real found footage can take many forms, be it commercial ephemera, or something more ethnographical like a home movie that was never intended for a wide audience. Whatever the form, it has attracted some distinct actors who have brought others’ work to a new, and potentially wider, audience that was never meant to see it.

To refer to the North American “Found Footage” phenomenon between the mid-1990s to mid-2010s as a “movement” is to imply there was a proactive community of multiple artists producing their own interpretations of a set style, similar to the French New Wave or Dogme 95 cinematic movements; or a school of thought one might see amongst historians, artists, or philosophers. Instead, it was a non-collaborative, non-competitive handful of comedians using similar source

material, produced by others, to further their careers. Specifically, five comedians - Derrick Beckles; Joe Pickett; Nick Prueher; Nic Maier; Dimitri Simakis; and, occasionally, five intermittent members of Maier's and Simakis' artistic collective - were responsible for shaping the North American found footage phenomenon into what it is today. We will focus on these actors in particular because they are not only the most prominent of the phenomenon, but because they have a shared history, with frequent interconnectivity in terms of where they performed, who they knew socially, and what influenced them. Despite not belonging to a movement, or being bound by any kind of shared artistic manifesto, they have occasionally collaborated, and run in similar social circles. There is some shared DNA between them all that cannot be denied. As they continue down separate paths, there is enough connective tissue that to chart these actors would be impossible if we were to omit their connections to each other.

They also created three distinct types of found footage transformation and exhibition - Beckles pioneered the absurdist and humorous compilation film; FFF offered live and online audiences more conventional presentation of sourced material, accompanied by their insights; and EIT! combined elaborate performance art with intentionally satirical compilations of ephemera. Any other contemporaries working in the sphere of showcasing found footage could be seen as imitating one of these three styles, so it's best to focus on those who originated the three key styles.

An intense 20-year period of development by the actors within this phenomenon culminated with the experimental online project *Memory Hole* - named after a mechanism in George Orwell's *1984* - that shifted the intent of ephemera exhibition

from producing anarchic and comedic work, to something more bleak and thoroughly impersonal. The phenomenon has left a slew of influenced artists in its wake, who have brought forward diluted elements into more mainstream work, such as Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim. The found footage phenomenon looks increasingly likely to be reaching its creative endpoint, but is likely to live on as a self-sustaining subculture, its community reveling in the developments of the past 25 years. But it is hardly a conclusion to the phenomenon - its lasting impact on American pop culture in the age of streaming cannot be understated.

What follows is a history of that 25-year period, along with an epilogue detailing the gradual decline of the phenomenon as it reaches a nadir following the milestone of EIT!'s *Memory Hole* project. One of the three main actors had long departed the scene by then; the creators of *Memory Hole* began a slow and steady transition away from the scene; and only one entity remained. They attempted to usher in their successors against an online landscape moving away from their unique form of sourcing, and showcasing, found footage. Breaking down the cultural contexts against which each of our actors emerged, as well as the environments in which they flourished, we will chart how each would handle a restrictive nostalgia that brought about their prominence and would bring about the entire phenomenon's demise.

Charting the actors' evolutions as they experiment within the found footage phenomenon, we will see a shift away from focus on the footage as a tool for absurdist art, focused on the ego and artistic expression of the artist. The natural shift has been towards the context of the footage, as FFF have gained prominence and the most artistically-inclined actors have receded from the scene. Crucially,

though, all actors are informed by the same technology, much of the same content they would repurpose in their own unique ways, and all driven by a type of nostalgia specific to their generation. What differentiates them most significantly is their relationship to the internet. Beckles, who laid the foundation, stepped away at a time when the internet was in the ascent as the dominant cultural platform in North America, whereas the others have relied heavily on it. FFF would veer widely from Beckles' approach, whilst EIT! would develop compilation filmmaking as an artform into something far more pointed than Beckles' more scattershot approach. As FFF sought to make the found footage phenomenon more about the footage, and those who created it, they also solidified its place within niche North American culture by aggressively fostering a community known as The Melindas**.**

After chronicling the development of Beckles and FFF, we will examine how EIT! emerged as Beckles' natural successor before his departure from the scene, and the ensuing tensions between the remaining actors. Reaching the peak of the found footage phenomenon with 2014's *Memory Hole* project, we will then assess EIT!'s impact on the phenomenon; their focus on "culture jamming"; their pointed satire through use of nostalgia; and then the post-*Memory Hole* crisis that the found footage phenomenon now faces. By 2019, the post-*Memory Hole* state of the found footage phenomenon looked very different to what Beckles had started in 1994, with efforts to foster a new generation of found footage actors proving difficult. Instead, new satirists that were informed by internet content, rather than the same ephemera of the 1980s, began to emerge - but the influence of the found footage phenomenon, and the different styles pioneered by its main actors, was obvious.

CHAPTER ONE

1492-1986: Pre-Beckles Precedent for Found Footage

There is a precedent to found footage in all its forms, from Beckles' early experiments, to FFF's presentations of their discoveries and investigations into its creators, to EIT's utilization for their own propagandistic purposes. In fact, there is a literary tradition - epistolary fiction - stretching back to 1492, with the publication of Diego de San Pedro's *Carcel de Amor*, right up to 2000's Mark Z. Danielewski novel *House of Leaves*, with everything from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and numerous works of H. P. Lovecraft in-between. It is, essentially, found footage in written form - someone finds a record of something, and becomes part of the record's history as they present it to others. However, it largely cannot be considered "found literature" in any way that relates to the current found footage phenomenon, because the majority of this fiction was written before 1994.

A precedent closer to the efforts of the found footage scene actors is what was produced in the underground art scenes of New York, Los Angeles and Toronto. Notable figures such as Shirley Clarke, Joseph Cornell and Bruce Conner had been experimenting with found footage since 1936. This work offers a clear divide between experimental collage films, more driven by subversive attempts as sociocultural and political commentary, and the compilation films pioneered by Beckles' few peers - Animal Charm, Amok Books, and Todd Graham - and developed by Beckles himself. Of the prominent actors in the found footage phenomenon, only EIT! had any meaningful interaction with this archaic form of

found footage experimentation, and they've never admitted to it directly influencing their work.[1]

There is little to no crossover between the actors of the modern found footage scene, and the more abstract output of the collage artists like Conner, Craig Baldwin, or Arthur Lipsett. Dimitri Simakis considers some of them as influences, but he is one part of a larger collective, so it cannot be said that they shaped the combined works of EIT!, just that they are an undeniable part of its DNA. The comparisons can be made for the modern actors' inclusion of found footage, but not for its use in their work. How Beckles, FFF and EIT! utilize found footage is very different to the work of avant-garde artists, even when it ventures into the realm of absurdism. All these modern actors, first and foremost, are looking to make their audiences laugh. Beckles, however, did feature cult filmmaker Kenneth Anger in his Adult Swim show *Hot Package*, demonstrating a clear awareness of the kind of avant-garde filmmaking movement of whose canon he could not be considered a part of.[2]

Beckles was the founding father of the current found footage scene, but the rough concept of found footage had existed for centuries. Specifically, the method of using the work of others and incorporating oneself into the resulting art. What Beckles introduced was a sense of anarchy and humor, not to be intentionally subversive, but primarily to entertain. EIT! would eventually emerge as a hybrid of sorts, though closer to the sensibilities of Beckles than FFF. For 10 years, it would be Beckles' style that reigned supreme in the non-narrative found footage phenomenon, until

[1] Dimitri Simakis, Zoom call to author, October 11, 2022.
[2] Derrick Beckles, Twitter post, April 19, 2015, 7:15 p.m., http://twitter.com/realhotpackage/status/589954299288899584.

FFF emerged and found success in exhibiting found footage in a very different way to Beckles.

The Pre-Beckles period of history most important to our three actors was between 1973 and 1983. In that time, VHS and Camcorder technologies were made available to the consumer mass market. Earlier innovations, such as Kodak's introduction of 16mm film stock in 1923, and the emergence of the Super-8 system in 1965, certainly helped to produce footage for enthusiasts to discover, consume and archive before 1994. But VHS cassettes and Camcorders were prominent tools being used by and around our three actors when they were most impressionable and most ambitious in terms of developing their careers and body of work. It was a far more durable and affordable format for mass markets, as well as having the capacity to "tape over" recording, giving it far more utility, all of which goes some way to explaining why the modern found footage phenomenon is not just built upon VHS, but reliant on it. The aesthetic drives much of their production design and branding, and they would have been able to record much of their childhood influences and store it for years before they even considered forging careers based around found footage. Not only that, but there were precedents in this time that proved there was an audience for amateur content - *America's Funniest Home Videos* was first broadcast on November 26, 1989, on ABC. As Camcorder and VHS technologies allowed more people to produce content, a program like *AFV* was a natural home for this footage in a pre-digital age. There was a need for somewhere that this new content could be exhibited, and there a program like *AFV* became a necessity - at least, as a more accessible showcase of home movies, compared to the more academic Prelinger Archives that had been building its collection since 1982.

Before laying out the more specific circumstances surrounding the birth of the modern found footage scene, courtesy of Beckles, we need to understand the bigger picture to which it would belong. Beckles sourced his materials from broadcast television, and his earlier works would be produced and distributed physically, with analog technology like VCRs and VHS cassettes, as well as DVDs. But the scene he was creating happened alongside a technological revolution. Even the explosion of smaller channels on digital cable was less rapid and unpredictable than the rise of the internet as more people gained access to it, and everyone - corporations and individuals alike - were struggling to keep pace and find their place in the 1990s.[3] This shift had been increasingly signposted by new media and companies like IBM trying to prepare people for the inevitable from the mid-to-late 1980s[4], and by the mid-1990s, the digital revolution was in full swing. While Beckles was using earlier forms of affordable, democratized analog technology that anyone could get their hands on, his work, and those of his successors, would ultimately become products of the internet. They, more so than Beckles, would utilize it effectively to foster more unified communities, and offer hubs for a niche subculture.

Without realizing it, Beckles was part of a new phase in participatory media culture, one striving for techno-utopianism. This concept, essentially, strives for a perfect society through technological advancement.[5] Unwittingly, some of our actors' creative decisions would skirt around the interpretations of this definition. While none of the found footage actors invested in what this concept entails, they would all

[3] Thomas Streeter, *The Net Effect : Romanticism, Capitalism, and the Internet*, (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 134.
[4] Stephanie Ricker Schulte, *Cached : Decoding the Internet in Global Popular Culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 76.
[5] Howard P. Segal, "The Technological Utopians" in *Imagining Tomorrow: History, Technology and The American Future*, ed. Joseph J. Corn, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 119.

personify the optimistic possibilities presented by the early days of the internet. FFF would foster a community that connects through technology, sharing content and information with each other. Meanwhile, EIT!'s Jerry Maguire Pyramid in the desert loosely connects them to the Burning Man culture that would attract billionaire "tech bros" from Silicon Valley[6] that are paradoxically aligned with the ideals of techno-utopianism.[7] As loose a connection as the latter example may be, both examples demonstrate how the actions of the major actors in the scene were at least operating adjacently to a significant moment in how culture was shifting in line with technological advancement. However, that is where the similarities end- for example, politically, EIT! couldn't be further from the "tech bros" and their misunderstanding of accelerationism outlined in Alexander Galloway's *Brometheanism*[8], and neither Beckles or FFF seem particularly engaged in the future in front of them, when they've made careers out of deconstructing the past for their own ends. Techno-utopianism is about what is new and full of promise, whereas the found footage phenomenon revels in flaws in their source material, and the imperfections of the past. They combine remnants of the past with the technology of the future, and therefore taint it in the eyes of those who believe in the techno-utopian project.

As Beckles began to form a scene that would eventually become a phenomenon, he did so against a backdrop where people were excited about the possibilities afforded to them by increasing access to information and content via new technologies such as VCRs and the internet. It is a concept that Simakis, in particular, wholeheartedly

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[6] Gregory Ferenstein, "Why Silicon Valley billionaires are obsessed with Burning Man", *Vox*, August 22, 2014, https://www.vox.com/2014/8/22/6050625/why-silicon-valley-billionaires-are-obsessed-with-burning-man.
[7] Joshua A. T. Fairfield, *Runaway Technology: Can Law Keep Up?*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 224.
[8] Alexander R. Galloway, "Brometheanism" *Culture and Communication*, June 16, 2017, http://cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/brometheanism.

embraces as he understands that EIT! can only operate in an open source culture[9], where fair use is enshrined into law. As with his experiences on the fringe of Toronto's alternative comedy scene, Beckles was operating around the birth of a new cultural moment, but was not striving to be a part of it.

The found footage phenomenon, as it is today, was shaped by the internet. It was one of many fragments of a more diverse entertainment landscape that arose from technological advances emboldening the individual, as our relationships with technology changed drastically.[10] Our actors find footage by accessing repositories of content, and increasingly digital repositories. They also source found footage courtesy of their online audiences, as well as through interactions during their live shows. Earlier found footage was partially sourced through tape trading networks, yet another product of a participatory culture. Most often, tapes were offered in specific zines, such as *Wrestling Observer* for wrestling fans seeking hard-to-find recordings of matches[11], or movie magazines like *Film Threat*.[12] Mail order by check was far more common than actually exchanging tapes, but there were exceptions - for example, fan conventions of series like *Doctor Who*.[13]

But often, a tape could be seen at a party - much like the ones FFF and EIT! would hold in their college dorms - and was then recorded and passed around until its origin was so far gone it couldn't be traced back to the original source. Bootlegs of

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[9] Simakis, Zoom call.
[10] Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, The Whole Earth Network, and Rise of Digital Utopianism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 79.
[11] Eleanor Patterson, "Tape Trading, Professional Wrestling, and The History of TV Distribution", *Flow*. December 4, 2020, https://www.flowjournal.org/2020/12/tape-trading-wrestling-distribution/.
[12] Tex Hula, "Tex Hula's tales from the 80's & 90's tape trading circuit!", *Ain't It Cool News*, April 12, 2019, https://www.aintitcool.com/80s-90s-tape-trading-circuit-82017/.
[13] Greg Bakun, "The Tape Traders: Those Were The Days!", *From the Archive: A British Television Blog*, November 26, 2012, http://www.from-the-archive.co.uk/2012/11/the-tape-traders-those-were-days.html.

videos like *Heavy Metal Parking Lot* attained such cult status in underground circles that there was incentive to keep enough copies circulating until the internet provided them with a digital home. This circuit helped all kinds of videos attract audiences, such as films that were unable to screen legally due to copyright violations.[14] It is hard to imagine a found footage scene like the one Beckles had started without the aid of a form of crude peer-to-peer networking, even if that ultimately was a far cry from the techno utopianism that many were anticipating as the internet became more readily available.[15] Subcultures only survive through networking, which can take many forms, and it began to flourish as the means of sourcing, sharing and showcasing found footage became increasingly digital.

1987-1993: The Early Days of North American Found Footage

Any examples of "Found Footage" before 1991 are scarce - a handful of narrative features, a slew of avant-garde collage films, and the gradual emergence of Mash-Ups, like 1987's *Apocalypse Pooh* and Compilation Films like 1989's *Amok Assault Video.* The former is a mashup video of audio from *Apocalypse Now* played over clips from various *Winnie The Pooh* animations, which would gain a cult following among pre-internet audiences in Toronto's underground art scene, and at comic conventions[16], demonstrating a crossover appeal between artists and fans of pop culture. The latter is a compilation tape (more straightforward in structure that the videos of Beckles and EIT!) produced by staff at Los Angeles bookstore Amok

[14] Mike Everleth, "Tale of the Tape Trading", *Underground Film Journal*, October 25, 2008, http://www.undergroundfilmjournal.com/tale-of-the-tape-trading/.
[15] Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 260.
[16] Scott MacKenzie. "The Horror, Piglet, the Horror: Found Footage, Mash-ups, AMVs, the avantgarde, and the Strange Case of Apocalypse Pooh" *Cinéaction* 72 (2007): 10-11.

Books, featuring a variety of clips in sequential order, from dog attacks to CBS News' broadcast of Pennsylvania state treasurer Budd Dwyer's on-air Suicide.[17]

These efforts are primarily from the underground subcultures of Los Angeles, New York and Toronto, making no impact on mainstream culture. However, none of these early examples influenced EIT! Or FFF - members of the former, such as Simakis, admit to being influenced by Beckles, but not by the work of his most immediate contemporary, Animal Charm, or some of the other early actors like Todd Graham[18]. Beckles' successors were aware of the scene that was forming - especially Pickett, who was exposed to the somewhat-parallel tape trading circuit during his time working in the Minneapolis TV industry - but wouldn't cite it as an influence, or formative on their acts. EIT! Was more literate in the avant-garde experimentations with ephemera, but Pickett and Prueher consider their influences to be more mired in mainstream comedy. They didn't make any ventures into the found footage scene, beyond watching it for their personal enjoyment, until 2004.

Rick Prelinger was taking a different approach to the other actors in the burgeoning found footage scene, and while he does not fit in with them, he was as much a pioneer of preserving ephemera - although in a more straightforward manner - as Beckles. Ephemera, as defined by Prelinger, is content that has been produced for commercial, corporate and/or educational purposes, and crucial to this definition is its intended lifespan - ephemera is produced to be useful for a limited time, never intended as a piece of art meant to stand the test of time[19]. Between 1989 and 1991,

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[17] Ron Kretsch, "Demented 1988 Video Mixtape 'Amok Assault Video'", *Dangerous Minds*, July 15, 2014, https://dangerousminds.net/comments/demented_1988_video_mixtape_amok_assault_video.
[18] Simakis, Zoom call
[19] "What is "ephemera"?", The Ephemera Society of America, accessed January 7, 2023. https://www.ephemerasociety.org/definition/

Prelinger was an executive producer at Comedy Central - owned by Viacom, parent company of MTV. As Director of Archival Development for what was then known as The Comedy Channel - before merging with Ha! to become Comedy Central - he was producing comedy segments and music videos for the channel out of archival footage.[20] Yet it was his path towards preserving all this ephemera which would separate him from the phenomenon. Prelinger's work for Comedy Central was preceded by The Prelinger Archives, founded in 1982, a project which would amass around sixty thousand ephemeral films[21], a number of which were donated to the internet archive.[22]

Were it not for this, he could be considered part of the found footage scene, especially as he would eventually go on to produce a series of feature-length compilation films constructed of ephemera from his archive, such as *Panorama Ephemera*. It is his most recent work, *Lost Landscapes*, where he tours different cities and presents compilations of ephemera from cities such as New York, Detroit and San Francisco, that shows a less comedic alternative to the found footage phenomenon. Prelinger represents a more conventional form of sourcing and exhibiting found footage, and in many ways is the antithesis of what the found footage scene was meant to be - a comedic deconstruction of a culture that had produced amateur home movies, and corporate ephemera with no artistic value. While Prelinger primarily preserved it for posterity, the other actors of the scene sought to present it in altered forms, as opposed to understanding the significance of

[20] "UCSC Biobibliography - Rick Prelinger", University of California Santa Cruz, April 20, 2019, http://www.panix.com/~footage/Biobib_Public_20190420.pdf.
[21] J. W. McCormack, "The Source Material", *The Paris Review*, January 3, 2017, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/01/03/the-source-material/.
[22] Manohla Dargis, "Excavating New York, Frame by Frame", *New York Times*, November 8, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/08/movies/lost-landscapes-of-new-york.html.

preserving it intact. He is a crucial figure in the history of found footage as a whole, but not in the history of the found footage phenomenon.

As Beckles laid the groundwork for an emerging countercultural scene in the Scarborough district of Toronto, around 660 miles West in Stoughton, Wisconsin, his first rivals were starting to emerge. His closest American counterparts were beginning their long journey towards establishing, and developing, the Found Footage scene into something more prolific than Beckles could have imagined. Childhood friends Joe Pickett and Nick Prueher, who had known each other since they were 10 years old in sixth grade, initially bonded over an obsession with the TV show *Small Wonder* - even from a young age, they were both obsessed with the quirkier side of pop culture. More specifically, with an ironic appreciation of poor quality pop culture, long before movies like *The Room* created a “bad movie” culture[23]. Pickett recalls his mother working for a local radio station when he and Prueher were young, and listening to records that were given to Pickett’s mother by local artists trying to get their music on the air. Among these amateur efforts were an elderly woman singing in the character of a sock puppet, and on the more polished side, a Buddy Hackett album where Hackett performed an array of racist stereotypes. The duo laughed at this kind of content as children, and continued to do so well into adulthood.

This is not unlike the actions of their predecessor, *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (and the later *Rifftrax*, which consisted of former cast members and started in 2007, years after FFF had begun). First airing in 1988 on Minneapolis station KTMA-TV,

[23] Jamie Loftus, "Cinematic Schadenfreude and the Enduring Appeal of the Bad Movie", Inverse, October 4, 2016, https://www.inverse.com/article/21690-loving-bad-movies-how-did-this-get-made-hate-watch-paul-scheer.

and then later on the Sci-Fi Channel and Comedy Central - one of the homes of alternative comedy when the cable ecosystem was offering more niche content - the series featured a cast of characters making fun of kitschy B-movies. Its influence on FFF is very apparent, and it's no surprise that Prueher would briefly work with *MST3K*, as they are often referred to, as an intern on the tenth and eleventh seasons of the show between 1997 and 1998.

The pair were still in high school when Prueher was working at their local McDonald's. Stumbling across a McDonalds-exclusive training video "Inside Custodial Duties" in the break room, Prueher stole it in order to show friends, including Pickett, with a running commentary. Prueher had inadvertently sent the pair down a path that would ultimately define their careers. After the discovery of this initial piece of ephemera, Pickett and Prueher slowly began collecting any kinds of bizarre video tapes that amused them - anywhere from thrift stores to garage sales, eventually resulting in a collection of over 11,000 VHS tapes currently stored in their Brooklyn offices.

It would be another 13 years before the pair's obsession would culminate in a humorous, curated traveling showcase of their discoveries. *The Found Footage Festival* wasn't even a pipedream for two young men indulging in a hobby. However, when Pickett secured a post-college job working in a video duplication house, dealing with odd ephemera of a similar ilk to that initial McDonalds training video, which he would make sure to duplicate for himself as well as the client, it seemed inevitable this obsession was more than just a passing interest. As obsessed as they were with collecting videos, they wouldn't think about showcasing their collection on

the road until the early 2000s, and even then it was out of a necessity rather than a driving desire. But, based on their obsession with viewing being a communal experience, they would regularly invite friends to the college dorms for “the sacred hour”. They would watch TV shows like *Step By Step* and *Jenny Jones*, in addition to their latest thrift store finds, and riff on what they were watching, while Pickett would produce, print and distribute quizzes for everyone about the content.

CHAPTER TWO

1994-1997: Derrick Beckles, *TV Carnage*, and Early Compilations

Derrick Beckles claims he “always had a tape in the VCR”[24], and recalls one of his earliest experiments with video - a mashup of a Tex Avery cartoon, set it to music by punk rock band The Stooges, part of a music scene Beckles had been involved in with his own bands like Black Jello[25]. At this point, Beckles’ work wasn’t dissimilar to *Apocalypse Pooh*. Beckles, like his contemporaries, was part of a generation with “Latchkey kids”, identifying himself with that label, claiming he “would always have a TV on in the background”[26], showing his work to friends, much like Pickett and Prueher did. Unlike Pickett and Prueher, Beckles wanted to mold all this ephemera into his own distinct style of artistic expression, as opposed to merely presenting his discoveries. His earliest works involved painstaking editing using the VCR-to-VCR process, sometimes even re-recording content he already owned on VHS, as opposed to recording straight off his TV.

[24] Derrick Beckles, Interview with Doug Lussenhop and Brent Weinbach, The Poundcast, podcast audio, July 15, 2018, https://allthingscomedy.com/podcast/the-poundcast/117-derrick-beckles-and-brent-weinbach
[25] Isabelle Kohn, “Top 5: Derrick Beckles sent us his five favorite video clips of ever”, *IHEARTCOMIX*, February 27, 2015.
[26] Derrick Beckles, “Interview with Doug Lussenhop and Brent Weinbach”

These experiments eventually resulted in Beckles producing and distributing his bootleg VHS “mixtapes” in 1994, eventually evolving into the first of the *TV Carnage* series of compilation films. Beckles relied on a friend working at a duplication house, similar to Pickett, in order to mass-produce his bootleg mixtapes, and then would produce the labels himself. After attracting some attention beyond viewing parties he would hold for a network of friends, Beckles would then only charge customers for the shipping and handling costs - likely to avoid a slew of legal issues, as his work consisted entirely of copyrighted material produced by others, transformative as it was. Fair Use Law, as a form of defense within copyright cases, was still in its relative infancy.

In 1996, Beckles released *Ouch Television My Brain Hurts*, the first *TV Carnage* compilation film. This was the accumulation of years of experimenting and refining, and would begin to attract cult status to more of an extent than *Apocalypse Pooh* or *Amok Assault Video*. Beckles began to assign loose themes to his experiments following a period ill in bed and “doped up on painkillers”[27], assembling what would become the first *TV Carnage* film in a delirious state which would carry over to *Ouch Television My Brain Hurts*. The series of compilations would jump between non sequiturs, from a dream sequence in which Chuck Norris’ dog has nightmares about James Brown, to an intercut sequence of an exercise tape led by Cher, and a cooking tutorial by Angela Lansbury. It was the beginning of a new type of aesthetic that would ultimately influence major media ventures such as VICE and Adult Swim.

[27] Matt Haber, "Slicing and Dicing the Vast Wasteland". *New York Times*, 24 April, 2005.

Unlike the handful of predecessors to this work, Beckles' compilation film was not a collection of random, outrageous clips simply assembled one after the other, or a simple combination of audio from one work (*Apocalypse Now*) subversively set to an inappropriate video (*Winnie The Pooh* cartoons). It was a psychedelic journey through a wider variety of late-20th-century ephemera that was a distinct piece of art by an experimental artist and, crucially, comedian. It managed to capture the same kind of subversiveness that avant-garde collage filmmakers had produced between the 1930s and 1960s. While those films seemed more concerned with nuclear paranoia and the male gaze, if any clear theme can be found in Beckles' works, it is a loose critique of corporate ephemera, propaganda and consumerism - all themes that *EIT!* would critique in a more explicitly political fashion. But their formation was still a while away at this point.

Beckles had created something new, and unlike earlier efforts, his unique brand of compilation film began to influence others and gain popular attention in industry circles. This was, perhaps, a little surprising as he was operating on the outskirts of a thriving alternative comedy scene in Toronto. That scene produced the likes of comedy troupe Kids in the Hall, and others who were pushing back against a city that was becoming a hub for economic growth and development. In the wake of the North American Free Trade Agreement[28], Toronto was becoming a key hub for corporate innovation, as outlined by Naomi Klein in her seminal book *No Logo*[29]. Most notably was Toronto's focus on technology[30] - in a Toronto suburb much like Scarborough, where Beckles came from, "Netville" was a bold but unsuccessful

[28] David A. Wolfe and Meric S. Gertler, "Globalization and Economic Restructuring in Ontario: From Industrial Heartland to Learning Region?", *European Planning Studies* 9, no. 5 (July 2001): 577.
[29] Naomi Klein, *No Logo*, (London: Flamingo, 2000), 137.
[30] Gordon Thiessen, "Remarks by Gordon Thiessen, Governor of the Bank of Canada, to the Canadian Club of Toronto" (lecture, Canadian Club of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, 22 January, 2001), https://www.bankofcanada.ca/2001/01/canada-economic-future-what-have-we-learned/.

attempt within a modern housing development to be fully equipped with high-speed internet[31] before this became a staple of modern life.

While others were bristling against corporate ephemera and technological innovation, Beckles was happy to take as much of it as he could and mold it into something that amused him. He was producing this not long after 1989's “Experimental Film Congress”, which saw a battle amongst generations of avant-garde and experimental artists[32] who could be considered an earlier found footage scene. While they fought for dominance, the man who would render them virtually obsolete was tinkering away with VCRs in his apartment, recording anything he found to be weird or funny.

In the same year, Animal Charm released *Golden Digest*, a frantically-edited compilation film primarily centered around ephemera featuring the natural world, that is more experimental than comedic. The collaboration between Richard Bott and Jim Fetterley had only begun the previous year, with a similar style to Beckles, however the pair would go on to focus on their work as art, and ingratiate themselves in international exhibitions as established artists. Beckles would continue working under the *TV Carnage* brand for some time, focused on entertaining himself more than intentionally highlighting the fact his compilation films were works of artistic expression. For Beckles, it was more about amusing himself, and reveling in unbridled chaos as opposed to his output necessarily having a point. This kind of nihilistic attitude would go on to influence Adult Swim[33], and later prominent

[31] Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox: Democracy and the Future of the World Economy*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2012), 230.
[32] Scott MacKenzie. *The Horror, Piglet*, 3.
[33] Nicholas Holm, “No more jokes: Comic complexity, Adult Swim and a political aesthetic model of humour”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 2 (April 2022): 364.

comedians Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim - the duo have been recorded citing *TV Carnage* as an influence on their work.[34]

In 1997, Beckles would begin producing work for the emerging media outlet VICE - first known as Voice of Montreal, then a free monthly zine particularly geared towards the Canadian city's punk subculture. It was a relationship that would last for the best part of a decade, signaling his gradual shift away from the found footage scene and into a more mainstream presentation of what underground counterculture had to offer. It wasn't just Adult Swim, or VICE, that Beckles would ultimately influence. EIT! admit to being influenced by *TV Carnage* in their formative years, and they weren't the only ones - Beckles' impact on a subset of American comedy would have a domino effect. In addition to working for Adult Swim, he influenced comedians who contributed to its success. The most notable comedians, Heidecker and Wareheim, would form the YouTube comedy channel JASH with more mainstream comedians like Michael Cera and Sarah Silverman. They would also help to kickstart Super Deluxe, an earlier online content company owned by Turner and eventually folded into Adult Swim. Super Deluxe would go on to hire Simakis as a development executive.

All the aforementioned actors operate within this alternative comedy community, even if Beckles would not identify with it - just as he hadn't belonged to Toronto's alternative comedy scene. And while they didn't belong to the Adult Swim stable, Pickett and Prueher "would one hundred percent label themselves as alternative

[34] Aaron Hillis, "Sorta-Comedians Tim and Eric on Influences, Audiences, and What's Not Funny", *Phoenix New Times*, April 5, 2012, https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/film/sorta-comedians-tim-and-eric-on-influences-audiences-and-whats-not-funny-6453155.

comedians”[35], and were part of the early-to-mid 2000s’ alternative comedy scene in Brooklyn.

This new comedy community was born out of a time of fragmentation. Of course the internet presented the television industry with an existential threat, but traditional network television was also faced with a more immediate threat. Thanks to digital cable, smaller channels, which catered to all kinds of niches, were emerging in what can best be described as an explosion, as opposed to a slow and steady trickle. 68 percent of US households had subscribed to cable by 2000[36] - a sizable audience looking for more than what network television could offer them. It was an environment ripe for anyone indulging in niches, who could finally find an audience who perhaps hadn’t yet fully embraced the fragmented landscape of the internet. Amanda Lotz best describes the dilemma: “Television’s transition to a narrowcast medium—one targeted to distinct and isolated subsections of the audience—along with adjustments within the broader media culture in which it exists, significantly altered its industrial logic and has required a fundamental reassessment of how it operates as a cultural institution.”[37] It wasn’t just television suffering as viewers began to spread across the multichannel landscape - the advertising industry was struggling to keep up as it had to spread across more channels, and had to contend with technology like TiVo which allowed viewers to fast forward through commercial breaks.[38] It was yet to fully harness the potential of targeted advertising to niche audiences.

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[35] Joe Pickett, phone call to author, November 13, 2022.
[36] Marketing Charts, "US Homes Receive a Record 118.6 TV Channels on Average", June 13, 2008. https://www.marketingcharts.com/television-4929.
[37] Amanda D, Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2007), 5.
[38] Matthew McAllister. *The Commercialization of American Culture: New Advertising, Control and Democracy*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 19.

As technology was becoming increasingly democratized for amateur filmmakers and aspiring entrepreneurs, so was television - there would be something for everyone, giving them choice over a uniform viewing experience.[39] Audiences didn't just have to sit down and watch whatever the networks decided to put in front of them, instead they could choose not just what kind of TV programming they wanted to watch, but which media to play on their TV set - now they had video games and home video as viable alternatives to regular broadcast programming. But despite the increasing number of alternative forms of media to watch on a TV set, there were more television channels to watch than ever before. By the end of the 1980s, the number of cable program networks had more than doubled. And by the late 1990s, there were close to 200 networks in the US with the vast majority of cable subscribers having access to just over a quarter of the channels available on those networks.[40] With more channels and more options, came more specific choices - there wouldn't just be a comedy channel, or a music channel, but there would be an alternative comedy channel, or a music channel solely dedicated to punk rock.

Mainstream television and advertisers would need to adapt quickly in order to keep up (the latter[41] did so much sooner than the former[42]). A key part of that would be to appropriate whatever niche content was appealing to passionate subcultures, in order to regain audiences who had broken away in pursuit of the specific types of content that appealed to them. Eventually, our actors in the found footage scene, who had once been part of the television industry's ecosystem, would collide with the

[39] Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized,* 52.
[40] "History of Cable", California Cable & Telecommunications Association, n.d, https://calcable.org/learn/history-of-cable/.
[41] McAllister, *Commercialization of American Culture,* 45.
[42] McAllister, *Commercialization of American Culture,* 67.

industry in very different ways, some embracing it and others aggressively undermining it, exploiting its weaknesses.

For comedy programming in the era of fragmented media, chief among these smaller channels were Viacom's Comedy Central and, more importantly for the found footage scene, Turner Broadcasting's Cartoon Network - itself a fragment of a larger media conglomerate.[43] The network's late night programming block of adult oriented comedy, Adult Swim, primarily consisted of animation reruns, but executive Mike Lazzo commissioned original programs *Space Ghost Coast to Coast* in 1994 (as a Cartoon Network original, 7 years before the Adult Swim block launched), *Sealab 2021* in 2000, and *Harvey Birdman: Attorney at Law* in 2001. The former was a fictional talk show hosted by a Hanna Barbera character that Turner owned the rights to, with stock animation taken and transformed to deliver crude jokes taken completely out of the original, family-friendly context; the latter two, commissioned years later as the Adult Swim block began to emerge out of a loose late night block on the network, continued the trend. Creatives working on the block were doing the same thing as Beckles, transforming pre-existing content. All these shows had a similar sensibility, even if they weren't using footage sourced in the same way as Beckles.

In many ways, Adult Swim became a less accessible version of MTV for the late 1990s and early 2000s, which found a countercultural audience of stoners, slackers, and impressionable teenagers who would become the next generation of talent in animation and comedy. It was able to attract both younger audiences who might

[43] J. Matt Giglio and Matthew P. McAllister, "The Commodity Flow of U.S. Children's Television" in *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Matthew P. McAllister and Joseph Turow, (New York: NY, Routledge, 2009), 114.

crossover from the primetime block, and adults who would tune in exclusively for the Adult Swim block. Programs like *South Park* on Comedy Central, as well as *The Simpsons,* and counterculture favorite *Beavis and Butthead* - all of which featured characters making fun of what they were watching on TV - had set a precedent for the 18-34 male demographic,[44] demonstrating that cartoons weren't just for kids. As well as cruder animation aimed at an older audience, it was one of the first Western outlets to bring Japanese animation to American audiences, further cementing its status as a cool, edgy[45] destination for the counterculture, despite being owned by a TV giant.

Figure 1: Screenshot from Adult Swim's *The Scooby-Doo Project* (1999)

Adult Swim didn't air its first completely live action series until *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* In 2007, by which point the influence of the found footage phenomenon would really be felt by the television industry. Lazzo, whose vision for

[44] Hye Jin Lee, "All Kids Out of the Pool!: Brand Identity, Television Animations, and Adult Audience of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim" (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 2013), 34.
[45] Jacob Mertens and Lauren E. Wilks, "Cartoon Network: Adult Swim and the Evolving Use of 'Edge'" in *From Networks to Netflix: A Guide to Changing Channels*, ed. Derek Johnson, 2nd ed., (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022), 102, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003099499

Adult Swim couldn't have existed without the technological milestone of digital cable, clearly had an appreciation for found footage. Even before commissioning Beckles' first show, as he was a fan of *TV Carnage*[46]*,* Lazzo would oversee *The Scooby-Doo Project* in 1999, which incorporated the Scooby Doo characters into the live action world of *The Blair Witch Project*, similar to the hybrid nature of *Space Ghost Coast to Coast*. Such niche content wouldn't have found a place on television before the revolution of digital cable.

In 1994, while Beckles was developing his work, and building a foundation for which he would leave an undeniable impact on the North American cultural landscape, Pickett and Prueher had enrolled in college at UW-Eau Claire. There they would meet Mark Proksch, the actor behind one of their first prominent pranks, which would ultimately result in them gaining national attention for a lawsuit thrown at them for their work. But before that, they would embark on a road trip that would change their lives, and led to the creation of the Found Footage Festival a decade later. On a summer road trip through the Midwest, Pickett and Prueher discovered a cassette tape, with a homemade label, on sale at a random truckstop. The cassette contained the amateur, crude and profanity-filled country songs of Larry Pierce, who self-distributed his tapes to truck stops across the Midwest. This discovery began a years-long obsession, which initially consisted of Pickett and Prueher trying to collect all of Pierce's tapes for the next 7 years.

[46] Bradford Evans, "Talking to Derrick Beckles about his new Adult Swim show, 'Hot Package'", *Vulture*, October 3, 2013, https://www.vulture.com/2013/10/talking-to-derrick-beckles-about-his-new-adult-swim-show-hot-package.html.

1998-2003: Nick and Joe's Suicide Pact; Everything is Terrible in Ohio

Following their graduation in 1998, Prueher moved from Wisconsin to Minneapolis, with Pickett following suit in 1999. Both worked as production assistants for local TV stations - among the connections they made was pioneer music video director Chuck Statler, whose work was notable for the inclusion of found footage[47]. Prueher's time in the city was short lived, as he moved to New York within months of arriving in Minneapolis, in order to become a researcher for *The Late Show with David Letterman*- one of his duties was to source amusing videos to be aired on the show, putting his years of skills to use. Pickett, meanwhile, remained in Minneapolis for the next 4 years, jumping back and forth to Eau Claire regularly, and eventually worked at a video duplication company. It was here that he befriended co-worker Geoff Hass, and the pair decided to make personal copies of any footage, which they had been tasked to duplicate for clients, that amused or intrigued them. Their early mixtapes, made without Prueher, were dubbed "the Cinemagic Video Club" - compilations that spliced together their favorite clips, much like *TV Carnage* or early, less pointed *EIT!* efforts. These mixtapes would include clips of everything from the instructional video *How To Have Cybersex On The Internet*, to a public access show where a man creates paintings from his own spit, and home movie footage of a young boy in Ohio trying to jump between two trees and plummeting to the ground. At this point, though, these efforts were still purely for their personal enjoyment. By 2001, despite being on other sides of the country, Pickett and Prueher had collected the entirety of Pierce's works - following this milestone, a visit to the South By Southwest Film Festival in Austin, Texas had Pickett ponder the idea of the duo making their first feature film, a documentary about Pierce. Much like the rest of their

[47] JP Olsen, "Rubberhead: Akron's Lasting Effect on Chuck Statler, Godfather of Music Video", *Please Kill Me*, January 26, 2021, https://pleasekillme.com/chuck-statler/.

work going forward, Pickett and Prueher had a desire to find out the context behind the creator of this “found audio”, and present him and his output to a wider audience.

Pickett managed to reach out to a reluctant Pierce and convince him to let the pair commence production. Filming began in 2003, made viable by Pickett being able to rent out the necessary equipment from the video duplication house. Pickett and Prueher traveled to Pierce’s home in Indiana, around the time he was faced with being laid off from his job. What may have been an aimless portrait of Pierce quickly turned into a far more compelling narrative, as he was offered the opportunity to perform in Las Vegas, based on his underground following, and decided to completely relocate there. This was enough to convince Pickett and Prueher to commit to what they called a “suicide pact”. They would quit their jobs, Pickett would join Prueher in New York, they pick up part-time work wherever they could and, rely on their then-girlfriends for financial support. Their full-time occupation would be to continue production of the film project that would eventually be titled *Dirty Country*.

As the pair not yet known as “The Found Footage Festival” focused their efforts on Pierce, and not their growing collection of found footage, over in Athens, Ohio, another found footage duo had begun their slow journey into the scene. In 2000, as Beckles released his third feature-length compilation film, *When Television Attacks*, Dimitri Simakis and Nic Maier met as freshman at Ohio University - Simakis a Multimedia Arts major, Maier a Communications major. While *Everything Is Terrible!* involves a rotating lineup of different members, Simakis and Maier have always been the permanent, and founding, members of the collective.

Athens, Ohio is a bohemian college town set against a rural, almost Appalachian society. This is not dissimilar to towns like Austin, Texas or Louisville, Kentucky,[48] which were artistic oases in the most unexpected of states. Like Beckles' Toronto or Pickett and Prueher's Brooklyn, Simakis and Maier were developing against a unique backdrop. Akron was only a few hours' drive away, and was a Midwest epicenter for indie rock, producing musicians like Divo and Brainiac. Akron was much like a different Athens, in Georgia, which had been responsible for the previous generation of alternative music. However, Athens, Ohio, was every bit as dynamic as Akron, and had a vibrant cultural scene for impressionable students like Simakis and Maier. It was notable for its punk scene, drawing more parallels with Beckles' Toronto, as he and the rest of the team behind "Voice of Montreal" magazine had geared it towards the city's punk scene[49]. It is no surprise to see EIT! borne out of somewhere like Athens, especially considering the curriculum that would shape at least one key member of the collective.

Ohio University had a notable experimental film program as part of their Department of Radio-Television-Film, focusing on avant-garde artists like Kenneth Anger and Bruce Conner, who were making use of found footage for their art. However, it wasn't the earlier found footage artists that inspired Maier, even if they had had more of an impact on Simakis since before he went to college. In fact, much like Pickett and Prueher, they had no immediate aspirations to use their ever-growing collection of found footage as a means to develop a career. Their elaborate act would not begin to develop for another nine years. Instead, they were just fans of videos, making use

[48] Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Cool Town: How Athens, Georgia, Launched Alternative Music and Changed American Culture*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 27.
[49] Matthias Sdun, "From the Voice to VICE – a short history of VICE MEDIA", World Press Institute, October 10, 2015, https://worldpressinstitute.org/from-the-voice-to-vice-a-short-history-of-vice-media.

of being on a budget and living in proximity to a glut of thrift stores and video stores that were closing down in the face of the digital age, everywhere from Ohio to West Virginia. They were nowhere near the circles of the tape trading circuit, a subculture Pickett was beginning to get involved with during his time in Minneapolis. Instead, Maier and Simakis would source their tapes by scouring thrift stores, and browsing websites like eBay, iOffer and StumpyDiscs. When building their collection, they would focus more on the kind of ephemera that attracted Beckles, such as banned cartoons and unaired TV pilots, as opposed to the kind of home movies and public access recordings that appealed to Pickett and Prueher. Beckles and EIT! were already focused more on commercial content, FFF instead interested in the personal and the obscure.

Another key moment for Simakis and Maier was when their friend Matt Carter presented them with his truncated edit of the 1990 miniseries of *Stephen King's IT*.[50] The tape, titled *Fourteen Minute IT*, was produced in the infancy of the post-*TV Carnage* landscape. But both works clearly captured the imagination of Simakis and Maier. Several years later, having launched their collective, Maier and Simakis would go on to remake their friend's work as an even shorter version they jokingly titled *Fifteen Minute IT*, despite only being seven minutes long. Between Carter's video and *TV Carnage*, the first example of found footage artists being inspired by other artists within the scene was beginning to take shape. Of all the actors in the found footage scene, it was Simakis who was most influenced by the actors who had come before, by Beckles as much as by the likes of Conner and other avant-garde artists.

[50] Tarpley Hitt, "Everything Is Terrible!: The Keepers of Pre-Internet Pop Culture Finding Art in Absurdity", *The Daily Beast*, July 28, 2019. https://www.thedailybeast.com/everything-is-terrible-the-keepers-of-pre-internet-pop-culture-finding-art-in-absurdity.

Maier had grown up in rural Ohio, exposed to more mainstream commercial media, where Simakis was a Cleveland native, exposed to influences such as politically progressive public access TV, which shaped his politics and how he would deliver political commentary in his later work[51]; and separate from what he had absorbed during his college education, admired Mark Hosler's *Negativland* and Craig Baldwin's *Sonic Outlaws*.

The former was a band from the Bay Area whose lineup included Mark Hosler and Richard Lyons - they coined the term "culture jamming" and were pioneers in the creative commons license. The latter was a documentary by Baldwin about intellectual property infringement cases that included Negativland's *U2* EP - the title very clearly a provocative act by Negativland - which featured a song interlaced with expletive-laden samples from a 1982 radio blooper by DJ Casey Kasem[52]. Simakis was particularly excited to hear the rant in question, for being so unique at the time it was produced - listeners couldn't believe an on air personality making such comments while being recorded. Kasem and Island Records, U2's publisher, both sued Negativland.

Hosler's beliefs would form Simakis' mission statement - where someone else's art ends, other artists should be going to pick up the pieces. Simakis was far more interested in that belief than exactly how Hosler would utilize found footage. He was also interested in Hosler's long standing belief in the concept of culture-jamming[53], which would go on to define EIT! Culture Jamming, a phrase coined by the members

[51] Simakis, Zoom call.
[52] Searinggaspainland, "Full Casey Kasem blooper compilation (raw audio--no DJ talkover)", YouTube Video, 5:22 to 6:36, May 17 2012, https://youtu.be/seCkv_aqSF8.
[53] Matthew Moyer, "Negativland's Mark Hosler embraces uncertainty", *Orlando Weekly*, January 16, 2019, https://www.orlandoweekly.com/music/negativlands-mark-hosler-embraces-uncertainty-23236389.

of Negativland,[54] essentially means to hijack culture and disturb it through distortion of its recognizable symbols.[55] This certainly fits into EIT!'s body of work, which lampoons societal norms and commercial ephemera.

All this is in stark contrast to FFF, who were influenced more by the comedy of Steve Martin and David Letterman, and the "high school" sense of humor in parody publication *The Onion* (which Pickett would later write for as a contributor)[56]; and Beckles, who cites Tex Avery cartoons as a major influence on his anarchic, absurdist work. In addition to these more avant-garde influences, it was how the likes of Hosler would find audio and other ephemera, and how they would transform it, that fascinated Simakis. To this day, he believes in producing art and operating within a freesource culture - having made use of torrenting sites Napster and Soulseek - where nothing is sacred and everything is open to transformation.

With Beckles still the only established artist in the modern found footage scene, it may seem that 2000 to 2004 were the "wilderness years", especially considering there wouldn't be a fourth *TV Carnage* film until 2005. In those 4 years, Maier and Simakis were nowhere close to assembling the other members of their as-yet-unnamed collective, and Pickett and Prueher were only just beginning to develop what would become The Found Footage Festival. However, on September 2nd 2001, Cartoon Network would launch their after-hours block of programming called Adult Swim, and alternative comedy in America would never be the same. The block's role in the found footage phenomenon cannot be overlooked, especially

[54] Scotto Moore, "An interview with Mark Hosler of Negativland", *Scotto.org*, n.d., https://www.scotto.org/listing.php?smlid=180.
[55] Mark Dery, "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing, and Sniping in the Empire of Signs", *Mark Dery – Author. Critic. Essayist. Editor/Writing Coach*, n.d., https://www.markdery.com/books/culture-jamming-hacking-slashing-and-sniping-in-the-empire-of-signs-2/.
[56] Joe Pickett, phone call to author, November 13, 2022.

since it would attract both Beckles and EIT! to produce work for them, and offer them a way to transition from relative obscurity to visibility. While the block didn't exhibit found footage work, or show any of Beckles' *TV Carnage* films, it was a rallying point for similar-minded comedians. For example, one of the show's biggest hits, *Tim and Eric Awesome Show Great Job!* was largely inspired by public access shows and the same ephemera that captured the imaginations of Beckles, Pickett, Prueher, Maier and Simakis. Beckles' structureless style of editing would be emanated by the likes of Doug Luessenhop and Vic Berger, who would gravitate towards Heidecker and Wareheim and produce their distinct output for the block.

2004-2006: Enter The Found Footage Festival

In 2004, with *Everything Is Terrible!* slowly beginning to develop, and Beckles at his peak of creativity, Pickett and Prueher were fast running out of funds to complete *Dirty Country*. Their reliance on financial support from partners, and occasional part-time work, was no longer proving sufficient. It was Pickett, in an attempt to find other ways of financing production, who thought to utilize his "Cinemagic" mixtapes produced in Minneapolis with Haas, and show them at a makeshift film festival of sorts - which Pickett jokingly suggested be called "The Copyright Infringement Festival" - with the profits going directly to production. Prueher happened to know a standup comedian performing regular gigs at Rififi - a former video store and now-defunct club for alternative comedians on Manhattan's Lower East Side. A small 50-seat venue like Rififi was considered low enough of a risk to try out their material.

Figure 2: Pickett and Prueher live onstage for a performance of The Found Footage Festival.

The duo cobbled together a 90-minute show, consisting of the Cinemagic mixtapes and peppered throughout with commentary, ending with a trailer for a work-in-progress cut of *Dirty Country*, and managed to sell out the show with relative ease. Straight after the show, they were approached by a journalist who had decided to cover the event. After several more performances of this set, based on how well the first gig had been received, they began to attract more notable press attention, most prominently a write-up by Eric Campos of *Film Threat*, declaring that “If you want to see something truly different and disturbing, the Found Footage Festival has what you’re looking for en masse.”[57]

[57] Eric Campos, “The Found Footage Festival – Volume One”, *Film Threat*, August 10, 2004, https://filmthreat.com/reviews/the-found-footage-festival-volume-one/.

Pickett says that “Brooklyn was good to them”[58], and was the perfect place for FFF to try out material in front of a receptive audience. Much like Beckles in Toronto, and EIT! in Athens, they had found the perfect place in which to develop their act. Pickett theorizes that their niche attracted “white hipsters with money”, as the New York borough was on the verge of gentrification, and they did such good business that Brooklyn was key to their survival throughout rough patches, such as their legal problems in the late 2010s. Alongside *Film Threat*, FFF was getting press coverage from the likes of *Village Voice*[59], and of the major actors in the found footage scene, they were the most integrated into the alternative comedy scene. But this was not like the romanticized Manhattan cultural scenes where one might walk down the street and encounter the likes of Andy Warhol, Lenny Bruce, and Bob Dylan in familiar establishments. Instead, this scene would revolve around regular showcases at small comedy venues, or sometimes larger venues like Union Hall, as opposed to bars or gathering places.

Besides the occasional venture to Jim Gaffigan’s Manhattan showcase, Pickett and Prueher would find themselves appearing at Brooklyn showcases led by the likes of Leo Allen, Jenny Slate, Eugene Mirman, and Wyatt Cenac. It was at the latter’s showcase that they learned a valuable lesson about comedy etiquette, by showcasing a found video which featured serious medical training about how to remove fecal matter from a constipated person. Gauging positive audience reception, and going one step too far and playing the footage of defecation, they would not be invited back to Cenac’s show for some time after that - not because of the vulgar content of the video, but because they had committed a *faux pas* for the

[58] Joe Pickett, phone call to author, November 13, 2022.
[59] Village Voice Staff, “Lost & Found”, *The Village Voice*, January 19, 2011, https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/01/19/lost-found/.

following acts. According to Pickett, a rule of the standup comedy circuit is that “it is impossible to follow up shit, literal shit. It’s all the audience is going to be thinking about afterwards”[60].

Following their early success in New York, Pickett and Prueher then decided to embark on a 2-week tour along the West Coast, from Seattle to Los Angeles. Haas, one of the originators behind the Cinemagic mixtapes, was invited to join them but had to decline as he had recently become a father. The double act of Pickett and Prueher, and the live showcase known as *The Found Footage Festival*, was in full effect. Among the highlights of these formative early months was a sold-out show at the 650-seat Rooftop Film Club in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where the pair were ambitious enough to produce and show two new and completely different editions of their show for each day, in case they would have audience members showing up to each of their timeslots at the venue. In 2005, they released the first of many video recordings of their live performances, *Live From Brooklyn*, at around the same time that Beckles produced his fourth *TV Carnage* film, *Casual Fridays*. As Beckles operated at his peak, and the latter were beginning to establish themselves as a real alternative in the found footage scene, the first major paradigm shift in the phenomenon since the birth of *TV Carnage* was on the horizon.

As FFF was gaining momentum in 2005, Simakis was on the cusp of graduating from Ohio University, a year later than originally intended, while most of his friends who would become members of EIT! had moved to Chicago, where Simakis would eventually join them. This was the opposite decision taken by FFF - Pickett claims

[60] Joe Pickett, Zoom call to author, October 12, 2022.

that most creative people going to college in the Midwest would move to either Chicago or Minneapolis for work, if they weren't aiming for New York or Los Angeles[61]. Simakis was working at MTV as a general intern, trying to establish himself within the industry, and with access to all kinds of ephemera. Around this time, as admirers of Beckles' work - having discovered it during a visit to New York, as a mail-order advertisement in what was then the underground zine *Voice of Montreal*, and would later become *VICE* - some of the members of EIT! would send their found footage discoveries to him. This was the first time any of the key actors in the scene would interact.

This was closely followed, in 2006, by Pickett and Prueher's first interaction with Beckles. Much like Simakis et al, they had become aware of Beckles' work when they came across an interview with him for *Spin* magazine, compelling them to reach out as someone with a shared interest. However, their first interaction was less than cordial - now a known entity themselves, Beckles actually interviewed them for a publication and confronted them about the idea they had stolen his concept, and more specifically, a video he had first used. Addressing the controversy in a 2013 *Vice* interview, Pickett and Prueher denied the accusation[62]. In fact, Beckles has a good relationship with them nowadays, and the initial tension was followed by immediate de-escalation, according to an interview conducted with Pickett by the author of this thesis. The *VICE* article in question documents years of what seems like genuine tensions between FFF and EIT!, relatively soon before they would meet for the first time. Prueher describes "infighting", as well as having good relationships

[61] Pickett, Zoom call.
[62] Alex Mierjeski, "We Talked to the Founders of the Found Footage Festival", *Vice*, March 8, 2013, https://www.vice.com/en/article/kwnvqw/we-talked-to-the-founders-of-the-found-footage-festival.

with other connoisseurs of found items, ephemera, and public access television, such as Davy Rothbart of *Found* magazine, and Heidecker and Wareheim.[63]

With interactions becoming more frequent, and ranging from complacency to outright hostility based on misunderstandings, there is a case to be considered that these actors did indeed make up a movement, as opposed to all solely existing within a loose scene. Yet FFF, in the 2013 VICE article, and specifically Pickett and Simakis in private interviews with this author, all claim not to watch the others' work so as to avoid copying each other. There is no attempt to respond to each other's work and, if anything, they avoid each other. To compare Beckles, FFF, and EIT! is at once easy and complex to do. Pickett and Prueher are not traditional stand-up comedians, instead they are essentially presenters or, as Pickett, prefers "tour guides". They don't want to make the found footage about them, unlike stand-ups or artists. Simakis himself would admit their work is more about EIT! itself than it is about the found footage incorporated into their work[64]. Pickett and Prueher are aware they're viewing and showcasing videos not intended for a mass audience, such as corporate training videos. And to them this is part of the appeal. They are fascinated by the mundane and the unimportant, and are amused by the more awkward and banal elements of their finds. They found, right back to college, that the viewing became funnier as the audience grew for them to interact with. Bringing a social element to content that was not intended to be consumed socially by others, or for entertainment purposes, made it more enjoyable. However, despite some of their protestations, all these actors share yet another similarity - their work is an extension of what amused them in the privacy of their childhood homes and their dorm rooms.

[63] Alex Mierjeski, "Founders of the Found Footage Festival".
[64] Simakis, Zoom call.

It may not be enough to claim they belong to a movement, but they all have more in common than they would want to admit.

What is apparent about these three actors is that, before they formed or developed the found footage scene, they all had some kind of relationship to hubs of countercultural activity. Be it Toronto, Brooklyn or Athens, these places played a part in their creative journeys, even if they were skirting around more formal scenes or movements occurring within them. Hubs like Adult Swim, which may not have played a part in their formation, would help them find their place within the early-to-mid 2000s, along with contemporaries they would eventually collaborate with. Even a more fringe collection of artists like the found footage actors benefitted from being associated with counter cultural hubs in some form. But even more so than these alternative hubs, the corporate media landscape had a bigger role in their development than they might want to admit - specifically, its hubs of production.

Throughout the first decade or so of the scene's development, a familiar hub would appear crucial to the careers of Beckles, Pickett and Prueher - that of the video duplication house. Beckles relied on a friend working at one in order to mass-produce his compilations[65]. Pickett's stint at one ultimately resulted in the Found Footage Festival, when he met Geoff Haas and the pair began producing mixtapes, which would make up early iterations of his live show with Prueher. It was also the place where Pickett had access to equipment to shoot the *Dirty Country*. The video duplication house, an essential part of the TV industry, was a vital part in

[65] Derrick Beckles, "Interview with Doug Lussenhop and Brent Weinbach".

developing a scene that would present a challenge to the very behemoth that had belonged to.

Simakis, one half of EIT!, was a low-ranking intern at MTV, allowing him potential access to the kind of footage he would never find in thrift stores. Pickett and Prueher worked as production assistants and researchers for regional TV and late-night talk shows. All but Beckles got their start on the lower rungs of the TV hierarchy at a time when it was a dominant cultural institution. It cannot be understated just how huge the mainstream networks were at the time Pickett, Prueher and Simakis worked for them, all owned by even bigger conglomerates. Operating on the outer circles of the media ecosystem, these menial jobs in the more mundane corners of TV clearly proved a breeding ground for our actors. It provided them with technology, training materials, and ephemera. They were a “house of ideas” for creatives who sought to break away from conventional television, mock it for a living, and paradoxically they would rely on it for content. We wouldn’t have the found footage phenomenon if it weren’t for the TV industry, so in some ways they owe corporate TV a debt, even though they were pushing against it - the terrain of network studios and duplication houses were auxiliary sites for these actors. The found footage phenomenon would become something of a hindrance to the TV industry throughout the next few decades, until they started turning to these actors in order to produce the kind of niche content whose audience they hoped to recapture.

But a bigger part of the existential threat to traditional TV was the place these actors would find their home, and their audience - at least, before they could strike a balance between online and in-person exhibitions of their work. Some of these

actors would continue to rally against mainstream TV, and others would assimilate, but even as they grew in popularity, they were nothing compared to the risk posed by the internet. Specifically, the rise of video sharing sites - chief among them, YouTube. TV's biggest battle would begin on February 1, 2004. FFF hadn't begun yet, and Beckles was busy assembling the fourth *TV Carnage* film, with no thoughts of disrupting traditional media on a seismic scale. The event that would do just that, unexpectedly and inexplicably, was the 38th Superbowl, broadcast on CBS from Houston, Texas to an estimated audience of 150 million viewers. During the halftime show - incidentally, produced by MTV - Justin Timberlake and Janet Jackson were nearing the end of a performance of the song "Rock Your Body" by Timberlake. As the duo reached the song's finale, Timberlake decided to time the lyric "I better have you naked by the end of this song" to ripping off part of Jackson's costume to briefly reveal her breast. Three days later, thefacebook.com would officially launch, no doubt grateful for a discussion topic of such magnitude to spur on the prompt "what's on your mind?", and change the internet forever. "Janet Jackson" became the most searched term on the internet[66], and MTV's halftime show producer Alex Coletti would claim that "we put TiVo on the map"[67], another piece of technology that threatened traditional TV and its advertisers.

Former PayPal employees Chad Hurley, Steve Chen and Jawed Karim launched YouTube.com on February 14, 2005, following attempts to form a startup - after brainstorming, they couldn't come up with a project worth undertaking. But, eventually, spurred on by not being able to find the infamous clip of Jackson and

[66] Loren Baker, "Janet Jackson Tops Internet Search Terms", *Search Engine Journal*, February 5, 2004, https://www.searchenginejournal.com/janet-jackson-tops-internet-search-terms/250/.
[67] Martin Cogan, "In the Beginning, There Was a Nipple", *ESPN The Magazine*, January 28, 2014, https://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/10333439/wardrobe-malfunction-beginning-there-was-nipple.

Timberlake's performance[68], the trio began developing a video sharing site, and uploaded its first clip on April 23 - an innocuous, low-resolution clip of Karim at the San Diego Zoo. The website officially went public on December 15, and the rest is history. The first era of the found footage phenomenon ended with the dawn of YouTube - with FFF emerging as a serious competitor to Beckles, and EIT! not too far behind.

CHAPTER THREE

2007-2012: Everything Is Terrible! Arrives, Beckles departs

Beckles began his found footage experiments in the early days of the internet, while FFF and EIT! developed their acts with a focus on the discovery and presentation of pre-internet content. But YouTube would fundamentally change everything for the found footage scene's actors - it would shape the scene in a way that alienated Beckles; change how FFF would showcase their work; and propel EIT!'s career with a momentum they otherwise may not have had if they had focused on physical showcasing like FFF. By the 2010s, it eventually left FFF and EIT! at a crossroads - once Beckles left the found footage scene to begin working with the TV industry, the hierarchy shifted and saw EIT! moving away from the internet, and FFF moving more towards it. As the TV industry grappled with the growing dominance of the internet, and how to evolve with it, Beckles' transition into working with mainstream media meant the found footage scene had to grapple with TV. But those interactions wouldn't begin until the mid-2010s, leaving FFF and EIT! plenty of time to establish and re-define themselves within the found footage scene.

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[68] Jim Hopkins, "Surprise! There's a third YouTube co-founder", *USA Today*, October 11, 2006, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/tech/news/2006-10-11-YouTube-karim_x.htm.

Figure 3: Baby Cha-Cha's appearance on Season 1, Episode 12 of *Ally McBeal* (1998).

The concept of "going viral" online had existed long before YouTube arrived, going back to 1996 - the same year that the first *TV Carnage* compilation was released. Software company Autodesk Kinetix released an animation plug-in called Character Studio, created by a small firm called Unreal Pictures. One of the sample animations, intended purely as a tech demonstration, was a 3D animation of a dancing baby referred to as "Baby Cha-Cha". "Baby Cha-Cha" was quickly spread across the internet via email chains, and made the unprecedented move to mainstream television in 1998. The legal comedy *Ally McBeal* featured the dancing baby as a recurring hallucination in the titular character's head[69]. It was one of the earliest examples of the TV industry turning to the internet, which would only escalate going forward.

[69] Bill Higgins, "Hollywood Flashback: 'Ally McBeal' Made Meme History With a Dancing Baby in 1998", *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 10, 2017, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/hollywood-flashback-ally-mcbeal-made-meme-history-a-dancing-baby-1998-1027243/.

The meme was also an early example of how others could take widely available content and transform it into something unique - none other than Nine Inch Nails' former art director, Rob Sheridan, created a website for people to share their variations on the meme[70]. Occurrences like this laid the groundwork for the found footage scene to capitalize on their collections of unique ephemera, which would have remained otherwise undiscovered and unutilized. It was EIT!, in particular, who were on the cutting edge at a time when everyone wanted to be responsible for the next viral sensation, and every website was craving viral content that would direct traffic to their page.

In 2007, the same year that Pickett's and Prueher's film *Dirty Country* - the documentary that helped kickstart the duo's live shows in the first place - hit the film festival circuit, EIT! arrived on the scene. The collective was officially established in Chicago when its website went live, first posting on December 8, 2007, writing about *15 Minute IT*.[71] It was a very basic blogspot page, with their 1980s-inspired retro logo at the top, and a series of embedded video clips accompanied by some text. It would retain this design until 2014, upgrading to a more elaborate look and no longer running off of blogspot.

By Fall 2007, Simakis had left his college friends in Chicago and headed to Los Angeles. The group would communicate over email, wondering how they could collaborate creatively when such a key member was on the other side of the country. They decided to utilize their growing collection of found footage by posting their

[70] Rob Sheridan, "I Have a Confession to Make", *Patreon*, January 24, 2018. https://www.patreon.com/posts/i-have-to-make-16584611.
[71] "Matt Carter's 15 Minute IT (Redux)", Everything Is Terrible!, December 8 2007. https://web.archive.org/web/20100312233144/http://www.everythingisterrible.com/2007/12/matt-carter-minute-it-redux.html. Archived at https://web.archive.org/.

favorite clips online. Simakis was able to source videos himself on the west coast, offering potentially very different types of content from what the others could find in the Midwest. Ultimately, the goal would be to produce a compilation film on DVD, like *TV Carnage*. In December 2007, everythingisterrible.com went live, and served as what Simakis calls a “research center”, so they could keep track of their best clips for the eventual compilation film. It was a loose collective of college friends, posting clips largely for their own amusement, and for any like-minded fans of found footage.

Pretty quickly, though, it was garnering attention in the mainstream press, with CBC referring to it as “the best site ever”[72] - they had hit a sweet spot, when the early days of YouTube had created a desire by media outlets like Digg, Videogum and Huffington Post, for videos to “go viral”, and everythingisterrible.com was a breeding ground for those kinds of clips. The most notable examples include *Yellow Dino: Pedo Hunter*[73], a compilation of clips from a *Barney*-like education video on “Stranger Danger”; *Yoga 4 Roosterz!*[74], a compilation of clips from a farmyard-themed Yoga instruction video for children; and *Duane!!!*, a remix of a standout guest’s performance on *Barbie Dance Club*[75].

As the site gained attention, the collective would continue to source clips, passing hard drives back and forth between Simakis in Los Angeles, member Joel Barhamand in New York, and the others in Chicago. As they developed their first compilation film, there was no assigned hierarchy, with everyone randomly assigned

[72] Sarah Liss, "Everything is Terrible: the best site ever", *CBC News*, December 16, 2008, https://www.cbc.ca/m/touch/blog-post.html?category=popculture&file=blog-author-arts-online-512.html.
[73] Everything Is Terrible!. "YELLOW DINO: PEDO HUNTER". April 6, 2011. Vimeo Video, 02:07. https://vimeo.com/22012020.
[74] Everything Is Terrible!. "YOGA 4 ROOSTERZ!". February 19, 2017. Vimeo Video, 02:45. https://vimeo.com/204781051.
[75] Everything Is Terrible!, "DUANE!!! /// EVERYTHING IS TERRIBLE!", YouTube Video, 0:00 to 0:38, March 5 2020, https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=BI-aDjb2sAA.

different sections of the film, tackling different themes. Once the sections were edited together, they would figure out a loose structure, and Simakis would produce the final, refined combination of everyone's sections into something more coherent and polished. Uploading these clips to YouTube helped attract attention to their efforts.

Being part of the "Wild West" days of YouTube placed EIT! in a unique cultural moment - early YouTube had a particular feel to it, offering a democratic platform for creators as well as audiences, right down to its slogan - "Broadcast Yourself". It was a very intentional alternative to TV, which very deliberately commissioned and programmed its content. Virtually anything was permissible at the start, as the site needed to refine its system of content moderation, and the site wasn't reliant on advertiser revenue in the same way as it is in the 2020s. EIT!, in its earliest iteration, simply couldn't survive on the YouTube of today, with the platform's outdated copyright moderation system[76] that seems to ignore the legal protections of the Fair Use Protection Act[77], and unbalanced content moderation that favors the needs of advertisers more than the rights of its creators.[78]

[76] Katharine Trendacosta, "Unfiltered: How YouTube's Content ID Discourages Fair Use and Dictates What We See Online", *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, December 10, 2020, https://www.eff.org/wp/unfiltered-how-YouTubes-content-id-discourages-fair-use-and-dictates-what-we-see-online

[77] John Aldred. "YouTube has changed how it enforces "fair use" after creator receives 150 copyright claims overnight", *DIY Photography,* February 6, 2022, https://www.diyphotography.net/YouTube-has-changed-how-it-enforces-fair-use-after-creator-receives-150-copyright-claims-overnight/.

[78] Elise Stagmann, "Content Moderation on YouTube and its Effects on Users", *diggit magazine*, September 17, 2021, https://medium.com/@diggitmagazine/content-moderation-on-YouTube-and-its-effects-on-users-3b862ea3fc25

Figure 4: Everything Is Terrible! surrounded by *Jerry Maguire* VHS tapes.

The project that EIT! are best known for started in 2008, and would help them to further establish their identity, as well as differentiate themselves from their contemporaries. By this time, the collective's core lineup consisted of Maier, Simakis, Maier's brother Aaron, Barhamand, Katie Rife, Nick Moore, and Lehr Beidelschies. They began to assist Simakis in a regular occurrence called "Maguire Watch", in which he would post photos every time he came across a copy of *Jerry Maguire* on VHS, during numerous expeditions to uncover found footage in video and thrift stores. Simakis found it absurd quite how many copies he would come across. It wouldn't be until their first live show a year later, however, that the idea would graduate from online to the real world, when EIT! decided to ask people to "show us your Jerrys". Eventually, the gimmick would evolve into something on a much grander scale, but it would take another six years to reach that point. The project brings to mind a similar effort by Rutherford Chang, a New York-based artist who

spent so many years collecting pressings of The Beatles' White Album, that he was able to open a "store" in Brooklyn's Recess Gallery and display his collection as a show titled *We Buy White Albums*. He used the opportunity to purchase even more copies from visitors to the exhibition.[79] Both these projects focus on the quantity of a commodity, as opposed to the quality or artistic value of the work in question - be it a Beatles album or a Tom Cruise movie.

Following the 2009 release of their first compilation film, *Everything Is Terrible! The Movie*, on DVD, EIT! were looking for a way to promote the release. They cobbled together a live show to accompany a screening of it at the now-defunct Cinefamily Theater in Los Angeles, as a way to promote their first DVD, and sold out the show. Maier had gained experience as part of a touring band with his girlfriend, and between them the collective had become aware of repertory theaters that would be a good fit for the scale of their show, and have the technical capacity to screen their films. Their first live show was not polished, and lacked refinement; but it included smoke machines, and some costumes and masks, all of which would become staples of their live work. They would only perform this show a few more times, as loose as the first attempt, but John Gross, an employee of Austin movie theater Alamo Drafthouse, saw the potential and booked them in for more shows in the fall and winter of 2009, emboldening them to pursue this element more aggressively.

As soon as they released their second major compilation film, *2 Everything 2 Terrible 2: Tokyo Drift*, in 2010, they would develop their formula and grow more confident and ambitious. They began crafting clearer narratives around their films within the

[79] Tim Maly, "'We Buy White Albums': The Unique Decay of Mass-Produced Items", *Wired*, February 27, 2013, https://www.wired.com/2013/02/we-buy-white-albums/.

live element, their costumes and live setpieces getting increasingly large in scale. It made sense for several reasons - Maier was becoming interested in puppetry, and the collective had shared interests in producing spectacle, and using costumes in their work. But more importantly, they knew they existed in a world where a path had been cleared for them by FFF and Beckles, and they had no interest in copying what had come before them. Between these elements of performance art, and the *Jerry Maguire* gimmick, they had figured out how to put a unique spin on showcasing found footage to audiences.

Despite their work focusing more on live performance than on the found footage playing in the background, EIT! try to focus their audience's attention on their art more than the personality of the individual artists. Simakis surmises that FFF and Beckles connect with the footage they source and utilize on a more personal level, whereas EIT! are far more emotionally detached from the footage. Simakis goes as far as to claim they don't respect it at all, simply treating it as a tool to be used in their art. The collective made the decision that whenever they are onstage, they would wear masks and elaborate outfits to obscure themselves, and very rarely show their faces in any promotional materials. This helps them fade into the background, and ensures that audiences are focused on the art being created in front of them, as opposed to the faces behind the masks.

In this same year, EIT! would produce their first two compilation films, *Everything Is Terrible! The Movi*e, and their first *Everything Is Terrible! Holiday Special*, both released on DVD. These earlier films veer closer to *TV Carnage* than their later efforts, which are more distinct and polished. Like Beckles' films, these early

compilations are hyperactive and relatively structureless, playing out like a fever dream - this isn't surprising, since they weren't produced in conjunction with a live show that had a narrative, and admit to *TV Carnage* being an early influence.[80] They would begin producing regular and consistent content - a compilation film, and recording of a new edition of their live showcase, respectively - almost every year between 2009 and 2014. FFF would also manage to create, produce and record four new editions of their live show during this stretch, almost matching EIT! in terms of productivity. Beckles, on the other hand, was nowhere near as prolific - even before he began production on the *Totally For Teens* pilot, Beckles took four years between his fifth and sixth compilation films, and in 2010 would release *Let's Work It Out!*, his final *TV Carnage* compilation film.

In 2009, the founding father would slowly begin to pivot away from the Found Footage scene, leaving FFF and EIT! to transform it into a primarily online phenomenon which would ultimately become an established subculture. Losing Beckles meant the scene lost its agent of chaos - EIT! had something to say in their work, and FFF's style of showcasing was more conventional. Much like his career path, nothing was predictable or strategic about Beckles' work, instead operating on a whim, be it as part of the found footage scene he created, or as part of Adult Swim's programming.

Totally For Teens was a pilot Beckles produced for Adult Swim, a hyperactive and sarcastic attempt to replicate magazine shows aimed at the teenage demographic on network television that was far less focused on incorporating found footage, and

[80] Simakis, Zoom call.

more on utilizing a live studio audience and staged commercials for comedic effect. Beckles had produced a more focused satire, and while it was every bit as anarchic as his *TV Carnage* work, it was far more formal, scripted, and felt like it had a point to make. It was a significant departure from his earlier work, and would prove to be something of an influence on *The Eric Andre Show*, one of the biggest hits for Adult Swim's programming block since *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* Beckles' pilot was the first time a found footage actor was formally engaged with producing work for a mainstream media system, and in the meantime, his successors in the found footage scene would fall to infighting.

While EIT! openly acknowledge that they admired and were initially influenced by Beckles, the same admiration and respect wasn't present in their early interactions with FFF. In fact, there was a period of slightly unintentional animosity between EIT! and FFF from around 2009 - when FFF first became aware of EIT! - to 2013 - when they would actually meet for the first time. EIT! became aware of FFF in 2007 by watching their first video, *Volume 1: Live in Brooklyn*, at a party; watching it helped spur them on to create something, since someone had beaten them to the punch in showcasing found footage, despite knowing next to nothing about them at that point. Until 2009, it was all they knew of FFF, having not watched any more of their work. It certainly seemed helpful to them, so they could pursue the opposite of what FFF was producing.

EIT! had no actual resentment towards FFF, or a genuine hatred, but without making FFF aware of their intentions, they started flaring up a fictional conflict with them, producing videos and jokingly berating them at live shows, in which they would

insincerely threaten any audience members who admitted to being fans of FFF's work with violence. They felt there was comedic potential in a manufactured "East Coast/West Coast" rivalry, akin to the one which plagued the hip hop scene of the 1990s.[81] However, they didn't think to let their manufactured nemeses in on the joke. Audience members would approach Pickett and Prueher to notify them of the collective's threats towards them, and they found EIT! to be encroaching on their territory - as well as producing work out of found footage, they would play some of the same venues and felt they might be taking away some of their niche audience. Having not met them, and not being able to have EIT! explain the misunderstanding, tensions remained until 2013. Up to this point, Pickett reiterated in the VICE article published that same year that "I heard that Everything Is Terrible! doesn't like us. We haven't met those guys yet."[82] It was, in effect, a joke that got out of hand, and not some elaborate act of performance art - neither really represented a threat to the other, especially since it would be a long time before FFF really engaged with YouTube, whereas it was this platform that made EIT!'s careers. They were different enough, too, that it is unlikely they would "steal" each other's audiences - if anything, offering niche crowds similar showcases of found footage would benefit them both, each representing multiple opportunities to engage with found footage. Attempting to start a fictional rivalry would be unlikely to attract audiences to just one of these actors, but rather compel them to see both sides of it.

A theater owner in Duluth, Minnesota, capitalized on these tensions by proposing a special event - "Found Footage Festival vs Everything Is Terrible!", which occurred on Saturday October 12, 2013 at the Howard Theater in Washington DC. It was also

[81] Isaac Semple, "Why was there a feud between West Coast vs East Coast rappers?", *HipHopHero*, October 8, 2022, https://hiphophero.com/why-was-there-a-feud-between-west-coast-vs-east-coast-rappers/.
[82] Alex Mierjeski, *Founders of the Found Footage Festival*.

the first time that any of the members of FFF and EIT! had actually met. The show played out with three rounds of 10-minute sets. FFF performed a set, then EIT!, and repeated this so that each of them would have a cumulative 30-minute set. After each round, two individuals in the crowd would be given a FFF DVD, and another given an EIT! DVD, and the audience would vote to decide who won each round by asking one of the two volunteers to hold up their DVD. They would go on to repeat this staged showdown occasionally, in San Francisco in 2016 and 2019, as part of the San Francisco Sketchfest Comedy Festival. Every time the two entities clashed onstage, FFF was voted the overall winner.[83] Performing this show multiple times across many years, it's clear that relationships were healed and the two groups were comfortable enough to occasionally perform together. It was also an acceptance that, especially in a post-Beckles landscape, both versions of showcasing found footage could peacefully coexist.

If the first era - a more analog era - began with Beckles' experimentations in 1994 and ended with the birth of YouTube in 2005, then the second era - that began in 2006 and, arguably, ended in 2014 with the launch of *Memory Hole* - is defined by community interaction. After years of intimate word-of-mouth helping the spread of video mixtapes and keeping a niche subculture alive, the found footage scene became a phenomenon that could assemble enough people to have regular, and profitable gatherings.

Beckles has never prioritized live showcases like EIT or FFF - each with their own distinct live identity - but has performed *TV Carnage Live*! at least six times between

[83] Joe Pickett and Nick Prueher, phone call to author, November 22, 2022.

2009 and 2016 across Austin, Philadelphia, New York City, San Francisco and Hamilton, Ontario. The little that is known about these events is that, beyond a pre-selected compilation of clips, the performances have been sporadic, in keeping with Beckles' energy. They have also been much shorter and less structured than his counterparts, playing as part of another event like a film screening unrelated to Beckle's content, or as the warm-up gig for a musical performance. What is most intriguing about Beckles' occasional forays into live performance is that some of these shows occurred after 2010's *Let's Work It Out!* compilation film. The first post-compilation show, at Philadelphia's International House in 2011, was part of his "Let's Work It Out Tour", of which there are sparse details. What may have been a transition away from compilation films, and a move into the live performance space, was nothing but an anomaly - one recorded show in Austin, with few available details, a year before the release of *Let's Work It Out!*, and one more known performance in New York a year after the Philadelphia show, is hardly a tour, and wasn't followed up with regular live appearances.

The 2016 performances in San Francisco, however, suggest Beckles still had a desire to return to the found footage scene. In a 2018 interview with Doug Lussenhop - one of the main editors for Heidecker and Wareheim - Beckles claimed that "I don't record [ephemera off the TV] anymore… I have years of, like… I wanna make another TV Carnage so badly… I have the material, so much stuff…"[84] At best, *TV Carnage* is indefinitely dormant, a busy Beckles occasionally scratching an itch with short, off-the-cuff live showcases. But it can't be said he is still an active part of the phenomenon when the brief returns aren't impactful, offer nothing new, and are

[84] Derrick Beckles, "Interview with Doug Lussenhop and Brent Weinbach".

sporadic. Until Beckles decides to make a seventh *TV Carnage* film, or begin touring more regularly, he is no longer an actor in the scene like he once was. He is not an influence, or a presence, on the phenomenon anymore. In his absence, FFF and EIT! have become the faces of something he founded. With a move towards the mainstream, now largely focused on involvement with the works of Eric Andre and the *Jackass* franchise, he has strayed from his found footage roots and is increasingly established in the realm of prank comedy for MTV and Adult Swim.

The fact Beckles had branched out into live performance, following EIT! and FFF, makes it worth assessing the shift of the found footage scene from primarily online, or exclusively through pre-produced compilations, to live performance with an interactive audience. All the actors from the scene had either transitioned to more live performances, or adopted a hybrid model of working primarily online and regularly touring their live showcases. Each followed on from the other - what FFF did was feasible because Beckles had established a precedent for showcasing found footage; FFF encouraged a participatory element with their live shows, asking audiences to bring them any found footage they thought would be of interest, which helped to eventually foster an established found footage community made up their regular audience; and when EIT! followed suit with “send us your Jerrys”, it was something audiences came to expect, which led to them expanding the concept into a live pop-up video store, and the idea of the “Pyramid of Jerrys” in the desert. Each predecessor walked so their successor could run - but exactly who will copy EIT! Is an unanswered question, with no potential new successor emerging out of the phenomenon since they arrived on the scene.

The found footage scene had emerged from the subcultural underground which revered media artifacts, to a live event with enough of an audience to warrant it being a more regular occurrence, and a viable career for the actors. This was also a path many YouTubers would take as a way to offset income they were losing as the platform became more advertiser-friendly at the expense of its creatives. Selling merchandise[85] and going on tour[86] is the most profitable venture, much like musicians who cannot rely on record sales in the days of streaming platforms like Spotify. Having come to live performance later than FFF, EIT! seem to love this element of their work the most - in fact, they relish the more personal and intimate approach more than they do the online approach that made them famous.

Both entities started their live performances as fundraising schemes - FFF as a way to finance *Dirty Country*, and EIT! as a way to promote their first DVD. Yet both underestimated the kind of response they would garner with this move, and how viable an option it was for their livelihoods. After years of touring took its toll on Prueher, and the necessary shift to primarily online work during the COVID-19 pandemic, FFF is slowly transitioning away from this side of their work, despite beginning their careers with in-person showcasing. They still tour, but less frequently, and this change has allowed them to focus on both their personal lives and other ventures. They seem to enjoy the flexibility now they don't have to solely rely on the live element of their act.

[85] Brandon John, "Bands can earn a truly insane amount of money from merch these days", *ToneDeaf*, May 23, 2017, https://tonedeaf.thebrag.com/just-how-much-do-artists-earn-from-merch-these-days/.
[86] Devon Delfino, "How musicians really make their money — and it has nothing to do with how many times people listen to their songs", *Business Insider*, October 19, 2018, https://www.businessinsider.com/how-do-musicians-make-money-2018-10.

This shift, as well as EIT!'s success in both the virtual and physical spheres of performances, means the found footage actors don't need to choose one or the other. It seems to be a relief to both actors, and has seen them gradually dominate the worlds the other used to inhabit - FFF are more known for operating online, and EIT! have increasingly become a physical presence that is slowly moving offline. They upload a lot less frequently to their *EIT!* and *Memory Hole* YouTube channels, and are overall less prolific than they used to be; FFF, however, have become increasingly prolific in their output now they're primarily an online entity.

2013-2014: Beckles Embraces The Mainstream, *Memory Hole* is A Revolution

As the 2010s saw FFF and EIT! begin to evolve beyond the live performance space, and the world of found footage, they would start to interact with the industry that birthed them as that same industry fought to stay relevant in a more digital age. By the end of the decade, the found footage phenomenon would face this exact same struggle, fighting to find their place as traditional TV and the internet began to work symbiotically - TV became geared towards streaming services, and more mainstream websites became geared towards advertising in the same way TV had for decades. In spite of this, the found footage actors would bring their web-enhanced careers to traditional TV, the very place they had developed their work whilst operating in its studios and video duplication houses.

Figure 5: Promotional image of Derrick Beckles for Adult Swim's *Hot Package* (2013)

By 2013, all found footage actors were established, active, and prolific - EIT! had produced their fifth feature-length compilation film, FFF were on the sixth edition of their live showcase, and Adult Swim released the first season of *Hot Package*, Beckles' first TV series. Like his *Totally For Teens* pilot, which was not picked up for a full series, it was a satire of celebrity gossip magazine shows like *Entertainment Tonight*. The show ran for two seasons and balanced scripted skits with found footage edited in a similar way to *TV Carnage*. *Hot Package*, while significantly more aggressive in its satire, draws some comparisons with contemporary, more straightforward shows like *The Soup and Tosh.O* - themselves more modern successors to *AFV*. All these shows appear on regular television, deemed as acceptable and no longer fringe - even *Hot Package* and *Totally for Teens*.

Adult Swim has managed a rare balancing act for years of allowing its creatives to flourish and produce shows that have helped to usher in the next generation of

alternative comedy, while executives like Mike Lazzo protected them from the media empires like Time Warner, which eventually merged with AT&T. Adult Swim wasn't the only one walking this tightrope, as many recognizably alternative artists, who branded themselves as anti-corporate and anti-establishment, tried to forge successful careers within the corporate system whilst claiming to rally against it.[87]

This was also happening in certain corners of comedy, such as the Toronto of *No Logo*, where poster boys of anti-commodification The Kids In The Hall would work with corporations like Paramount Pictures and Amazon.[88] But Lazzo's programming block was one of the few that managed to successfully retain its outsider image, and continue to produce projects that didn't seem to belong on TV. Something like *Totally for Teens*, the first time anyone from the found footage phenomenon was able to make fun of TV whilst actually broadcasting on the platform, could only have been commissioned by Adult Swim. And it set the stage for the other actors to really engage with TV, and go after it in a way they hadn't done before.

EIT! would follow in Beckles' footsteps in 2016 with their own special for Adult Swim, *Gigglefudge U.S.A*, a nightmarish parody of *AFV*, hosted by Paul Reubens. It was a natural progression for them, as they had made earnest attempts at crafting narratives since 2010's *Tokyo Drift*, with ambitions to move away from films that were purely compilations, wishing to create a singular narrative out of the multiple narratives contained within their video collection. But the project's roots were in

[87] Andrew Limbong, "'Sellout' explores how anti-establishment views in punk puts bands in a tough spot", *NPR*, October 26, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/10/26/1049450432/sellout-explores-how-anti-establishment-views-in-punk-puts-bands-in-a-tough-spot.

[88] Calum Marsh. "Nearly 30 Years Later, The Kids in the Hall Are Ready to Offend You Again", *Complex Canada*, May 10, 2022, https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/kids-in-the-hall-return-interview.

another piece of work from several years earlier, and even featured some of the more notable clips from the work in question - *Memory Hole*.

In 2013, sometime before their first meeting with FFF, and an accord was reached within the found footage scene, EIT! were granted access to the entire library of *America's Funniest Home Videos* - an archive containing every single submission that made it to air, and everything that didn't. The team in charge of the library granted access to EIT! as they felt they were falling behind in a culture far more engaged with the internet than with conventional broadcast television, and wished to have their library preserved and put online for preservation. For some of Simakis' reservations about being an archivist, this was a daunting task they chose to take on, and they were playing archivists when they began uploading the footage. However, they felt it was far more interesting to do something new with this material than just include it in another humorous compilation film alongside commercial ephemera, especially since the videos were so regionally diverse. There was so much content from Middle America, usually overlooked in favor of work produced in major coastal cities and metropolitan areas, that it was far more intriguing. They also decided to evoke a very different emotion than laughter - fear, producing something akin to a horror film as opposed to a funny clip that could "go viral".

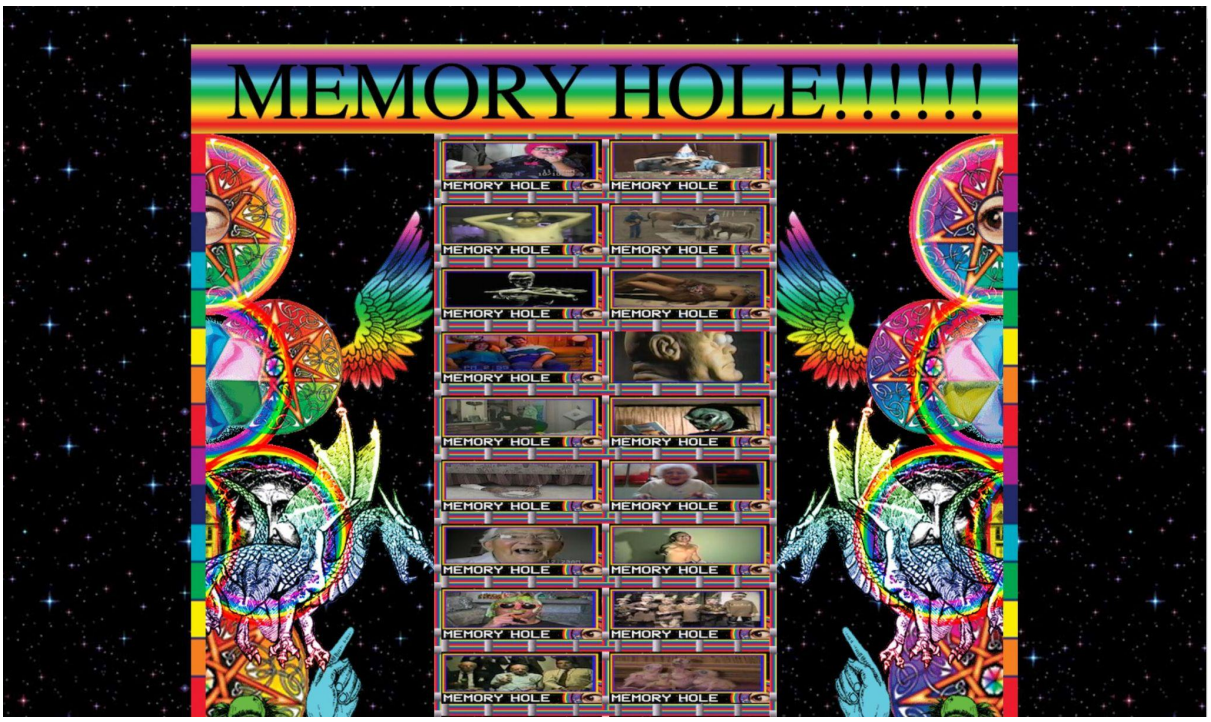

Figure 6: Front page of the *Memory Hole* website.

They launched a separate website and a separate YouTube channel, named after a concept from George Orwell's novel *1984*. *Memory Hole* launched in 2014, and according to a 2014 Vice article, the project was deliberately "more amateur, more intimate, bordering on voyeuristic."[89] Most of these clips, edited by EIT! in a somewhat similar fashion to their most "conventional" compilation tapes, are less than 60 seconds long. However, they are not manipulating the footage as much as they usually do, instead adding some unsettling sound effects or music. One of their most popular, and earliest, clips is *Wormhole Grandpa*, featuring a naked elderly man pulling faces while staring down a lens. The channel's most successful clip, *Chinless Dancer*, features a man shuffling into frame - shoulders raised and head sunk down to give the appearance he has no chin - with music composed by EIT! synced up to his mouth and hand movements.

[89] Troy Farah, "The Memory Hole Collects the 90s Home Movies That Were Too Weird for TV", *Vice*, November 5, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en/article/exm8az/reincarnating-90s-home-movies-that-were-too-weird-for-tv-131.

These clips are nonsensical, and presented without the kind of context they might be were they part of a normal, structured EIT! compilation film. And they are only available in their edited form, on Memory Hole's YouTube channel and official website, the latter designed in the webcore aesthetic that faithfully copies GeoCities webpages of the early 2000s. It seems like they embraced the Web 1.0 aesthetic in an attempt to immerse viewers in the era most of the *AFV* submissions came from - it is a far more complete experience viewing the clips on the *Memory Hole* website, compared to their YouTube channel. This kind of immersion is in keeping with the live performance elements of their work, as well as creating more of an atmosphere in which to view the unnerving, contextless clips. It doesn't seem like a tribute to this era, as much as it is an attempt to recreate the specific tone that seems less polished than web 2.0, and therefore less recognizable to viewers who may be younger, or weren't engaged in the early internet. This, in itself, is an effective way to create something horrifying for audiences. It is harder to create something visually distinct in the stark, clean layout of modern platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Memory Hole signified a shift in the found footage phenomenon, which from 1994 onwards had been far more focused on finding humor in what the key actors had unearthed online and in thrift stores, and instead focusing on more disturbing elements. For what felt like the first time, the found footage phenomenon didn't have to be funny, it could be disturbing as well. It is a different type of "found footage horror" to the popular subgenre of American cinema that includes films like *Cloverfield* and *The Blair Witch Project*. It is a far cry from EIT!'s previous work -

instead of focusing on political commentary and incorporating live performance with high production value, this project offered audiences found footage with no context whatsoever, utilizing the found footage in a different way to before - as a tool to evoke an emotional response from viewers, and not an intellectual one. To shock and disturb, as opposed to making them think about their satirical commentary present in their usual work.

But, with uploads to the *Memory Hole* project and their main YouTube channel becoming more sporadic as EIT! focus on other projects, it represents a frustrating milestone in the found footage phenomenon. Namely, besides the development of an interactive community of found footage fans pioneered by Pickett and Prueher - The Melindas - *Memory Hole* was the last time a truly fresh take on showcasing found footage had been produced.

Despite a recent period of stagnation, as the collective stopped prioritizing uploads, the channel gained attention when a found footage showcase program with the same title, presented by Will Arnett and produced by Quibi, was accused of stealing EIT!'s logo in addition to the title.[90] While Quibi was a mobile-based production outfit, it was a gamble by giants of traditional media (among them former Dreamworks executive Jeffrey Katzenberg) attempting to achieve success in a format they didn't truly understand. It was a gamble that failed spectacularly, shutting down within six months of launching[91] and costing investors almost $2 billion in losses - among these investors where broadcasting companies including NBCUniversal, Viacom and

[90] Tyler Hersko, "Quibi's 'Memory Hole' Accused of Plagiarizing Content From Boutique Art Collective", *Indiewire*, April 7, 2020, https://www.indiewire.com/2020/04/quibi-memory-hole-plagiarizing-content-everything-is-terrible-1202223451/.
[91] Elaina Low, "As Quibi Shutters, So Goes Nearly $2 Billion in Major Hollywood Investments", *Variety*, October 21, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/quibi-weighs-shutting-down-as-problems-mount-11603301946.

WarnerMedia[92]. Eventually, it would be the burgeoning content arm of TV software company Roku that purchased Quibi's library of 75 titles for less than $100 million[93], available for over 50 million people to view on their televisions, and attracting more viewers to the content in two weeks than Quibi did in its lifetime.[94] It was another example of figures from more conventional broadcasting attempting to fit into more internet-oriented content - in this case, mobile-based content - and failing to understand it. It wasn't their first interaction with the found footage actors, and it wouldn't be their last.

2015-2019: *Chop & Steele,* the *Jerry Maguire* Pyramid, and The Melindas

If the form struggled to evolve past *Memory Hole*, it is the remaining actors' development as professionals that may explain the scene's stagnation. As FFF and EIT! pursued intriguing new avenues in their careers, they were still producing regular found footage showcases online and in-person throughout the post-*Memory Hole* period. Yet their most notable achievements were either outside of the found footage scene, or as advocates for a new generation of found footage actors. Two developments define this post-*Memory Hole* era - the found footage actors' interactions with more traditional media conglomerates; and the formal establishment of a fan community that may well signal the phenomenon's nadir, consigning it to an active subculture that survives within its own bubble but with no further creative development or innovation.

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[92] Benjamin Mullin, Joe Flint and Maureen Farrell, "Quibi Is Shutting Down Barely Six Months After Going Live", *The Wall Street Journal*, October 22, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/tv/news/quibi-shuts-down-hollywood-investoes-1234812522/.
[93] Wendy Lee, "Why Kevin Hart's Quibi series is 'huge' on the Roku Channel", *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2021-06-22/kevin-hart-quibi-roku-die-hart.
[94] Dade Hayes, "Roku Originals Draw More Viewing In 2 Weeks Than Quibi Did In Its Lifetime", *Deadline*, June 18, 2021, https://deadline.com/2021/06/roku-originals-quibi-streaming-one-billion-1234777771/.

The formula of the live showcase had been perfected by the mid-2010s- attend a FFF show, and one would witness an introduction onstage by Pickett and Prueher, offering context to newcomers about who they are and what they do, and they would then take a seat to the side of the stage and provide commentary over screenings of their favorite found footage clips, and then standing up in between clips to offer further commentary and segues into the next footage that an audience would be shown. Attend an EIT! show, and one would be met with multimedia visuals that quite literally set the stage for members of EIT! to greet audiences in costume and begin the narrative arc that plays out in-between clips of their work. They both had reliable audiences that would attend, and buy their merchandise. It's hard to see how they could shake up their own formula.

EIT! had successfully carved out a niche which meant they weren't encroaching on FFF's creative territory, but unlike FFF they faced a paradox. They were operating in an era that increasingly fetishized analog media, despite audiences primarily consuming digital media. EIT! were, first and foremost, an online success story, using the internet to present clips from analog media. Within a few years of establishing themselves, they had a newfound love for live performance art and wanted to move away from the online space that had made them famous. They *need* the internet, yet want to avoid it. They *need* to associate themselves with analog media because it was the content that got them noticed online, yet want to move away from it, in favor of something more avant-garde. Despite utilizing analog media, they weren't an analog media phenomenon - caught in a technological transition, they were fighting to prevent themselves being pigeonholed as "the VHS guys" or

“the internet guys”. It was a website that made them famous, but they are now best known for a project involving VHS copies of *Jerry Maguire*.

Cameron Crowe’s drama *Jerry Maguire* was released on VHS in 1997[95], when the format was at its peak, with 16.7 million VCRs sold in the USA that year.[96] Having beaten Sony’s Betamax in the “format wars”, the VHS cassette represented opportunities for consumers not just in America, but around the world[97] - it would allow anyone to record anything, store it, and watch it any time they liked. It was a natural extension of the revolution seen in cable TV around the same time, offering a platform for niche content before the internet would become a haven for it. 1997 was also the year that the DVD format arrived in the USA.[98] By 2003, however, DVD rentals had surpassed VHS rentals in the USA[99], and by 2006, when David Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* became the last Hollywood movie to receive a VHS release, the VHS era was beginning to wind down[100] - it was the first year that the number of households with DVD Players finally surpassed those who owned a VCR.[101] Just because the era of VHS dominance would begin to wind down soon after *Jerry Maguire* was released on home video, didn’t mean that VHS tapes weren’t still being produced. It meant that, eventually, when people threw out their VCRs, there were a lot of VHS tapes looking for a home.

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[95] Jonah Engel Bromwich, "You Had Them at ‘Jerry Maguire’: This Art Exhibit Stocks Just One Movie", *New York Times*, December 15, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/15/arts/jerry-maguire-vhs-exhibit.html.
[96] *Sound & Vision*, "1997 was Record-Setting Year for Video Products.", February 1, 1998, https://www.soundandvision.com/content/1997-was-record-setting-year-video-products.
[97] Andrew C. McKevitt, *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 133.
[98] Jeff B. Copeland, "Oscar Day Is Also DVD Day", *E! Online*, March 23, 1997, https://web.archive.org/web/19970411035822/http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/0,1,841,00.html. Accessed via https://web.archive.org/.
[99] IGN Staff, "Die, VHS, Die!", *IGN*, June 20, 2003, https://www.ign.com/articles/2003/06/20/die-vhs-die.
[100] Geoff Boucher, "VHS era is winding down", *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 2008, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-dec-22-et-vhs-tapes22-story.html.
[101] *CNN Money*, "DVD players overtake VCRs", December 26, 2006, https://money.cnn.com/2006/12/26/technology/dvd_vcr/.

Figure 7: EIT's live installation *The Jerry Maguire Video Store* in Los Angeles.

EIT!'s ongoing mission to collect every copy of *Jerry Maguire* on VHS ever produced presented them with an opportunity to pursue the live element, which they seem to prioritize over showcasing found footage, in a very different way. In January 2017, by which point they had collected approximately 15,000 copies, they launched a live pop-up video store at the iam8bit gallery, in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, to house every copy they had acquired, and invite the public to continue offering donations of more tapes. It was a statement, and an opportunity to announce the end goal of the journey - to construct a pyramid, made entirely out of these tapes, in the Nevada desert. Just before the popup store opened to the public, they launched an online fundraiser asking for $500,000 in order to construct it, and only raised $1243.[102] Their reasons for choosing a desert, and a pyramid, are a little unclear. But considering their love for Alejandro Jodorowsky's surrealist film *The*

[102] Everything Is Terrible!, "Build a Jerry Maguire VHS Pyramid!", *Gofundme,* December 1, 2016, https://www.gofundme.com/f/jerry-maguire-vhs-pyramid.

Holy Mountain[103] - partially set in a desert - and previous shows' costumes and production design paying tribute to the film, it's fair to say this played a part in the decision.

Another potential reason to build a crude and pointless monument in an environment where it doesn't belong - which cannot have been lost on a California-based group so obsessed with culture jamming - was to emanate Californian "tech bros". The "tech bro" and their relationship to events like Burning Man, which takes place in the Nevada desert, are well-documented. It also ties into the idea of "Techno-Mysticism", encapsulated in the relationship between San Francisco-based art troupe USCO and tech pioneers of the late 1960s like Stewart Brand. An early example of art and technology interacting, Brand and USCO sought to merge and celebrate a union between technological advancement, mysticism inspired by Eastern religions, and drug culture.[104] Tech giants from the Bay Area seeking to reflect, collaborate and create in the middle of the desert seems like a natural extension of Brand and USCO's work together. This plays a huge role in the ethos of companies like Google and Amazon[105], and it's ripe for ridicule by a group like EIT! - they had come from Ohio, and in terms of their geographic origins, as well as their Midwestern sensibility, and political beliefs, they couldn't be further away from Silicon Valley.

If they were making fun of established parts of American culture like *AFV* on the very platform where that show originated, it makes sense that they would ridicule modern technological culture in a habitat that "tech bros" hold dear. But in a cruel twist of

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[103] Ben Munson, "Everything Is Terrible!'s Commodore Gilgamesh", The A.V. Club, April 12, 2012, https://www.avclub.com/everything-is-terrible-s-commodore-gilgamesh-1798230786.
[104] Turner, *Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 48-50.
[105] Turner, Fred, "Burning Man at Google: A Cultural Infrastructure for New Media Production", *New Media & Society* 11, 1&2 (February 2009): 83.

fate, Simakis would end up becoming a part of that habitat, albeit temporarily. He became the creative director of Giphy, a company that produces GIFs for online sharing. Giphy would go on to be acquired by Facebook in 2020[106], and even though it was forced to divest Giphy by EU regulators in 2022[107], Simakis would end up working with the same Silicon Valley giants he had previously lampooned.

The fact that they used a concept that originated from their earliest days as a found footage collective, and turned it into a grand statement that comments on the prioritization of quantity over quality of a commodity in the modern market- and potentially the "tech bro" culture, as well- demonstrates an ambition far from the early days of their blogspot. Obviously an endeavor announced in jest, the Pyramid of Jerrys marked a gradual desire to evolve, leaning further into live art installations, and prioritizing costumed performances over the compilation films themselves. Most recently, the collective worked with immersive art company Meow Wolf on several installations[108] in Denver, Colorado, showing a desire to collaborate with artists outside of the found footage phenomenon.

In an interview with the author, Simakis repeatedly raised the desire amongst EIT! members to explore different avenues, chief among them being the process of Video Synthesis. This is when video hardware- mostly from the 1990s and 2000s- is used to produce glitch art, such as saturating colors to an extent that neither the footage or the hardware were ever meant to be saturated. Video synthesizer technology

[106] Vishal Shah, "Facebook Welcomes GIPHY as Part of Instagram Team", *Meta*, May 15 2020, https://about.fb.com/news/2020/05/welcome-giphy.
[107] Mark Sweney, "Facebook owner Meta to sell Giphy after UK watchdog confirms ruling", *The Guardian,* October 18 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/oct/18/facebook-meta-sell-giphy-cma.
[108] Dave Jasmon, "Plastic, Pizza, and Positivity with Everything Is Terrible! at Meow Wolf Denver", *Birdy Magazine*, December 1, 2021, https://www.birdymagazine.com/text/plastic-pizza-and-positivity-with-everything-is-terrible-at-meow-wolf-denver-by-dave-jasmon/.

allows for a vast array of visual alterations, and feels like an organic transition for an art collective more interested in what can be done with found footage as a tool, rather than the footage itself. It also shows a desire to experiment that is more in keeping with avant garde artists such as Bruce Conner, and in line with the “DJ Culture” that Simakis considers the collective to be a part of. By looking to the past, EIT! is implying that, at least for them, there may not be any more creatively innovative ways to showcase ephemera and home videos.

By the late 2010s, EIT! were clearly ready to move past found footage in the same way as Beckles had. They had all outgrown the found footage scene, but EIT! has not fully transitioned out of it yet. For now, at least, they’re still active within the scene. FFF, on the other hand, are still firmly entrenched within it. However, as Beckles and EIT! had interacted with the forces of television in a more productive way - a key element of the post-YouTube era, FFF would draw the ire of television executives in a way that would exhaust them creatively and financially, leading to them drastically adjusting their careers.

Pickett and Prueher, despite their focus on documentary filmmaking and continuing the Found Footage Festival, are no stranger to absurd live acts of comedy. It began when a tired and hungover Pickett was unwilling to appear on a morning TV show in the UK during a tour there - in his place, alongside Prueher, British tour manager Michael Clapham would impersonate Pickett live on air, despite looking nothing like him and struggling to retain a convincing American accent. The pair clearly found this kind of deception funny, so it is no surprise they continued it for years to come. In 2010, they were involved in helping college friend Mark Proksch craft the

character of Kenny “K-Strass” Strasser, a self-described “Yo-Yo Master” who could not actually perform any successful Yo-Yo tricks. They booked him onto morning shows in TV stations across the US, purely for their own entertainment.

A sideline that clearly amused the pair, as the act helped propel Proksch to a mainstream comedy career, Prueher would take his place around 2013 as Chef Keith Guerke - a fake chef claiming to promote a fake book, *Leftovers Right: Making A Winner of Last Night's Dinner*. Forcing presenters to consume his improvised concoctions, such as a mashed potato ice cream cone and “Turbo Gravy”, live on air, the pranks culminated in Pickett joining him on air as they became a different set of characters. Chop and Steele, alleged “strongmen” who clearly demonstrated no kind of physical prowess, would prove their undoing. Debuting the characters on morning shows across America in late 2016, it was Gray Television, the parent company of morning show *Hello Wisconsin*, that would escalate dissatisfaction with the prank to an official lawsuit, filed against the pair in April 2017.

Figure 8: Pickett and Prueher in-character as fake strongmen Chop and Steele.

The next eleven months would prove to be a financial and psychological nightmare for the pair, despite ultimately resulting in the lawsuit being dismissed, in part thanks to successful crowdfunding to help with their legal fees[109]. They were forced to continue touring, as they sought to fundraise their legal fees via online crowdfunding platforms, in order to financially sustain their operation. It also brought some underlying tensions in the pair's differing ambitions to the surface. Prueher was always keen for job stability, whereas Pickett preferred the freedoms afforded to them by the freelancing and touring lifestyle. The fact these pranks occupied so much of their time alongside the Found Footage Festival, an enterprise only launched as a way to finance *Dirty Country,* shows a desire to diversify their output, in spite of the lawsuit attracting nationwide attention. It led to appearances on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* and *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, as well as an ill-fated appearance on *America's Got Talent*, when they relieved themselves live onstage in front of an audience. Unsurprisingly, the segment never aired but they made a very brief appearance on an episode of the show in a different context. It led to the biggest boost their careers had seen since the early momentum they had achieved in 2004.

It's easy to see all this as an intentional statement about their attitude towards broadcast television, treating legacy formats as nothing but comedy fodder - after all, they used their knowledge about, and experience in, the industry in order to get booked on the morning shows in the first place. They could have used their industry connections to get booked, with the crew being made aware of the joke, but chose not to. However, Pickett and Prueher consider themselves comedians and not artists - their motivations in these pranks aren't political (like political comedy duo The Yes

[109] William Hughes, "Get Involved, Internet: Help the Found Footage Festival guys out of a legal jam", *The A.V. Club*, July 18, 2017, https://www.avclub.com/get-involved-internet-help-the-found-footage-festival-1798264149.

Men, who perform politically-motivated pranks and also appear in the *Chop & Steele,* a 2022 documentary about this period of Pickett and Prueher's lives) or artistic (like EIT!). Instead, Pickett and Prueher just wonder what they can get away with - any statement that they might inadvertently make is unintentional.

These pranks are nothing new - comedian Bobcat Goldthwait, who also appears in *Chop & Steele*, was arrested for committing arson on the set of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. Andy Kaufman, as himself and his alter ego Tony Clifton, would menace late-night talk shows, as would Charles Grodin. Even celebrities like Madonna, Sandra Bernhard, and Joaquin Phoenix got in on the act, playing exaggerated versions of themselves for their own amusement on TV shows. Pranks like these are a precedent for performance art - even if, unlike EIT!, it isn't connected to Pickett and Prueher's usual line of work.

In the end, the found footage phenomenon won a battle against mainstream television, even if they didn't win the war. TV came to them in different ways - for Beckles and EIT!, it was positive interactions with Adult Swim and *AFV*, but it was initially more combative for FFF, before they raised their profile by being invited on some of TV's most established institutions, like *The Tonight Show* and *America's Got Talent*. But unlike YouTuber counterparts like Lilly Singh - whose transition to late night television has met with a relatively lackluster response[110] - TV wasn't able to dilute their unique form of entertainment. The found footage phenomenon began in the early days of the internet, but wasn't born of it - its actors were not a product of the internet, even though it benefited their careers; nor were they products of TV,

[110] Richard Lawson, "Lilly Singh's Late-Night Show Deserves Time to Grow Around Her", *Vanity Fair*, September 20, 2019, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/09/lilly-sing-a-little-late-nbc-late-night-review.

since they pushed against it for so long despite having started their careers in its infrastructure. The conflict raging between traditional TV and the internet didn't initially impact the found footage actors as much as YouTubers or internet animators, and was instead the background to their pranks against the media establishment. When traditional TV and the internet clashed with the rise of streaming services, the internet arguably won out, but at the cost of becoming more mainstream and abandoning many of its content creators. Eventually, however, it would come to affect the online ventures of the found footage actors, to the point that they were forced to diversify their efforts outside of video sharing sites like YouTube, which had increasingly come to define their work for audiences.

The TV industry was shaken up on February 1 2014 when, following an early venture into original programming with the series *Lilyhammer* in 2012, DVD delivery and video-on-demand streaming service Netflix released *House of Cards* on its service. A prestige political drama overseen by Hollywood director David Fincher, the show went on to score nine Emmy nominations and four Golden Globe nominations - a first for a series available exclusively online. Later that year, on July 11, *Orange Is the New Black* would prove even more successful, and garnered twelve Emmy nominations. It was the start of a war between traditional TV and internet TV that had been brewing for some time - shots continued to be fired, like Comcast intentionally slowing down Netflix traffic and forcing them to pay for a direct connection to their network.[111] Between 2013 and 2020, the state of the industry was uncertain for both viewers and the well-established TV infrastructure. But by 2022, the conflict would eventually reside as the two factions achieved a symbiosis of sorts, especially with

[111] David Goldman, "Slow Comcast speeds were costing Netflix customers", *CNN*, August 29, 2014, https://money.cnn.com/2014/08/29/technology/netflix-comcast/index.html.

the COVID-19 pandemic forcing a gradual change in viewing habits to become the standard. TV had become part of the internet, and vice versa.

As the TV industry evolved, the internet was becoming increasingly reliant on advertisers, and chief among these sites was YouTube. This has presented EIT! and FFF with the kind of struggles they wouldn't have to face in the early days of YouTube. Copyright takedowns are always an issue for channels like theirs, which share the content of others, no matter how much that content has been transformed. EIT! have had videos, and in several instances, their entire YouTube channel, deleted by the company for copyright violations over the years, despite their adherence to the fair use doctrine. The original versions of their most popular clips, which had hundreds of thousands of views, no longer exist and have since been transferred over to their vimeo channel for posterity. FFF have been hit with severe copyright strikes twice, in the earlier days of their channel, around 2008, and lost a lot of followers; it also happened as recently as 2021. It is something both entities live in constant fear of - if they have enough copyright strikes, and their channel is deleted entirely for repeat violations, it could significantly impact their livelihoods.

This is on top of YouTube leaning towards more child-friendly and advertiser-friendly content, the latter a particular priority after offensive content by creators lost them significant advertising revenue in the "adpocalypse", as it is best known, of early 2017.[112] YouTubers of all kinds, who can now viably make a living from their YouTube channels, and develop sustainable careers in the entertainment industry off the back of it, are faced with these concerns on a daily basis. It is seen as a major contributor

[112] Julia Alexander, "The golden age of YouTube is over", *The Verge*, April 5, 2019, https://www.theverge.com/2019/4/5/18287318/YouTube-logan-paul-pewdiepie-demonetization-adpocalypse-premium-influencers-creators.

to a multitude of creators leaving the platform, as they simply cannot keep up with the unpredictable whims of the algorithm[113], and demands of advertisers[114], on top of a copyright moderation system in serious need of reform. It is no longer enough to understand which thumbnails and titles are likely to attract attention- creators are often subjected to an intricate and seemingly random process[115] which increasingly favors content deemed appropriate for children[116].

It's no wonder all the actors of the found footage scene were looking for offline alternatives to show their work almost as soon as they had gained a following online - the pressures significantly affect YouTubers who began their careers much later on in the lifespan of the website[117], and not all of them have alternative avenues to make a living on the platform.[118] These ongoing concerns particularly affect FFF since their operations have moved almost exclusively online, save for the dwindling number of live shows they are carrying out each year. With a shift from live performance to webshows, one significant development has occurred - the formal establishment of a found footage community.

There had never been a communal hub for fans of found footage to congregate. EIT! encouraged audiences members and fans to send them copies of *Jerry Maguire* on

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[113] Simon Parkin, "The YouTube stars heading for burnout: 'The most fun job imaginable became deeply bleak'", *The Guardian*, September 8, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/sep/08/YouTube-stars-burnout-fun-bleak-stressed.
[114] Adam Popescu, "Is YouTube Risking A Creative Exodus?", The Fast Company, March 31, 2014, https://www.fastcompany.com/3028401/is-YouTube-risking-a-creative-exodus.
[115] Alexis C. Madrigal, "How YouTube's Algorithm Really Works", *The Atlantic*, November 8, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/11/how-YouTubes-algorithm-really-works/575212.
[116] Mariella Moon, "YouTube tweaked its algorithm to surface 'quality family content'", *Endgadget*, August 2, 2019, https://www.engadget.com/2019-08-02-YouTube-algorithm-quality-family-content.html.
[117] Julia Alexander, "YouTube's top creators are burning out and breaking down en masse", *Polygon*, June 6, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/6/1/17413542/burnout-mental-health-awareness-YouTube-elle-mills-el-rubius-bobby-burns-pewdiepie.
[118] Todd C. Frankel, "Why almost no one is making a living on YouTube", *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/03/02/why-almost-no-one-is-making-a-living-on-YouTube/.

VHS, and until 2018, this was the most proactive attempt to engage with members of what couldn't exactly be called a community yet. Part of the issue with the found footage scene, and why it can't be classified as a movement, is that there has been a lack of interaction and collaboration amongst actors, save for a few minor exceptions. There was a clearly identifiable tape trading subculture, operating before Beckles started the found footage scene, but there wasn't a clear found footage subculture. The actors all operated in spite of each other, as opposed to with, or because of, each other. Interested parties were always disparate, at best forming collectives like EIT! Pickett thinks maybe there have been facebook groups that existed for selling tapes, but he was unaware of any forums or message boards where people could bond over their love of found footage before 2018.[119] Like the three main actors themselves, there were pockets of people interested in the found footage phenomenon, but no real unified and clearly identifiable community. Even with fans of found footage, there was a scene and not a movement.

In October 2017, despite their legal woes, Pickett and Prueher rented out an office space in Brooklyn. This was a place to store the 11,000 video tapes in their collection, which had been distributed across their cars, apartments and a storage locker for years. It was from here, on April 3 2018, that they would livestream the first episode of their webshow *VCR Party Live*, essentially delivering a form of their live show online with the assistance of director Steve Lawrence and editor George Pasles. They would showcase new finds and interact with audiences via a phone line and live webchat occurring on Facebook and YouTube. On August 23 2018, Episode 19 featured guest Eliot Glazer presenting a clip starring actor Nick Nolte. It was a

[119] Pickett, zoom call.

segment from the TV show *48 Hours* - not to be confused with the 1982 movie of the same name that also stars Nolte - in which the actor greets Melinda, the receptionist at a Dallas health clinic, on his way to a routine medical exam, in which he passes out during a breath test. The randomness and banality of the clip amused Pickett and Prueher so much, they embarked on a quest to track down Melinda and interview her - something they often do with the stars of found footage they showcase on *VCR Party*. In subsequent episodes, they began each episode with the greeting “Well, Hello Melindas!”.

Pickett then suggested their viewers be referred to as “Melindas”, and primarily through fan-operated facebook groups, The Melindas were born - a key element of a subculture, or fanbase, is to have a name that strengthens the collective identity. These facebook groups arrange social meetups[120] around live FFF shows, share their own finds, and assist Pickett and Prueher as they seek context to found footage presented on the webshow. Between the groups, and *VCR Party Live* happening at the same time every week, it offers the kind of hub that allows a subculture to thrive. As observed by David Grazian - “...as the proliferation of fan web sites suggests, subcultures and scenes are often formalized into social organizations that provide more-or-less stable arenas for human interactions surrounding the collective consumption of popular culture.”[121]

Casually adopting a name for their fanbase has inadvertently been the most important contribution that Pickett and Prueher have made to the found footage phenomenon. Their fans can now identify themselves as Melindas, as opposed to

[120] David Grazian, *Mix It Up: Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Society*, (London: W.W. Norton & Company, Ltd., 2010), 85.
[121] Grazian, *Mix It Up*, 83.

just “fans of found footage in general”. And with an established subculture comes its identity - the likes of Mods, Teddy Boys and Rockabillies are long since outdated, yet these subcultures survive on the passion of niche audiences. They can dress in an identifiable way, and listen to a distinct style of music associated with the culture, which is enough to sustain it. Melindas may not have a specific dress code or listen to certain types of music, but they have in-jokes and regular events at which to congregate.

Another benefit to fostering a more coherent and socially active community, is that Melindas can source footage that might otherwise allude Pickett and Prueher. They travel around America less frequently and can miss out on obscure ephemera like Larry Pierce’s truckstop cassettes which launched their careers, but now have a community spread across the world to assist them. Most recently, this author brought them found footage from rural England they likely never would have discovered otherwise. A self-sustaining fanbase, who converse both online and in-person, are ensuring there is a constant, and more varied, stream of found footage to be presented. This not only helps FFF, but the phenomenon as a whole. With the formation of The Melindas, Pickett and Prueher may have just rescued the found footage phenomenon from eventual obscurity - the subculture may not progress any further, or experience any major innovations going forward, but it won’t die out or lose its community. It may not be a bad thing that they stick to the formula, and remain comfortable with their niche, but dedicated, fanbase.

As for EIT!, Simakis says that the collective didn’t do much to foster a community of their own, but evidence suggests otherwise - fans bring them VHS copies of *Jerry*

Maguire, and instantly understand the demand to “show us your Jerrys”. In an interview with the author, Simakis clearly regrets this lack of proactivity a little, but as they develop their art regardless of their audience, it doesn’t seem to have impacted EIT!’s success or creative development. But it was a fan who gave them one of their favorite ever clips, *Hitler Kid* - contextless footage from an audition tape where a young boy dresses up as, and impersonates, Adolf Hitler. It was a standout moment in their second compilation film. Simakis’ tone when expressing regret about not pushing for fan interaction, beyond “show us your Jerrys”, suggests that he wonders what clips of that caliber may have been found if they had focused on the community a little more, rather than on what interested them as individual artists. Besides the internet becoming increasingly important to the found footage phenomenon’s survival, by the end of the post-Beckles era, there was a more clear community than there ever was when *TV Carnage* began. At the very least, this should ensure the phenomenon’s survival, even when its current actors move on from it.

Looking Ahead

The post-*Memory Hole* era of the found footage phenomenon is creatively stagnant. In the years since its launch, plenty has happened to the actors in the found footage phenomenon, and their overall careers, but not to the actual form of found footage presentation. EIT!’s live installations have little to do with the form of found footage, and it never factored into FFF’s morning show pranks. Even the most important development in the phenomenon, the establishment of The Melindas, was simply a consolidation of a pre-existing audience that FFF had spent years building. Even if the found footage phenomenon has found its place, and will avoid going extinct by

sustaining itself on a niche fanbase, no one has offered fresh new takes on the presentation of found footage.

As of 2022, that community has not offered any new actors to rival EIT! or FFF. If EIT! leave the scene, Pickett and Prueher become the only major actors in an increasingly stagnant environment. They have been diversifying in recent years - as chronicled in *Chop & Steele*, Prueher is also designing board games, continuing to delve into niche, analog outlets. The pair have launched their own niche streaming service, *Rewind-O*, and use their platform to support other creators. They produced *The Dundee Project*, a short documentary about people who believe in UFOs, directed by and starring cult filmmaker Mark Borchardt, of *American Movie* fame. More recently, they have produced UK found footage documentary *A Life on the Farm* (full disclosure, the film was directed and produced by this author), about obscure found footage produced by a farmer in 90's rural England, which features appearances from Beckles, Pickett, Prueher, Simakis, Maier, and fellow EIT! collective member Lehr Beidelschies. They have also highlighted other, much smaller, contemporaries such as A/V Geeks and Strange Tapes - appearing on the former's show as regular guests, and getting involved in occasional showdowns similar to those they perform with EIT!; the latter having their own online showcase of ephemera uploaded to the FFF channel while Pickett and Prueher take an annual summer break.

Part of that diversification is a willingness to move past nostalgia for the world, and its media, that they grew up with. All three actors have primarily utilized found footage and ephemera from their childhoods, be it cartoons or commercials. All grew

up when the VHS format was at its peak, and having spent decades collecting tapes, they find it increasingly difficult to find more. Trips to video and thrift stores, especially while touring, have become less frequent simply because these stores are either closing down or stock far less VHS tapes than before. With Beckles long gone, and EIT! using ephemera to address topics such as advertising to children, rampant consumerism, societal conformity, and evangelical Christianity, only FFF are looking beyond the limitations of VHS content. Their webshow allows them to source and showcase clips found online, and Pickett claims that .IMGs in particular are the future of the phenomenon.

Scouring YouTube for random videos ending in the .IMG file format name, FFF are able to find videos akin to what EIT! uncovered for *Memory Hole*, as those kinds of videos are uploaded with little thought given to them by the uploader. It's the modern equivalent of an unlabelled home movie on VHS being carelessly donated to a thrift store for the likes of Pickett and Prueher to find. Such is their belief in its potential that FFF has produced a one-off special for their online audience highlighting .IMGs, something they haven't done for any other kind of ephemera. However, this is not a move that has heralded an important shift in the found footage phenomenon - it hasn't changed the game, and .IMGs are just another stack of content for FFF to mine for their webshows. They don't usually present any .IMGs at their live shows, and EIT! haven't followed suit and dug into .IMGs, instead focusing on the satirical potential of VHS ephemera and Web 1.0. FFF haven't incorporated any of this into their presentation or aesthetic styles, so the two actors are clearly going down different paths in how they utilize the internet for their work.

Pickett also suggests that the natural progression of their scene is memes, where people repurpose and transform content out of context, purely for entertainment, as opposed to trying to forge a career out of it like the found footage actors. They all transformed ephemera, initially, for their own amusement, and stumbled across paying audiences and viable careers in doing so. But they are established, with reliable audiences, and in an online economy less favorable to content creators, it is hard to imagine any successors being able to make a living like the found footage actors have. But economics aside, Pickett is right - memes are temporary, like most ephemera, and endlessly altered by others. It is also a perfect realization of Simakis' desire for an opensource culture, and a compelling argument to consider meme culture to be the next evolution for transformation and presentation of ephemera.

What is concerning for the future of the found footage phenomenon is not the fact the three most prominent actors are gradually departing it, nor is it the rise of the internet (if anything, that could ensure its survival), the death of thrift stores, or the emergence of new platforms through which to showcase found footage. It is the fact that, as the phenomenon has evolved and, arguably, become democratized with the arrival of Youtube, no new notable actors have emerged. There are very few creators imitating Beckles, FFF or EIT!, and because footage is easier to find, one would assume that there would be new actors in the found footage scene. New actors would be utilizing newer technologies, and sourcing and transforming a later generation of ephemera, offering different sociopolitical commentary, or embracing a different kind of anarchic aesthetic. Instead, it seems like Pickett and Prueher may be the last actors of the found footage phenomenon, despite their best efforts to usher in the next generation - yet, it seems as though they are happy to preside over

the subculture, while developing their careers outside of the phenomenon, too. Moving primarily online offered them flexibility they weren't afforded during their years of touring across America, and having a thriving community of fans means the subculture can be sustained, if not developed. The found footage phenomenon stopped developing after *Memory Hole*, and instead refined itself to a point where it has reached its creative apex - it doesn't need to change, and it won't. When Pickett and Prueher leave the phenomenon, the Melindas can replace them, taking on the role of custodians as opposed to new actors.

Conclusion

Emerging from the outskirts of countercultural scenes across the US and Canada, and the lower rungs of the network television infrastructure, the found footage scene turned into a phenomenon over the last three decades. It transformed from an underground subculture playing out via mail order, to one that capitalized on the early days of YouTube, before eventually finding its home on stages across America. Different flavors of showcasing ephemera from the VHS era offered its actors viable and successful careers. Operating as an alternative to more mainstream television, the three major actors who shaped this phenomenon went on to collide with TV in different ways. While Beckles and EIT! found varying levels of success with Adult Swim, Pickett and Prueher appeared on late night institutions - such as *The Tonight Show* - as a result of mocking morning TV shows to the point of being sued by them. As many of the major actors slowly left the scene they had formed, those who remained would go on to secure its legacy, by fostering the kind of community that the phenomenon had lacked for years.

Even if the subculture of Melindas move away from the phenomenon, along with Pickett and Prueher, and the found footage phenomenon completely dies out, there will be plenty of new forms of video content showcasing to take its place. In fact, there already are three primary successors in the forms of memes, YouTube commentary channels, and vaporwave. If we consider this chronicle of the found footage phenomenon to be a comprehensive history of its development, let's take the opportunity to assess its influence and impact. What can we learn about how these actors showcased their sourced works, compared to what works are showcased now, and in different forms? And who are these natural successors to the found footage phenomenon?

First and foremost, the key differences between the found footage phenomenon, and the newest generation of those who showcase and transform ephemera, are *what* content these new actors are sourcing, and *how* they're sourcing it. Pickett believes memes to be the future of found footage and ephemera exhibition.[122] There is some weight to that theory, it is important to remember that *how* a meme went viral isn't the point - if everyone is producing variants on the meme, a modern creator will jump on the bandwagon. This was demonstrated as far back as Rob Sheridan's ability to host an entire website for variations of "Baby Cha-Cha", the earliest example of an internet meme, back in the "wild west" days of the internet. Viral videos - like *The Evolution of Dance*, a recorded performance of a dancer demonstrating various dance styles throughout history; or *Winnebago Man*, expletive-laden outtakes from a Winnebago sales commercial, whose central figure, Jack Rebney, would be the

[122] Pickett, Zoom call.

subject of a 2009 documentary of the same name, starring Pickett and Prueher- will be shared in their original form, whereas a meme is something different. It only endures if it is constantly changed as it is shared - people don't share one version of a meme, but multiple unique variations. They were initially popular as static images, but are increasingly taking the form of video content, in part because social media algorithms favor this medium.[123]

A meme relies on creators to transform it, but most, if not all, of those creators now capitalize what is trending - this is in stark contrast to the methods of Pickett et al. They chose what they transformed, as opposed to copying what everyone else found relevant to reinterpret. The positive reception they received was from people discovering the content *because* the actors have found it - not because they had transformed content that was already popular. The fact that algorithms often set trends, and not individuals, is a key difference between the backgrounds in which found footage actors and modern creators operate.

Memes are a natural progression from the work of the found footage actors, but it is unlikely that they represent the singular future of found footage showcasing, even if it has become the most popular way for video content to reach the widest audience. Instead, the clearest replacement for found footage showcases like FFF are commentary channels on YouTube. Platforms like Twitter and Tiktok, which is where many memes now gain traction, rely on brevity for their humor, and for shareability. The home for longform exhibition of transformed ephemera is now YouTube, and specifically on commentary channels, as opposed to reaction channels. While both

[123] Oneday, "Why Social Media Algorithms Love Video Content", n.d., https://www.oneday.com/blog/why-social-media-algorithms-love-video-content.

feature individuals, or groups, presenting their reaction to trending content, the latter channel type merely records their immediate reaction to a piece of unedited content in real time. Commentary channels, however, involve more creative intervention with the popular content they are capitalizing on - they might react to the content, but they will take the time to produce a script, structure a video, and selectively edit the parts that they find most interesting, or are relevant to their commentary.

Crucially, though, neither of these types of channels focus on the obscure, or make the effort to source it, like the actors of the found footage phenomenon, because they literally can't afford to. Commentary channels certainly make an effort in how they present the content on which they commentate, more so than reaction channels, but they don't curate in the same way as Beckles et al, due to how the YouTube algorithm operates in favor of what is already popular - it is designed to appeal to the broadest possible audience who may not favor more unusual content. If commentary channels go "crate digging" - the act of collectors going to extreme lengths to find content, be it analog or digital - like the found footage actors, their work may be ignored in favor of something that appeals to a wider audience.

YouTube now presents a viable career for creatives, but these new creatives must adhere to the algorithm in order for their work to be seen - one which has been designed to favor the most popular and indistinct content as possible in order to maximize views - and to generate ad revenue that provides them with an income. Increasingly, these younger creators are the victim of deskilling that comes with the diffusion of new technologies - Modern audiences can now access everything that meme creators and commentary channels can, so it is less impressive when we are

presented with their transformed content. We are more literate in technology, with the capability to transform trending content ourselves. Found footage actors, however, have stood out in large part because of *what* they find, rather than *how* they transform it.

The found footage actors developed their careers, and grew up in a society, before YouTube and the attention economy dominated online media. It was harder to find content unless someone had recorded it, and even if they had, it was harder to acquire those recordings. More effort was put into sourcing the content the actors would transform, partially because their early careers didn't rely on it, and because it was a passion project for them. But modern creators don't operate in a culture of scarcity, with so much content immediately available for them to transform, and general audience focus has shifted to the immediate, as opposed to the curated or the obscure. Unlike Melindas, for example, they aren't impressed by the effort of "crate digging". But fans of the found footage phenomenon acknowledging and praising the effort involved in such scavenging, adds a level of legitimacy to the act of doing so - the actors are doing it for their audiences as much as they are for personal satisfaction. They are doing it because they love it, not because they have to.

And it must be a relief that their audiences are now well-established, and they aren't reliant on a younger audience whose perception of their work would differ drastically. The craft knowledge and experience they bring to the transformation and exhibition of obscure ephemera does not chime with the majority of audiences who would likely consume content from commentary channels. As opposed to creating work that

would draw an audience to them, creators must now tailor their work towards an audience. It is not entirely the fault of the algorithm, when it is adapting according to audience behaviors. The aforementioned issues are just some of the pressures that young creators face every time they upload, and in order to survive are forced to upload frequently to the point of creative burnout. This is a significant difference from the actors of the found footage scene, who developed within a TV ecosystem that inadvertently encouraged them to be creative, whilst they stewed away in monotonous, low-ranking production crew jobs and video duplication houses. They were able to develop within an ecosystem without the pressure to have their work seen immediately in order to succeed - when they eventually presented themselves to audiences, it was on their terms, as artists with established identities, and it clearly paid off.

However, modern creators who create memes and run commentary channels have an advantage, in that they grew up with more media literacy and fluency in popular culture because they had the internet at their disposal from the beginning of their careers. They did not develop in the same ecosystem as the found footage actors, where one had to painstakingly search and replicate what could be found, in order to present it to others. Modern creators have a better understanding of the culture in which ephemera is produced than the found footage actors did when they were starting out. What seems to hold these new actors back, however, is that they can’t be quite as experimental for fear of falling foul of the YouTube algorithm - be it trying to retain audience attention, or traversing the content moderation and copyright systems. It’s not unlike the pioneers of early hip hop who primarily used copyrighted

material for sampling, and were faced with not just censorship, but legal troubles.[124] This, as well as the overbearing algorithms driven by audience behavior and favoring content with the broadest possible appeal, makes it difficult for an artist to indulge their interests and share it with an audience. They must work in fear of a poorly-designed copyright system, in addition to an algorithm that works against them. It is a harsher landscape for the new generation who are showcasing ephemera than it was for the actors of the found footage scene.

Figure 9: Screenshot of the eBay auction for the most expensive VHS tape ever sold.

This is, oddly enough, playing out in an environment where younger generations are nostalgic for the 1980s and 1990s, yet seem to ignore attempts by their peers to highlight this ephemera on YouTube. There is currently a revival of analog media like vinyl records, which in 2022 surpassed sales of CDs[125], and VHS, despite JVC ceasing production of VCRs in 2016. This is in addition to a very lucrative market

[124] Amanda Sewell, "How Copyright Affected the Musical Style and Critical Reception of Sample-Based Hip-Hop", Journal of Popular Music Studies 26, no. 2-3 (June-September 2014): 295-320.
[125] Steve John , "Why Vinyl Records Are Making a Comeback in 2022", *The Manual*, January 4, 2022, https://www.themanual.com/culture/why-vinyl-is-coming-back/.

that has emerged for those looking to trade VHS tapes on platforms like instagram[126] and ebay, in some cases selling for upwards of $80,000.[127] Older generations feeling nostalgic for these formats is understandable, but it's the interest from younger people that is intriguing. There is historical precedent for this - each period of history is nostalgic for another period, especially younger people who did not live through the era in question. In 1980s America, there was a period of intense nostalgia for the music, fashion and culture of the 1950s. Before that, between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, British youth birthed the "Teddy Boy" subculture where people would wear outfits that blended the style of 1940s America with Edwardian-era fashion.

If these younger generations, who are viewing memes and commentary channels, are turning to the format that kickstarted and defined the found footage phenomenon, it may attract them to the phenomenon itself. It is somewhat plausible, now there is an immediate community of Melindas, that they could ingratiate themselves into the phenomenon and indulge their interests. It doesn't seem like a stretch to assume some of the more hardcore fans of VHS might discover the found footage phenomenon and help it to survive, in the same way that many other niche subcultures have managed to endure past their peak.

It is not just the VHS element of the found footage phenomenon that is likely to live on through the next generation's gateway interest in older analog formats.
Some younger millennials, and older members of Generation Z, are nostalgic for the internet of their childhood - the same form of internet embraced by EIT! Recent

[126] Hannah Selinger, "Who Is Still Buying VHS Tapes?", *New York Times*, February 20, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/20/style/vhs-tapes.html.
[127] "Nukie (1993) factory sealed and graded VHS tape", eBay, accessed January 7 2022, https://www.ebay.com/itm/225324479952.

cultural developments have demonstrated younger creatives producing work out of nostalgia for the early internet. Perhaps most intriguing of the new internet aesthetics and genres to have emerged is Vaporwave - a microgenre of music that slows down and transforms types of music most commonly associated with elevator music, or inoffensive “muzak” that might play in places such as shopping malls and grocery stores. The aesthetic that often accompanies music videos of these tracks borrows heavily from 1980s imagery such as wireframe, or “light grid”, graphics - best described as “a network of glowing straight lines receding in perspective against a black background”[128]- and VHS glitches. This ties vaporwave to both pre-internet nostalgia, and association with the cultural influences of early internet which have led to multiple microgenres.

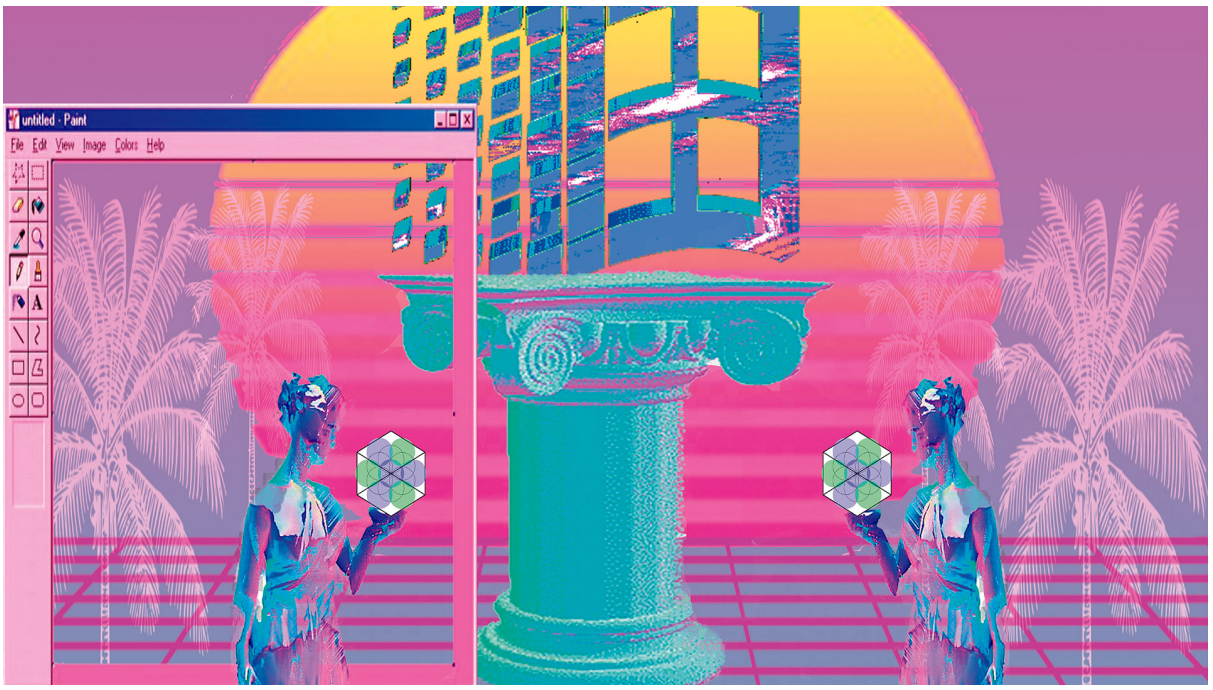

Figure 10: Visual example of the Vaporwave aesthetic.

[128] Richard McKenna, “Vanishing Point: How the Light Grid Defined 1980s Futurism”, *We Are The Mutants,* https://wearethemutants.com/2017/02/16/vanishing-point-how-the-light-grid-defined-1980s-futurism/.

Chiming with Pickett's belief that memes are the next step in the presentation of ephemera, Lucy March goes further and argues that they are the next stage in the evolution of culture jamming - the ideology that has defined the work of EIT! since they began - and that vaporwave is a part of the modern culture of ironic memes.[129] This can at once be as anarchic and absurdist as Beckles' work, but also as pointed as EIT!'s. Vaporwave is also tied to the VHS format, as it is often recorded on VHS cassettes as part of a statement about the society which revered the format.[130] Irony is a key element of vaporwave[131], and it is hard to imagine that some of EIT!'s work hasn't played a role in its development.

The influence of Web 1.0 nostalgia goes further, documented by other microgrenres such as "nightcore" - a genre of music born on the internet, consisting of pre-existing songs that are sped-up and pitch-shifted, which was developed on YouTube and filesharing sites like LimeWire, and fostered an intensely passionate fanbase online[132]. There is also "webcore"[133], which is built around the aesthetics of earlier web artifacts like the Windows 95 operating system, programs like Microsoft Paint, and the clunky designs of Geocities webpages. FFF have ensured the survival of the found footage phenomenon as a subculture, but EIT! are the actors who have influenced the very future of ephemeral exhibition. This form of exhIbition is somewhat anarchic, and somewhat reliant on nostalgia, but even if it is presented in an absurdist manner, it has a point to make. Culture Jamming is a concept that goes

[129] Lucy March, "'You Say You're AntiCapitalist…Yet You Earn a Living!': Teenage Stepdad and the Memeification of Culture Jamming", I*nVisible Culture*, no. 34 (May 2022): 4, https://doi.org/10.47761/494a02f6.7ebc00cd
[130] Sharon Schembri, "Digital consumers as cultural curators: the irony of Vaporwave", *Arts and the Market* 7, No. 2, (2017): 200.
[131] Ken McLeod, "Vaporwave: Politics, Protest, and Identity", *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30, No 4, (December 2018): 139.
[132] Rob Arcand, "How Nightcore Became Your Favorite Producer's Favorite Genre", *Vice*, August 15, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en/article/jp4ve3/nightcore-history-essay.
[133] Günseli Yalcinkaya, "Why are we all so obsessed with early web nostalgia?", *Dazed Digital*, February 28, 2022, https://www.dazeddigital.com/science-tech/article/55404/1/why-are-we-all-so-obsessed-with-web-1-nostalgia.

beyond the found footage phenomenon, and is less reliant on the ephemera of the past. It needs media artifacts to weaponize, but it is not embedded in the “golden age” of VHS content like much of FFF’s output - it works with the ephemera of any period or topic it chooses to satirize.

For example, an anonymous, masked artist has been running *Christian Nightmares* across a blog, newsletter, YouTube channel, and various social media accounts since November 2009. In a similar vein to EIT!, *Christian Nightmares* shares various clips, and eventually created compilations, of ephemera from the far-right and evangelical christians of America which spans back to the 1970s. The artist, a former “born again” Christian, uses christian ephemera from the past to demonstrate how religious fervor in American media is not a recent phenomenon. EIT! would also satirize christianity through culture jamming in their compilation film, and accompanying live show, *The Great Satan*. The concept of culture jamming just so happened to work well within the confines of the found footage phenomenon, but didn’t rely on it. If anything, culture jamming has enriched the phenomenon, adding some depth when compared to the more absurdist efforts of Beckles, and the more conventionally comedic approaches of Pickett and Prueher.

While the found footage phenomenon looks set to survive past the major actors that shaped it, within the bubble of its community of Melindas, it is unlikely to evolve. But its successors are clear. At its least inventive, the next stage of ephemera exhibition is commentary channels. However, the latest generation of nostalgic creatives seem to be crafting something far more interesting, weaponizing nostalgia and creating something new from ephemeral artifacts of the past, which is most apparent in

vaporwave. Memes, too, are offering us a glimpse of the direction in which ephemera exhibition is heading. What is most interesting about these three different forms is that each seems to align with the unique angles of each major found footage actor.

Memes are closest to the random, unpredictable work of Beckles, which he produced for his own amusement - he may not have used trending content, but the intention and execution are similar. Both are clearly anarchic transformers of content, their sole intention to amuse themselves or others with their often nonsensical creations. Commentary channels are closest to the work of FFF - they both add value to content through their commentary, and transform it through selective editing and humorous observations on the material. Both are curators to varying degrees, even if it is only FFF that are scavengers. Vaporwave is very similar to the work of EIT!, and not just because both operate with an adherence to the mission of culture jamming - the collective and the microgenre seek to make a point with their art, and weaponize nostalgia in order to do so. They are both culture jammers, but one primarily utilizes audio and some visual imagery, and the others are performance artists. It is this latter category, the culture jammers, who understand the new value of nostalgia. The commentators and the anarchic transformers - those who alter source material into something abstract and nonsensical just because they can - do not intentionally trade in the satirical currency that nostalgia now offers.

We have chronicled a phenomenon that may be nearing the end of its creative life - even if it will endure as a subculture without innovation or development - and deconstructed its reliance on the past, as well as assess what may come along to

succeed it. But to only focus on the more negative side to its natural conclusion is to overlook its significant impact on North American culture. As with niche cultural phenomena that came before it, successors took elements of what influenced them from those subcultures and subgenres, and brought an evolved form of it into the mainstream. For example, giants of modern American cinema - everyone from Steven Spielberg and George Lucas to Quentin Tarantino - grew up with a love of everything from exploitation cinema and movie serials, to monster movies produced by Universal Studios. They would introduce elements of this into their movies, and the likes of *Jaws*, *Star Wars,* and *Pulp Fiction* would permeate into every area of popular culture.

In a similar way, we have evidence that *TV Carnage* influenced some of the biggest stars of Adult Swim, including Heidecker and Wareheim. The influence of the found footage phenomenon is apparent in big-budget shows for streaming services such as *Saturday Morning All Star Hits!* on Netflix. The show uses a filter to look as though it was shot on VHS, and parodies the kind of saturday morning cartoon programming blocks that Pickett and Prueher showcase and make fun of during their weekly webshow. Another example is *Comrade Detective* on Amazon Prime, where the showrunners recreated a fictional cop show from the former Soviet Union, as though it had been produced in the 1980s, and dubbed the foreign cast with notable American comedians - exactly the kind of ephemera that would be sourced and transformed by the found footage actors. Streaming shows like these reach wider audiences than anything being produced by the found footage actors, and we are also beginning to find an increasing number of artists[134] who cite these actors as

[134] Alexandra Parrish, "anthony smith", *aint–bad*, January 7, 2013. http://www.aint-bad.com/article/2013/01/07/anthony-smith/.

inspirations for their work[135]. The influence of the found footage phenomenon on modern media is undeniable, and its development over the past 25 years has ensured it will continue to exert influence over everything from web content to streaming shows for years to come.

Nostalgia, in part, drove the found footage phenomenon. The cultural shift from analog to digital media would extrapolate its success, despite being built on content from an analog age. Its death, or its continued stagnation, may not come about because of technological advancement, but because of generational and cultural shifts. Yet the actors involved provided an invaluable service in preserving huge amounts of ephemera, and amateur home movies, that otherwise may have been overlooked. They also proved to have a notable impact on alternative comedy in North America; and on content produced during the age of digital cable which fragmented the television ecosystem that, in part, gave birth to the found footage scene. Our actors eventually found themselves encountering a television industry trying to keep up with an online space that had helped our actors develop their careers. They had the upper hand, and either railed against the industry, or were able to bring their unique style to an older medium. Yet it would be the new ecosystem that would herald the phenomenon's sunsetting, devaluing the kind of niche and obscure media that once made them a more prominent subculture in North America.

But creatives now living within the new ecosystem are already taking elements of what made the found footage phenomenon so successful, and crafting a form of

[135] "Squint: Cinema From Cinema Panel (30.10.22)", *Weird Weekend Cult Film Festival*, December 8, 2022. http://makeitweird.co.uk/2022/12/08/squint-panel/.

ephemera exhibition that owes much to the works of Beckles, FFF and EIT! This new form seems to be a blend of anarchy, satire, humor, and an intimate understanding of the cultural past of North America. This new generation of exhibition, which combines humor with more pointedly critical satire of both ephemera, as well as nostalgia, owes a great debt to the combined work of Beckles, Pickett, Pruher, Simakis and Maier.

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