“Artistic activity consists not in discovering the essence of a medium, but rather in exploring and perhaps renewing or reinventing its power of expression.” (Rodowick, 2007, pp43)

The research aims firstly seek out a more specific definition of found footage cinema, including questions of what can be considered as found footage films, their function and how they are read in a social or historical context. More specifically, the research focuses on found footage cinema as a practice of the avant-garde and the experimental. In nearly all avant-garde and experimental found footage, the very nature of found footage film foregrounds cinema as a medium. As Wees notes in ‘The Ambiguous Aura of Hollywood Stars in Avant-Garde Found Footage Films’ (2002):

“Found footage films nearly always have the effect of bracketing the images and calling attention to them as images, as constructed representations, and therefore as something that can be deconstructed or undone.”(Wees, 2002: p4)

Definitions of Found Footage films are broad and varied amongst theorists. This research however focuses on Found Footage as an avant-garde filmic practice that has the ability to decontextualize moving images and sounds from originals meanings and at the same time re-appropriate it with alternate meanings. Danks suggests one basic definition of found footage cinema:

“Found footage, compilation, collage or ‘archival’ cinema is a broad filmmaking practice encompassing the use of file footage in documentary cinema, stock footage in fictional cinema, home-movie footage in some feminist cinema and the often radical recontextualisation of a vast array of images and sounds in examples of avant-garde cinema.” (Danks, 2006: 241)

Reinterpreted meaning in found footage ranges from critiques in the political, social and cultural realm (e.g. The Atomic Café 1982) to parodies preying on content from popular films (Apocalypse Pooh 1987). One important facet of found footage filmmaking is its practice of creating alternate meanings from original contexts of the original footage.

Found footage filmmakers according to Mackenzie (2007), “sift through the accumulated audio-visual detritus of modern culture in search of artefacts that will reveal more about their origins and uses than their original makers consciously intended.” These filmmakers then collate all of the material they gather to construct image-sound relationships which “offer both aesthetic pleasure and the opportunity to interpret and evaluate old material in new ways.” (Mackenzie 2007: 10)

Found footage filmmakers exploit the systems of value we attach to the audio-visual relationships they present to us to engage us in somewhat of a Brechtian “Verfremdungseffekt” or “Distanciation” manner, in other words, it engage us by alienating our senses. Apocalypse Pooh (1987) is an excellent example, representing the interesting relationship between the audio and the visual. Apocalypse Pooh incorporates footage from Disney’s Winnie the Pooh films assembled with the voiceover of Marlon Brando’s character in Copolla’s Apocalypse Now (1979). Quite predictable is the effect of this audio-visual relationship; one would value Pooh as an innocent, simple character, a cause of positive childhood nostalgia. Hearing Pooh and his friends rant lines such as, “I love the smell of napalm in the morning” disorientates the viewer, allowing for our valuing systems to distort and reassemble into new thinking, or awareness of what is really happening before them.
Found footage further disrupts the viewer’s immersive experience by framing familiar ideologies in a structuralist format; such as doing away with traditional Hollywood narrative structures and other accepted cinematic conventions like experimenting with the idea of cinematic space and temporality. Structuralist film theory emphasizes how films convey meaning through the use of codes and conventions not dissimilar to the way languages are used to construct meaning in communication.

Yet, despite such satirical critiques on the cultural, social and political contexts. Found Footage cinema cannot help but pay homage to source texts. The nature of Found Footage cinema, as a cinema based on the recycling, re-appropriating and reuse of sounds and images from previous texts means it cannot help but indulge in the magnificence of the texts it tries to parody (In found footage works such as Pixel Pirate (2006)). Found footage films cannot wholly detach itself from the culture and conventions that surrounds and gave birth to the source material it tries to ridicule. The reading of found footage films is therefore marked by the disparity between the original and the reworked texts. Found footage film therefore can be seen as a reflexive critique of society and the nature of fleeting culture. This then sets Found Footage cinema apart from other forms of cinematic practices, as it is performs a reflexive satire, but is completely reliant on the very object it is trying to distance itself from.

Another critique found footage cinema performs is one on “new media” and an emerging digital culture. One of the key characteristics possessed by found footage is its ability to disrupt an audience’s immersive experience. Found footage films does this by highlighting film as a medium. For example, by emphasizing the presence of celluloid through special effects in Tscherkassky and Arnold’s films, it presents a struggle of the medium and its narrative, causing us to question the notion of what cinema is in this rapidly advancing digital age. The permeation of the film material throughout the narrative plot, the spectator is altered to the presence of the medium. This is achieved through the disruption of traditional narrative structures and the distortion of cinematic space and temporality. With the proliferation of home digital video editing software, the very notion of filmic space and temporality shifts vastly. Walnes suggests such software privileges spatiality over temporality, what was traditionally more valuable in terms of film, ‘Time no longer takes primacy over space’ (Walnes, 2009). Walnes further suggests that diegetic space and temporality is also disrupted.

‘Spatial montage facilitated through digital compositing introduces a new type of associative process. Objects and figures are recontextualized in unlikely environments; associations are made between images sat shoulder to shoulder. Digital compositing thus opens up a whole other dimension of possibilities for montage, one which is arguably more immediate, yet at the same time more overtional than a temporal clash of images.’ (Walnes, 2009)

The disruption of film time and narrative time through various special effects makes the spectator conscious of the temporality of the apparatus and therefore the medium. In “Loving a Disappearing Image”, Marks discusses how film is becoming a “disappearing” image and as such, it restores aura to the work but aids the re-appropriation of the film’s intended meaning through its deterioration. Working with celluloid as a medium creates a different sensory experience because it foregrounds the value of work even before it is seen. This challenges the emergence of ecologies in film, which, signals a different approach to the idea and notion of cinema, and film.
With the advancement of technology, a digital editing culture and the proliferation of the internet, the notion of found footage cinema is again challenged and changed.

‘The internet, then constitutes a new kind of archive, one that offers unparalleled access to a huge range of material and which sustains a community which values and encourages creativity’ (Walnes, 2009)

“Cinema is the art of the index; it is an attempt to make art out of a footprint...pulling elements from databases and libraries becomes the default; creating them from scratch becomes the exception.” (Manovich, 2001, pp250 & 130) Found footage filmmaking challenges “new media” and brings about the question of “What is a film without an indexical image?” Manovich recognizes that this “crisis” of cinema’s identity also affects the terms and the categories used to theorize cinema’s past.” (Manovich, 2001, pp249)

Found footage films in particular offends the fundamental legal-media practice of copyright as the idea of reusing images fundamentally offends the notion of ownership, the idea of the ‘original’ and the ‘reproduced’. As Walnes notes:

‘Much recycling of moving images is politically charged and foregrounds the objective of resisting and undermining the ownership of media, whether by a company or an archive, by taking material without permission and ‘turn[ing] the barrage of images back on itself”. (Craig) Baldwin considers found footage filmmaking to be a movement that “talks back, is sarcastic, has attitude, steals your images, and all that kind of thing. Punk kind of attitude.”’ (Walnes, 2009)

Along with a critique of culture and politics in the wider context, found footage films can then also be seen as a critique of the outdated laws regarding copyright. With the advancement of the internet and websites such as YouTube, new found footage ‘artists’ are able to create, distribute and popularize their films with relatively little authoritative control. Video artists such as ‘Pogo’ who rework popular movie audio and visuals into new electronic/dance music clips/videos are given slight freedom to practice their unique brand of creativity using copyrighted materials. This distribution of illegally splicing and putting together of source (copyrighted) materials is reflective of the overall practice of found footage cinema, to use previously well-read texts, de-contextualize it and re-appropriate it to give it new life.