



# Media-N: The Online Journal of the New Media Caucus

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*Screenshots and Audio Effects: Electronic Events*

**Chairs: Doreen Maloney and Rachel Clarke**

Introduction to  
Screenshots and Audio Effects: Electronic Events  
Doreen Maloney and Rachel Clarke

When we put together the call for Screenshots and Audio Effects: Electronic Events we kept in mind that sessions for New Media, or Media-Based Technology, or whatever our area is called, were often comprised of panels looking at the semantics and rough definitions that plague our field, its curriculum, and its academic circumstances.

We opted to depart from this theme since our interests are situated more in how artists negotiate aesthetics, content/concept and theory with their use of technology, rather than the politics of the academy. We were very interested in having a session that allowed others in our field to get a view of the diverse, wry, stunning and ambitious work being done despite the labeling and the mechanics.

The panelists chosen employ low-tech, high-tech, traditional and non-traditional means of creating "new media" art. The main theme that underscores each of the pieces to be presented here today is the artists' intelligent and sophisticated view of how mediated art creates and adds to the experience of culture.

The resilience and creative problem-solving skills each panelist employs are likewise remarkable and so it is with great pleasure that we introduce in the order of their presentation: Nomi Talisman, independent artist, San Francisco; Zachary Lieberman, Parsons School of Design; Susan Otto, CADRE Laboratory for New Media, San Jose State University; Roberto Bocci, Georgetown University; Joyce Rudinsky, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and Conrad Gleber, of Florida State University. Five of the six panelists submitted their papers for inclusion in this edition of media-N.

# Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies

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This paper is a revised version of my talk on Screenshots and Audio Effects panel at the CCAc conference in Atlanta, 2005, where I discussed the complex relationships between home movies, amateur film, found footage and mainstream cinema in my work *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies*. This paper explores further some of the key concepts and thoughts about this piece, as well as some of its technical details.

*Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies* is room-sized video installation, set up to simulate a movie-going experience, with a bank of theater seats, and a wide videoprojection showing short video pieces made from found film footage. By scanning this footage frame-by-frame on video I made new movies that comment on cinema as a cultural phenomenon. The video pieces range from 40 seconds to almost three minutes in length.



Video still: *Pink Feathers*, 2003  
from *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies*, Nomi Talisman

My work *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies* explores the cultural role of cinema and its relationship to everyday life. My main sources are home-movies, from the 30's to 70's, but I also incorporate footage from the fringes of the industry, such as educational and instructional films, and travelogues. I used found 8 and 16 mm footage that I categorized and catalogued. I transferred the celluloid to video by scanning filmstrips, which I then re-animated and edited. Each scan consists of three filmstrips that are placed next to each other; they relate on both the horizontal plane (the surface of the screen), and the vertical plane (one sequence

following the other). The individuality of each filmstrip is maintained within the moving triptych. Each window is framed by the visual information that is usually hidden: the sprocket holes, the optical soundtrack, the type of film, and the processing date.

I carefully selected highlights from the found footage: a facial expression, a body gesture, a car passing by, and a camera shot focusing on a landmark. These condensed scenes are usually as short as three seconds. They often differ in format, style, or content, but because they appear in the same cinematic space, the montage of these composed elements suggest new meanings. For example, a sequence of a child dancing in a suit and hat, sharing the screen with pink flamingos and a street parade in total become reminiscent of a musical. Images of a woman taking a bath, juxtaposed with the view of a hotel room and an airplane come to resemble scenes from Hitchcock movies. The musical and the suspense movie, like other codified genres of cinema, offer the viewer a formulated experience firmly established by well-defined rules and responses.

Home movies tend not to follow a narrative. They are simply records of events, at the same time both special and quotidian: a wedding, a birthday party, a child's first steps, the new car, a family vacation. By looking closely at this database, familiar cinematic scenes begin to emerge: a woman in a white dress runs down a road in a shot that seems like a 50's melodrama; two men in trench-coats cross a field to shake hands, as if meeting in a spy movie. A man in the corner of a room smokes like Bogart. Freed from their original contexts, these isolated moments take on an iconic quality. By uncovering the film genre characteristics embedded in home movies, my work frames home movies as part of a bigger cinematic experience, and plots the relationship between amateur and mainstream film.

I constructed my video by playing with cinematic conventions, manipulating scraps of discarded footage, much as a cinematic viewing can be broken down into a series of conventions, such as titles, sounds and shots. These very short films become commentaries that contain the essential components of the phenomenon, or genres they refer to: a western, a musical, or a "foreign" film. The films become agents, vehicles through which to explore the society that produced them. As Baudrillard states in *America*: "The American City seems to have stepped right out of the movies. To grasp its secret, you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards to the city." (1). My work is, in part, an exploration of Baudrillard's statement. I have chosen as my raw material the real world of America, as recorded by amateurs; yet my explorations of this real world were examined through the lens of the cinema. My work illustrates how amateur film and cinema support one another, and investigates the way real life mimics film, which is itself a simulacrum of real life. I will explore the complexity of these relationships through three of the short pieces.



Video still: *Pink Feathers*, (detail), 2003  
from *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies*, Nomi Talisman,

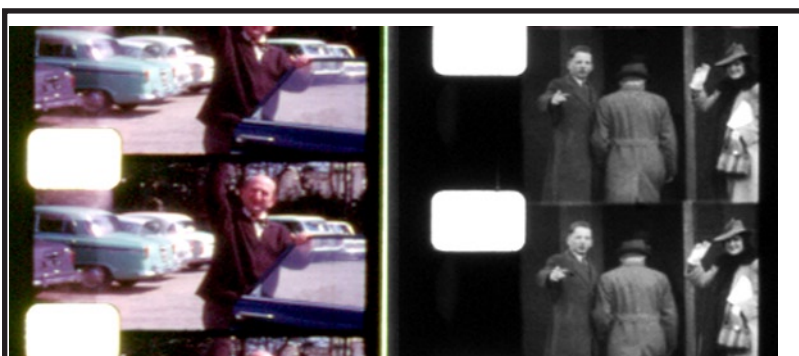
Much of the found footage I collected, including home movies of my own family, featured weddings, vacations, scenes of everyday romance; people kissing, waving goodbye, departing.

Watching my parent's wedding on celluloid, I wondered if they had felt as if they were starring in their own Hollywood romantic movie. These everyday love stories, heartbreaks and heroic moments are the building blocks of many movies with which the audience identify, dream about, and attempt to emulate. I chose *Casablanca* (See QuickTime) as a model to comment upon viewers' identification, because it contains the iconic raw material of romantic fantasies: good versus the ultimate evil (the Nazis); lovers torn between staying together and separation for the sake of a greater good.



Video still: *Casablanca*, 2003  
from *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies*, Nomi Talisman

*Casablanca* is a cult movie because it uses all these – and many more – stereotypes. Umberto Eco describes *Casablanca* as a “hundred clichés... talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion.”(2). The home movies that I found embodied these stereotypical moments: over and over again couples kiss, part, wave goodbye, visit exotic locations, fall in love. I spliced these moments, layering each separate personal story to create a romantic narrative. This narrative selects the iconic highlights of *Casablanca*. To cement the association in the viewer's mind between my home made *Casablanca* and the original movie, I utilized lines from the song “As Time Goes By.” Shown as subtitles, or as a karaoke text beneath the images, the soundtrack consists of a phrase from the song whistled off-key, as a scratched record adds a quiet, nostalgic background noise. This homemade soundtrack suggests the magic and hope that cinema lends to everyday life; when for a moment we live the glamour of the screen, and hear “our song” playing in the background.



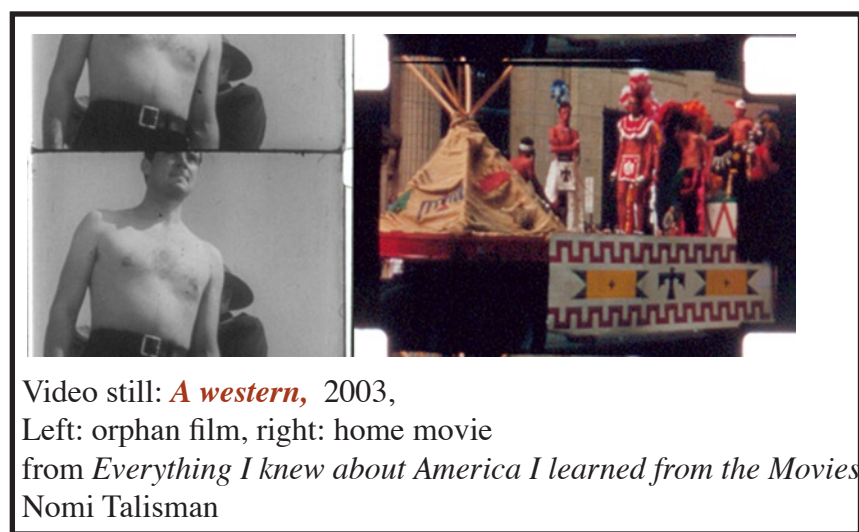
Video still: *Casablanca*, 2003  
from *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies*, Nomi Talisman

The western section of my video began with footage I found of a child pretending to be a sheriff in a cardboard model of a prison cell, and another child riding a rocking horse (See QuickTime) I began to consider the conventions of the western: an exploration of themes such as wilderness versus civilization, freedom versus restriction, and community versus individualism, to borrow Sarah Berry-Flint's categories in Genre(3).



Video still: *A western*, 2003  
from *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies*, Nomi Talisman

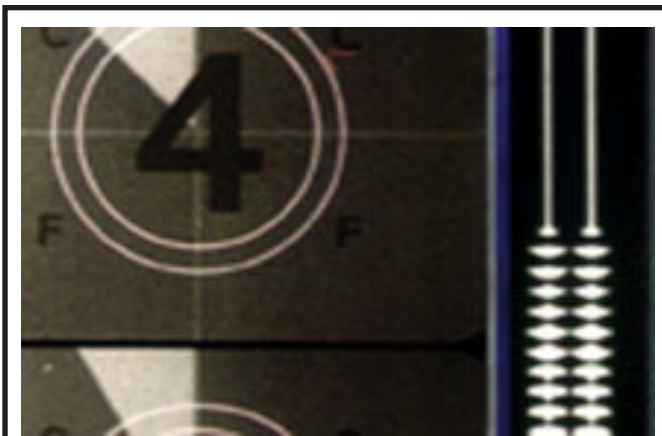
Westerns are a study of characters that are both outlaws and noble gentlemen at the same time, the hero in the rough. I edited footage from street parades scenes showing horses and a stage with people dressed as Native Americans, and combined this with the found footage described above. I also incorporated footage from orphan films in black and white: horses, wagons, deserted towns and gunfights, from an unknown movie. I spliced this found fictional footage with footage of a girl in a cowboy hat sitting on a rocking horse. The dream of being a hero enters, for a moment, a child's life, in imitation of the realm of cinema. The western movie I created was the first instance where I incorporated both professional and non-professional footage, from real life and from a stage set. The genre of the western itself seemed an ideal place to introduce orphan film; The genre is itself a fictionalized version of real life events, and so the cycle of reality and illusion turns one step further within this segment of my video.



Video still: *A western*, 2003,  
Left: orphan film, right: home movie  
from *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies*,  
Nomi Talisman

The main action in my version of a pornographic movie takes place not in front of a camera, but principally in the spectator's imagination. The viewing screen is divided into three sections, on two of the screens are close ups of an athlete's naked leg, in a black sneaker. The athlete's movements are arrested and repeated as he stretches forward preparing to sprint, then falls back to wait. This gesture simulates the act of copulation only because of context. The two outer screens are reversed and so both images of the athlete appear to converge onto the central screen of a close up of a woman's breast, stroking her nipple, which again, is arrested and repeated. The three scenes create a syncopated sexual choreography. At times the central image of the woman is replaced by shots of a football team getting ready on the field's lines. By juxtaposing different shots and angles of the football team an abstract, pulsating movement appears on the screen. The use of sports found footage references adrenalin, climax, masculinity, all components of the pornographic film industry. The title (XXX) appears in the movie a few times, for several frames, as if a section was cut out of the movie, it also suggests the presence of a subliminal image. The most important element of pornographic movies is missing in my movie is the climax, the most expensive shot in a porn movie: the Money Shot (4), the confirming close-up of the male orgasm. Instead, the players and the athlete are caught in suspended animation. The action is sped up, moving faster and faster until the anticipated moment of climax, then the title

“Finished” appears for a split second across the screen to be replaced by a blank screen. My pornographic short movie extracts elements of pornographic films, nudity, close-ups, pacing and climax, yet it is in essence a satirical commentary on the genre, with subtle commentary upon conventions of heterosexual porn movies such as the threesome, the orgy, and the lesbian act.(5) For this segment of my video I imposed new meaning upon the found footage, removing it from the original context and re-defining it. Rather than working with the footage itself and allowing it to dictate the genre, I began to reverse this process, finding footage which when removed from its original source could suggest new meaning.



**Untitled**, Detail from film still, 2003,  
*Everything I knew about America I learned from the movies* Nomi Talisman

My investigation of amateur film led me to see the direct correlations between the fictional world of mainstream cinema and the lives of the American public, as they chose to record themselves through home movies. *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies* frames home movies as part of the larger cinematic experience, as Christian Metz notes in *Film Language*: “...each film is, first of all, a piece of cinema” (6). The found footage clips revealed much about mainstream America's everyday interpretation of their lives in filmic terms. Baudrillard's hypothesis that a true understanding of the American city can best be seen through America's cinema, is reinforced by my study of amateur film, which is itself a filmic recording of real life so often framed in cinematic terms. These moments were captured by the amateur film makers, and perhaps, the real life actors, even saw themselves playing a role in their favorite movie: a romantic charmer, a musical talent, a tough cowboy, a porn star, or a film noir detective. *Everything I knew about America I learned from the Movies* highlights the fluid relationship between amateur and mainstream film, where each medium feeds the other, creating a state of constant recycling.

1 Baudrillard, Jean. *America* (London and New York: Verso, 1988) p.56

2 Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyper Reality* (London: Picador, 1967) p.197-209

3 Berry-Flint, Sarah. *Genre*, in *Film Theory: a Companion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999) p.28-35

4 Williams, Linda. *Hard Core* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) p.93-119

5 Williams, Linda. *Hard Core* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) p.126-127

6 Metz, Christian. *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) p.3