

Aliens Under America!

David Cox reports on the media activist scene in the Pacific North West, USA

These are the End Times. . .

So concludes the narrator of Craig Baldwin's film *Tribulation 99: Alien Anomalies Under America*, a film entirely made up of "found" footage; old scifi B-grade fare mainly, UFOs, monsters, educationalist films and generally heaps of images of ravaging chaos. The film's earnest narration explains a history of America as the landing site of the Quetzals, who, in leaving their own destroyed planet Quetzacoatl thousands of years ago, have since secretly controlled most of the major events of America from underground. Political assassinations, the activities of the CIA in Central America, the fate of nuclear waste, all are explained as the deliberate work of the Quetzals, whose saucers in fact continue to menace the world, emerging from bases at Earth's centre, to routinely copy human "dupes" to do their bidding. The relentless, sensationalist, *National Enquirer* ranting, raving tone of this amazing film (screened on SBS earlier this year) encapsulates a feeling very familiar on California's streets today.

These really are the End Times as far as many are concerned. Certainly it's near the end of the almost uninterrupted global

end of the almost uninterrupted global economic expansion and hegemony which America has held since 1945, if not of its military expansion. Certainly the end of any real faith in the credibility of the urban Justice (Just Us) system. Damn near the end for California's least well off, the largely black and Hispanic homeless populations of the Mission District in San Fransisco, and of South Central Los Angeles, where, in response to the acquittal of the LAPD officers who beat up Rodney King, there occurred in April one of the largest and most spontaneous uprisings in America's modern history.

Following the official screening of *Tribulation 99* two nights later, at the Golden Gate Film Awards in San Fransisco, when, asked whether the film related in any way to the violence happening in the streets outside, Baldwin replied, "yes, the film is about the same sense of fear, the same sense of powerlessness." A state of emergency had just been announced, and a 9pm till dawn curfew installed.

Burn Hollywood, burn

I smell a riot goin' on

First they're guilty now they're gone

Yeah I'll check out a movie

But it'll take a black one to move me

Chuck D of Public Enemy:

Fear Of A Black Planet album

***Fear Of A Black Planet* album**

In a city like San Fransisco, with its massive homelessness, the curfew proved nearly impossible to enforce with any real effectiveness, and was treated as a joke by most of the Mission's population, where most police activity had focused. A demonstration I attended by a group called "Artists and Writers Out Loud", or AWOL, held in Delores Park on May 8, was later during its march led astray by its police escort, who then arrested eighty percent of the peaceful marchers for "not following the prescribed path". So widespread was SF Police Chief Hongisto's police force overkill and general bungling during the rebellion that he was sacked two weeks later. Around the Mission, people were exchanging flyers and information, and organising meetings. During the conflict a bunch of us stood outside ATA media arts centre watching in

speechless amazement as police in buses, vans and trail bikes chased youths who threw bottles and other missiles. In nearby Market Street, near 6th Street, the city's poorest as well as the opportunists had smashed shop windows and looted their contents. Many of those arrested were just walking, to work, or to a shop or restaurant, and many non-English speakers were completely unaware of the curfew, with the only announcements on

curfew, with the only announcements on radio and television. Reports of police beatings and indiscriminate arrests were routine and widespread. While in LA the National Guard and even the Army had been called out to counter the insurgency, this had not happened in San Fransisco, but the police presence, or rather omnipresence, was alarming.

The Situationist International flyer from the 1965 Watts riots resurfaced and was distributed, its main point being that dispossessed blacks and Hispanics in California are in fact relatively better off than those in other states, but that proximity to such flaunted and conspicuous wealth nearby results in the desire to seize the emblems and symbols of dispossession – ie the ghetto shops – and destroy them; self-hate directed at the site of injustice. This explains why the rich neighbourhoods were largely and paradoxically spared.

The Mission, ATA, and ‘Other Cinema’

Within the dynamic, politicised, cynical and sarcastic avant-garde in San Fransisco's Mission District resides an empowering, funky, and generally cool institution: Artists

Television Access, or ATA, at 992 Valencia Street. Essentially a cable-based media arts centre, ATA draws its staff from "interns" who obtain academic credits for volunteer work. ATA also happens to be the residence of Craig Baldwin and Phil Pateris. Pateris is a video editor extraordinaire, whose cutting and satirical found footage montages are screened, together with other work he edits, on ATA's cable program on local television on Thursday nights. A focal point for lowbudget media production (mainly video but some film), ATA is also a natural hangout

for local artists who use its expansive and funky gallery for staging screenings, events, performances. It's even employed occasionally for dance therapy classes! The band The Residents held a function to launch their latest interactive laser disk at ATA while I was there, and there's a different multimedia installation every two weeks or so in the front window. Next door to ATA is a shop catering to The Mission's believers in Santaria – a form of Afro/Carribbean voodoo. Sweet incense wafts from this shop, and occasionally one hears sounds that could be chickens being sacrificed! Other shops in Valencia Street include the Modern Times leftwing bookshop, cafes with names like Beano, Radio Valencia, Club, and Muddy

Beano, Radio Valencia, Club, and Muddy Waters, and various women's craft and bookshops. There are bars, restaurants, framing centres, graphics shops, offices of political parties. Poetry readings and printed ideas in general are in evidence everywhere.

Saturday nights at ATA offer a kaleidoscope of work from the "new youth" cinema, curated by Craig Baldwin. Organised thematically, Other Cinema screens work with fairly full-on critical and confrontational themes and subject matter. The most prominent recurring motifs are the body, gender, and identity. Largely dismissing the traditional avant-garde's central concern with formalism and structure,

David Cox's film made while touring the US, Spiral USA, screens as part of experimenta's "Engineering Memory: Views of History, Politics Culture and Geography" session on Thursday November 26 at the State Film centre in Melbourne.

Other Cinema's films focus on filmic analyses of the politics of identity and sexuality. The work is often also characterised by a concern with external, outward views of the US, its culture, its history, its myths. Craig Baldwin's latest

history, its myths. Craig Baldwin's latest film is about the Spanish "explorer", Coronado, which is to be released at the time of the Columbus' cinquecentenary. *Oh No Coronado* traces the path of the conquistadors across New Mexico, revealing the outrageous injustices perpetrated against the original people of the region. Coronado, searching for the fabled Seven Cities, was deliberately given wrong directions by the Native Americans he subjugated, and, for his bungling, was finally arrested by his own colonial superiors. Baldwin's collaborator and camera operator Bill Daniel is another San Francisco-based artist who looks outward to the vast and compelling US landscape.

Bill Daniel and Bozo Texino

Bill Daniel's work in the social documentary field represents the cutting edge of the current American non-mainstream. His most recent work, *Who is Bozo Texino?* chronicles the many and varied lives of America's freight train-hopping hobo subculture. Daniel shoots Bolex-on-the-railroad-tracks footage of hobo men and women, the boxcar graffiti, and the landscape sights from boxcar doors. *Bozo Texino* celebrates a "beat" sense of USA: the

LEXINO celebrates a "beat" sense of USA: the itinerant's home, the nomadic spiritualism genuinely to be found on the road. He had to record the soundtrack interviews surreptitiously, with a concealed Walkman Pro recorder, grabbing shots on the move. At one point a hobo hurled the suitcase containing all his gear from a moving train. Miraculously, the Bolex, the Walkman and the exposed 100ft rolls were unharmed.

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David Cox's film *Monuments Far and Strange* on the marquee of the Capitol cinema in Olympia, Washington state.

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. . . I began first by photographing the drawings (inside boxcars), like hundreds of them, also photographing the odd places where the hobos crashed out (jungles), then the day after Thanksgiving a bunch of homeless dudes (bindle stiffs) invited me to join in the partaking of a rusty drum of soup made of filthy dumpster food (Mulligan stew). They were friendly and cool but didn't have much to say about the graffiti (monikers). I was hoping they might know who Bozo Texino was, Bozo Texino was the graffiti I had seen the most often, and for unknown reasons it had become my mission to find the originator of that character. The one with the most absurd hat and the blankest stare. . .

Bill Daniel's Xeroxed text accompanying his film *Who is Bozo Texino?*

Bozo Texino?

Daniel grew up in Dallas, Texas, and an early childhood memory was being denied candy during the fracas after the assassination of JFK. This momentous occasion was the inspiration for a multimedia fancydress party at ATA organised by Daniel, where every available image and sound relating to the assassination conspiracy was dug up and installed in the gallery converted into Jack Ruby's Carousel Club for the evening. Oliver Stone's film had just been released and the highlight of the night was footage Bill had taken, purely by chance, of Stone's re-enactment of the fatal driveby. Bill just happened to have a camera handy when the feature film crew were filming in his home town, and from then on, eerily, had his own shaky black and white footage of the event that rocked the world and robbed him of his candy.

Greta Snider

Greta Snider is another social documentarist who moves around a lot and films far-out people. Her work is often about things like trash collectors in the desert (*No Zone*), skate gangs, and her latest, *Shred of Sex*, is essentially a round robin, pass-the-camera-to-the-next person, sex film, a home porno play movie. Screened to the

a home porno play movie. Screened to the crew/cast on Other Cinema's opening night in February this year the film was warmly welcomed by the audience. The film's highlight, where a skate punk ejaculates onto his skateboard, was met with a particularly hearty cheer. *Shred of Sex* was rejected by the local labs for processing due to the subject matter, so Snider and her friend processed the footage themselves. Often the footage blends from solarised freakout to scratchy monochrome. The cool thing about this screening was that the people who made the film were seeing it for the first time alongside complete strangers off the street. The sense

of community and solidarity in the room during *Shred of Sex's* premiere was nothing short of inspirational and sublime. The US rightwing, there as here, are terrified of sexual libertarianism. Playful sex films which empower and unify in this climate can prove genuinely subversive.

The Fine Art Agenda

Apart from ATA, other independent film institutions include the Pacific Film Archive and the San Francisco Cinematheque, which cater for a much different sector of the film community. The Cinematheque is an

Community. The Cinematheque is an offshoot of the Bay Area's San Francisco Art Institute, a bastion of the fine art, academic, museum-oriented film realm. The PFA is located on the Berkeley campus, and screens a constant program of work from around the world. Narrative, documentary and a very strong experimental bias dominates the PFA agenda, whereas the Cinematheque is focused more specifically around showcasing the work of local and interstate film art: a kind of Californian Modern Image Makers Association. The vibe at both venues is genteel, laidback. They offer thematically programmed cross sections of current work from around the world and around the USA. One event I attended had been curated by Steve Anchor and Lynne Sachs and dealt with film representations of personal trauma and mortality. Called "Mortal Coils" the event brought together work from Barbara Hammer, Mark Street, Susan Fairfax and others. Another Cinematheque event focused on the work of Canadian experimental filmmaker and artist Michael Snow, who displayed slides of his public installations and screened both his classic structuralist film *Wavelength* and the more recent *This is not the title*. In the nearby art institute gallery were hologram installations which made use of the viewer's perspective of the imagery (a recurring theme in Snow's work). The retrospective was engrossing, intense and

retrospective was engrossing, intense and rather historical-academic.

Film Arts Foundation

Film Arts Foundation, in San Fransisco's South of the Market (abbreviated to Soma) is the finest and most efficient media resource centre and filmmakers' production facility I have ever seen. The forward thinking acts of those who gained *realpolitik* power after the counterculture is no better expressed than in the cool efficiency and smooth running of FAF. It is a facility everybody relies on to obtain gear, to do editing, to run and to take workshops. Its newsletter, *Release Print*, with articles by local filmmakers and writers like Barbara Hammer and Trinh T Minh-ha, has pages filled with intense political discussion, with information about current political film events, ideas, and practice. FAF is the hub of the independent film culture in San Fransisco, and a production facility in its own right. Trinh T Minh-ha's *First Name Viet, Given Name Nam* was produced via FAF, as was *Berkeley in the Sixties*.

Of all the gear rented by FAF, the most sought after is the foundation's optical printer. So widespread is reworking of footage that the machine is booked out weeks in advance, and enrolments for workshops in operating the device fill up immediately. The

operating the device fill up immediately. The

underpinning aesthetic rests with the almost universal use of "found footage" films made from old films. To be able to stretchprint, to freeze frame and to do multiple pass super-impositions is considered fairly necessary by filmmakers in the Bay Area. (Optical printing was the consistent characteristic of work from San Fransisco that I saw at Oberhausen in 1991.) Funding is made available by the FAF too. Individual production grants running into the tens of thousands of dollars are donated every year back into the SF film and video community. This extraordinary integration and collectivisation of film facility hire/funding/education could probably only happen in Northern California. Imagine Swinburne, MIMA, The Melbourne Super 8 Group and the (old) CDB of the AFC all mixed together into one institution, and you would have something approximating FAF. (Amen!)

Logs

Olympia. I first heard about Olympia when my film *Puppenhead* was screened there as part of the town's annual international film festival. Olympia is in Washington, about two and half hours drive

Washington, about two and half hours drive south from Seattle, and the Evergreen University nearby has populated the town with a creative young community, many of whom form the basis of a vivid independent music scene. The Olympia Film Festival sits squarely at the heart of the Northwest sensibility, merely hinted at in *Twin Peaks*. The real thing is far more esoteric, spaced out and melancholy. Snowcapped mountains frame rolling hills of pine and fir trees, there are blue skies, logging trucks, and diners with neon signs in the front window advertising Budweiser, Red Hook (one of the sweetest beers in the world) and fantastic Club and Reuben sandwiches with side orders of fries. This is Olympia. Norman Rockwell storefronts still exist here along the sound, and you can get a beard trim for only \$2.00. Coffee refills are free, and everything you hear about that cherry pie is true. But I digress.

Set within the heart of the small town is the Capitol cinema, home of the Olympia Film Society. Built in the twenties, the Capitol screens programs from latest releases through to off-the-wall work from the local filmmakers collective, The Film Ranch Olympia. This ad hoc group includes the media activist band Negativland's frontman Marc Hosler, Bob Basanich of the Olympia Film Society and Chicago video artist

Film Society, and Chicago video artist Wendy-Jo Carter. The Film Ranch works mainly with direct-on-film 35mm production, found footage, and Super 8. The Capitol is also a bit of a hangout, where locals meet to check out the steady flow of prints which arrive from all over the country. Events at the Capitol are broadcast on Radio KAOS at Evergreen, as are the many backyard CD and cassette releases of local bands such as Witchy Poo and Negativland.

Drive-in culture is not dead in the US, I found out. The very fine young Bob Basanich works as a projectionist at the local drive-in, set amid hills of pine. I saw *Alien 3* and *Predator 2* here, and between them old commercials from the fifties advertising businesses in Olympia. These were screened,

Bob announced over the hundreds of car speakers, for "visiting filmmaker from Australia, Dave Cox"! Inside the projection booth were ancient 70mm slides for longlost businesses and upcoming films (*Ben Hur*, with the chariot race image, sticks in my memory). During the screening, Bob had casually put together a film of found footage from the offcuts around the booth combined with direct-on-film animation. After everyone had left the drive-in at about 12.30 am, he screened it for me. When his film finished, a brilliant shooting star arced over

finished, a brilliant shooting star arced over the screen. Far out. Here, in the sublime and slightly spooky logging world, the drizzly weather and Puget Sound provide a compelling backdrop to a generally really way cool happening situation.

Seattle: Jet City, Emerald City

Seattle is like Melbourne minus the parks. Very similar in size and feel, this town is one of the wealthiest in the US due to the buoyancy of Boeing and software companies like Microsoft. It also has the country's highest coffee consumption and suicide rate (could there be a relationship?!). The media activist heart of Seattle is 911 Media Arts Centre. Nine One One takes its name from the phone number for emergency services in America's cities, and the focus of much of its events programming is gender related video screenings. Open screenings happen regularly, as do programmed workshops. Like Film Arts Foundation in San Fransisco, 911 offers its members film and video production equipment and post production facilities hire. Video is the focus of its services, however, and its carpeted screening room is host to the work of visiting artists. 911 recently received a healthy sum from the

911 recently received a healthy sum from the Warhol Foundation to pursue its mission: to foster development of a politically aware "New Youth" media, and enable image and sound production to be within access to anyone interested.

Toy camcorder used by artists!

Of course the Nirvana-led music culture boom in Seattle, though much hyped, is real enough, and does inform the film and video culture. In this punk do-it-yourself area lies the cult of Pixlvision. Pixlvision was a video camcorder made for children by Fisher Price which used audio cassettes to record very high-contrast black and white video image with sound. Material shot on these cameras looks like early reel to reel portapak imagery dubbed about ten times: in other words, fucking fantastic. At ATA, staffer Todd Edelman has programmed entire evenings of Pixlvision work from around the country. The work is dreamlike, and well in keeping with the cult of End Times.

The Seattle Film Festival has been a consistent host to often fringe work from around the world and programmer Nick Vroman has specialised in screening works from Spain and India. I caught up with Nick

from Spain and India. I caught up with Nick in Seattle and he showed me around the Festival's amazing Egyptian Theatre: in fact a converted Masonic temple. The auditorium holds over a thousand people, although the position of some seats right beside the screen means that seeing the screen is almost impossible. The festival offices are concealed behind sliding doors built into the wall, a hangover from the building's original function. New Film City is another venue in Seattle, screening often innovative collections of short works. Curator Janice Findley is herself an animator, her work utilising pixillation and live action, with frenetically paced footage of pixillated intensely decorated costumed characters speeding frantically in a blur of colour across the screen.

Friend to Janice is the clay animator extraordinaire Bruce Bickford. A shy and reclusive man, Bickford owns a garage full of intricately detailed clay figures and sets; his work is best known as the film accompaniment to Frank Zappa's collaboration with conductor Pierre Boulez.

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Bickford's animation suits Zappa's amazing music perfectly in the video releases *The Amazing Mr Bickford* and also *Baby Snakes*. Swirling colours melt characters into strange shapes, the camera tracks over nightmarish landscapes, followed by armies of surveillance officers. A car driving along a bridge is in fact driving over a twisted face, which itself mutates. Bickford utilises a painstaking method to render apparent shifts in distance, building each model in twenty-five scales, each one receding in size. To show a tracking-out shot he replaces the figures and (get this!) the models forming the figure's surrounding landscape, with smaller versions for each successive series of frames. The result is nothing short of hallucinatory. Bickford worked with Zappa for six years with varying degrees of compatibility, but the collaboration in my mind is one of the most important in 20th Century art.

A recurring motif of much of the more off-the-wall work I saw in the US was the bankruptcy of reason, of language itself, in a nation of such utter contradiction and imbalance economically and culturally. A

imbalance economically and culturally. A kind of everyday situationalism informs much media activity, even the most humbly produced. A fey, indifferent, bemused but knowing cynicism accompanies this videotape, that Super 8 film. The media groups are very well connected, with newsletters and work flowing smoothly around the continent, riding unofficial and semi-official pathways of cultural currents. This is fuelled also by the close links between the concerns of the artists operating in different locations and the widespread range of venues and non-profit media institutions funded by foundations and federal grants. The abundance of streetpress, newsletters, live poetry venues, bands and cafes makes the whole Northwest coast buzz with a vibe of political and cultural energy, an energy left over from and sustained by the legacy of the late sixties and early seventies counterculture.

In San Fransisco's Mission district this is also largely to do with the fact that the area is the home of many Central American refugees and escapees. 24th Street's La Boheme Cafe lived up to its name at no time more than

during the Rodney King rebellion when, outside its facade, assembled a demonstration calling for freedom of speech. The demo was declared an illegal gathering and was

declared an illegal gathering and was dispersed by the cops. Here, in a smokefilled room, are men and women of every colour, many writing profusely, others strumming beautiful classical guitars. Everybody talking politics. The walls are plastered with thousands of flyers, political ads, manifestos. The coffee is the strongest I have ever known, one cup for a dollar is enough caffeine for an afternoon.

Virtual Reality And Cyber Culture

I had the opportunity to try virtual reality for the first time in San Fransisco at the 25th anniversary of the original "Be In" (after waiting over an hour in a queue, I found this electronic arts version to be mainly a kind of yuppie trade fair). Donning the headset I was guided through the virtual landscape by a blonde aide who was there to reassure VR pilgrims. Pressing the trackball forward resulted in rapid, 3D periscopic flight forward. Look up and you actually take off. Look down and you see the "landscape" from above. All very impressive. But the sheer hype, gloss and self-importance of the thing was too dazzling. I was made quickly conscious of the appalling *egocentrist* project of virtual technology. I mean, here is an

of virtual technology. I mean, here is an artform which places the receiver interactively at the centre of the entire predetermined universe! The contradictions abound: one is free to explore the artificial world, yet encased and restricted in the physical one by all the paraphernalia.

The utopianist swanning and rhetoric of the software and hardware agents pushing the systems reminds one of the sellers of cure-all elixirs in the last century. It is the almost evangelical positivism which characterises the language of the advocates of Cyber technology which I find alienating and conceited. That and the spectre of the military, whose agenda is never far behind, even at something mellowly dubbed an "Electronic Arts Be-In". I also attended a class at San Fransisco State University given by Jaron Lanier, of VPL Virtual Reality company, who had started the course in order to record his own lectures for later publication in an MIT book. I accompanied a friend who had enroled in the course (with students

handpicked from most relevant departments on campus). Lanier, whose main claim to fame is his invention, the "data glove", which enables VR users to interact with the artificial environment by means of hand gestures peppered his address with

gestures, peppered his address with references to "body music", Zen, and the need to invent a language of body communication equal to the demands of a technology that brings people, separated by the real world, within the realm of each other's senses.

Visitor

The only link that utopian technology cults in California have to the independent film scene is the desire for a kind of media facilitated nomadism. The need to place the receiver of images and sound in a place not "here", links, say, the use of found footage with VR. This idea of going *elsewhere* for the experience. Using old film to make new ones is a kind of nomadic hunter-gatherer aesthetic and also a genuine political project: with the death of structure in evidence all around can we "make" anything anymore? Why bother? Is not meaning and language itself redundant? All we need then, is to occupy an *imagined* space; either one coming to us from the past as film unimagined, or one which is the contents of a helmet linked to a computer.

**The simulacrum is never that which
conceals the truth – it is the truth
that conceals that there is none.**

The simulacrum is true.

The simulacrum is true.

**Jean Baudrillard,
*Simulations,***

**Look, we are marinating our heads
in a sauce of dreamlike
Juxtaposition!**

**Zippy the Pinhead Trying
VR, *San Fransisco Examiner,*
January 1992.**

As the law rider cars cruise Mission Street, bass speakers booming, the mariachi band music spills from the cheap bars, and the smell of burritos and grilled beef pour from the many taco restaurants, I walk down Mission to Valencia. Passing cafes where refugees pen poems of fatality, I see the old deco Pepsi Cola building, now Police Headquarters for the Mission, get ready for a night of confrontation with the Bloods, the Crips and the generally pissed off. I walk near

16th Street where the Roxy Cinema is screening something really good, on down to ATA where good friends and comrades meet me with new images and new sound retrieved from the cracks in the surface of an empire's swansong. And I feel at home. Big time.

Love to Craig, Lynne, Liz, Bill, Greta,

**Love to Craig, Lynne, Liz, Bill, Greta,
Todd, Phil at ATA. Bob, Mark, Catherine,
Wendy-Jo, Amy and Jeanne in Olympia, to
Nick, Marie and Janice in Seattle, and Dirk,
Hugh in Vancouver.**