

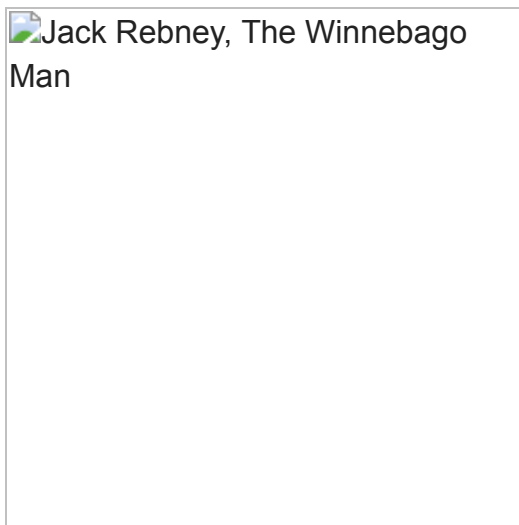
Collecting the Trash: The Cult of the Ephemeral Clip from VHS to YouTube

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Jack Rebney, The Winnebago Man

In 1989, salesman Jack Rebney shot a promotional video for the motor-home manufacturer Winnebago industries. What he didn't know at the time, however, was that his angry tirades in the outtakes from that shoot would later end up as a viral sensation. Known as 'The Angriest Man in the World', or more simply as 'Winnebago Man', the clip was initially assembled by the crew in an attempt to get Rebney fired, but was later copied and traded among collectors of VHS ephemera. Years later, in 2006, this cult shifted online when the clip was uploaded to YouTube and subsequently picked up nearly 3 million views.¹

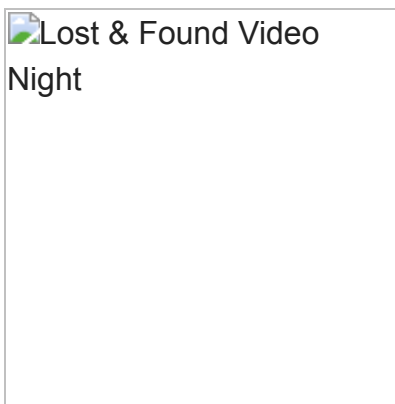
As Lucas Hilderbrand has observed, YouTube has contributed to a culture of the clip that allows viewers to select the specific moments that they wish to watch (and rewatch) in a "new temporality of immediate gratification for audiences."² What the 'Winnebago Man' points to, however, is the ways in which this culture of the clip forms part of a longer history of collecting and re-presenting ephemeral media that is often ignored or forgotten. In this column, therefore, I would like to consider the ways in which contemporary clip culture relates to earlier attempts to collect and archive the ephemeral clip.

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSWUWPx2VeQ>[/youtube]

The Winnebago Man clip

Key to this history is the role of bootleggers and video traders who would swap and trade rare and elusive tapes through fanzines, conventions and mail-order catalogues. These collectors would invest (sub-)cultural capital in texts which existed outside legitimate distribution with a particular emphasis on the peripheral and throwaway. Reminiscent of the collectors of printed ephemera such as John de Monins Johnson who would collect “everything which would ordinarily go into the waste basket after use,”³ these video traders would build up amateur archives of screen detritus from home movies through to corporate training videos. This is the paracinematic audience whom Jeffrey Sconce once famously described as being “more inclined to watch a bootlegged McDonald’s training film than *Man with a Movie Camera*.”⁴

Furthermore, this audience were not simply collecting the clips but also producing video mixtapes which would feature a collection of clips from a variety of sources edited together onto a single tape. There is not the space here to go into a detailed history of the video mixtape, or to properly explain how it draws on earlier filmic traditions such as the mondo film, but some of the more significant examples include *Cathode Fuck* (1986), compiled by *Film Threat* editor Chris Gore; *Amok Assault Video* (1989), compiled by underground publisher Amok Press; and *Lost & Found Video Night*, a ten-volume collection compiled by video distributor 5 Minutes to Live. As David Carter has observed, the status of such compilers suggests that mixtapes “have their origins in the underground film ‘zine culture and, more specifically, in the bootlegging gray market such publications either facilitated or encouraged.”⁵



Lost & Found Video Night

Given that the emphasis within the genre is on novelty, it is difficult to identify ‘representative’ clips from this period although some of the more famous examples would include Crispin Glover’s notorious 1987 appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman*, the Siskel and Ebert outtakes tape, and footage of The Cramps playing at the California State Mental Hospital in Napa. Collecting together these ephemeral moments and assembling them into a (loose) structure, these mixtapes functioned to lend order and coherence to various disparate found footage clips. They also provided a platform where texts that were once fleeting and forgotten could become more accessible.

[youtube]<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALapHYNSmoA>[/youtube]

Crispin Glover on Letterman

The main shift, however, happened with the launch of YouTube in 2005 when many of these clips were made widely available online. Functioning as a repository of otherwise unavailable moments of popular culture, YouTube swiftly became the principle site for finding obscure video clips. Yet, as Will Straw has observed in relation to new media more generally, “the gathering up and convergence of cultural artifacts in places of storage and annotation produces particular clusters of cultural authority and weight.”⁶ As this suggests, the collecting of clips within these amateur archives has much to tell us about the Internet’s relationship to this ephemeral media history.

Indeed, a fetishism has developed around what Lucas Hilderbrand terms “bootleg video aesthetics”⁷ where VHS artifacts such as white noise and rainbows of discoloration indexically signal authenticity and are often seen to enrich the text. Various sites such as ‘Everything is Terrible’ or ‘Found Footage Festival’ have appeared which collate and archive ephemeral clips with a specific emphasis on the VHS format. Indeed, Nick Prueher and Joe Pickett who curate the Found Footage Festival have declared that only two rules govern Found Footage Festival:

- 1) Footage must be found on physical format. No YouTube.
- 2) It has to be unintentionally funny. Whatever it’s trying to do, it has to fail miserably at that.

[youtube]http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUaAqD_0XXU[/youtube]

Found Footage Festival

Note the emphasis here on the materiality of the source format. The tapes are generally salvaged from garage sales and thrift stores with a recent blog entry explaining that they had “Just received a sweet box of tapes from the Birmingham Public Library today. Turns out, libraries are getting rid of their VHS too. We scored *Squirrel Time*, *Beanies For Fun And Profit*, *Raging Hormones* and, best of all, *Babies Of The Wild Ones 2*. We had no idea there was a sequel!”⁸ Collecting and archiving tapes which would otherwise be discarded, such sites invest value in ‘trash’ VHS material with a particular emphasis on the naïve and ridiculous. Of course, as Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, there is no better indication of cultural capital than the capacity to confer value on objects that are assumed to have none.⁹

In this age of streaming media, then, these amateur archivists are placing value on the sheer materiality of the videotape which I would argue forms part of a much broader fetishisation of the retro within contemporary culture — from the revival of vinyl records through to the use of apps which make iPhone photos look like Polaroids. Discussing bootleggers, Lucas Hilderbrand notes that “the true collector collects those objects that have to be found (and copied) rather than simply purchased at Best Buy.”¹⁰ In the case of these curators of ephemeral clips, a similar sense of distinction is constructed between the true collector who collects clips from videotapes and the lesser collector who simply searches for clips online.



VHS Collecting

To bring this discussion full circle, I would like to conclude by returning to the *Winnebago Man*. This ephemeral clip of outtakes from a 1989 promotional video has not only been traded by bootleggers, assembled into mixtapes and streamed from YouTube. More recently, it inspired the feature documentary *Winnebago Man* (2009) which tracked down Jack Rebney and explored the story behind the ‘angriest man in the world.’ Illustrating the complex intersections of media forms prevalent in the contemporary media landscape, the film points to the residual presence of old media within the current culture of the clip.

While it is important, therefore, that we attempt to grasp the latest developments within new media, this should not be at the expense of addressing the palimpsestuous presence of old media within these texts. Ultimately, the proliferation of short-form media on sites like YouTube, often seen solely in terms of the temporal specificities of internet-based platforms, should also be seen in terms of this subterranean history of the ephemeral clip.

[youtube]http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO05RfHO_4s&feature=player_embedded[/youtube]

Winnebago Man – Trailer

Image Credits:

1. [Winnebago Man](#)
2. [Lost & Found Video Night](#)
3. [Found Footage Festival](#)

Please feel free to comment.

1. 2,996,730 views as of 9th September, 2011 [[↩](#)]
2. Lucas Hilderbrand, “Youtube: Where Cultural Memory and Copyright Converge” *Film Quarterly* 61:1 (2007) p49 [[↩](#)]
3. “Eavesdropping on the past – the John Johnson Collection: An Archive of Printed Ephemera” (2010) [[↩](#)]
4. Jeffrey Sconce, “‘Trashing’ the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style” *Screen* 36:4 (1995) p372 [[↩](#)]
5. David Carter, “The Television Screen is the Retina of the Mind’s Eye: A Look at Video Mixtapes” *Not Coming to a Theatre Near You* (2010) [[↩](#)]

6. Will Straw, "Embedded Memories" in Charles R. Acland (ed.) *Residual Media* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007) p12 [[↵](#)]
7. Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Duke University Press, 2009) p65 [[↵](#)]
8. Joe Pickett, "Thank you, Birmingham Public Library!" *Found Footage Festival* [[↵](#)]
9. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Harvard University Press, 1986) p5 [[↵](#)]
10. Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Duke University Press, 2009) p62 [[↵](#)]