

## Introduction

This chapter explores Reel News, a radical left video-activist collective based in London. Founded in 2006, since then Reel News has released a bi-monthly newsreel on progressive movements and campaigns in Britain and around the world, and has become the longest-running radical newsreel in British film history. However, along with much of the rest of contemporary oppositional British film culture, Reel News and the video-activist community of which it is a part has largely escaped scholarly attention. In fact, the last book-length study to get anywhere near our current moment was Margaret Dickinson's edited collection, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (1999). Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner's *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (2013) is a valuable, more recent addition but, as its subtitle suggests, *Working Together* focuses on the so-called 'golden age' (Kidner 2013 18) of radical film in Britain – a moment that passed more than forty years ago.

Given the absence of research on contemporary developments one could be forgiven for thinking that oppositional film in Britain today is all but non-existent (save for the work of auteur filmmakers such as John Akomfrah or Adam Curtis). On the contrary, politically and aesthetically radical film culture in Britain is in a state of rude health. Long-standing production and exhibition organisations such as Amber in Newcastle, Leeds Animation Workshop and London Socialist Film Coop have been joined by more recent companies and collectives such as Migrant Media in Coventry or Global Faction and Neontetra Films in London, the latter of which also runs the London Labour Film Festival. Arts organisations such as Bristol Expanded and Experimental Film and Vivid Projects in Birmingham, curators such as the Otolith Group and filmmakers such as Luke Fowler or Andrea Luka Zimmerman comprise a politically engaged aesthetic avant-garde. The political avant-garde, meanwhile, (as well as every other shade of non-mainstream cinema) is catered for by a plethora of organisations ranging from DiY film clubs and co-operatives to annual festivals and volunteer-run, not-for-profit cinemas – see, for instance, London's Exploding Cinema, Manchester Film Coop, Liverpool Radical Film Festival, The Cube Microplex in Bristol or the Star and Shadow cinema in Newcastle.

In focusing on Reel News, this chapter concentrates on just one aspect of contemporary radical film culture – video-activism. I have written about the range of

organisations involved in British video-activist culture elsewhere (Presence 2015). Here, I want to outline how the culture as a whole has been influenced certain key technological and political developments that have occurred since the period covered in Dickinson's book, before zooming in to discuss Reel News in detail. Exploring the organisation's history, politics and practical strategies, the chapter shows how these contextual shifts shaped its development, and offers in the process a profile of one of Britain's most exciting video-activist organisations to date.

### **The internet and digital technologies**

One of the most significant factors distinguishing contemporary video-activist culture from the period covered in Dickinson's book is today's radically altered technological context. Described as a "technological revolution" (Castells 2000 28), the growth of the internet and digital technologies have fundamentally transformed the ways in which information, knowledge and culture are produced and shared in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed, for Castells, the production, distribution and consumption of information has become "the new material, technological basis of economic activity and social organisation" (2000 14).

This shift in the productive forces of society has rendered the production and distribution of digital information a major site of economic, political and cultural struggle. New forms of peer-production have proved potentially more productive than conventional, proprietary relations of production (*Wikipedia* is only the most obvious of numerous examples) and, though not necessarily free from exploitation, are also not dependent on capital or wage labour. Several commentators have thus argued that this technological context constitutes "a profound challenge to the whole concept of scarcity on which capitalist political economy depends" (Wayne 2003 47) and, having sown the seeds of a sharing economy, even heralds the end of capitalism itself (Mason 2015). Others, however, point to the increased reach and flexibility of capital in the digital era and its ability to exploit a global labour market; to inequalities of access to the internet and connected technologies; and the emergence of new forms of commerce (often based on unpaid labour), power and surveillance derived from mass data collection. Leaving aside debates about its macro socio-political consequences though, such a transformative and uncertain technological context has also created a range of affordances and challenges for contemporary video-activists.

File-sharing and proprietary online platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo have vastly increased the potential audiences for oppositional filmmaking and created an immense archive of potential footage, for example. Yet mainstream culture and politics are almost as

dominant online as they are off it. Prominent illegal file-sharing sites, such as The Pirate Bay and Kickass Torrents, are dominated by Hollywood entertainment, for instance, while sites dedicated to sharing radical material, such as OneBigTorrent, remain relatively obscure. Similarly, with so much content competing for attention on commercial video-sharing sites it is difficult both for video-activists to distinguish themselves and for audiences to locate their work. Again, as in conventional media, those with the most resources are most able to stand out.

Furthermore, although it is potentially easier than ever before to find and view video-activism online, making work available for free makes it harder for oppositional filmmakers to earn a living from their work. Developing strategies for financial stability in this context is thus essential. For many video-activists, this has meant striking a balance between less overtly political work that is paid or grant-funded, and more radical video-activism that is often produced and shared for free. For example, Undercurrents (1994- ), one of Britain's best-known video-activist organisations, subsidises its more radical work with commissions for commercial activities and funding for work as an access organisation with disadvantaged groups in Swansea. Other organisations, such as Camcorder Guerrillas (2003- ) in Glasgow or the Brighton-based SchMOVIES (2004-2014) (the descendant of the 1990s video-activist collective, Conscious Cinema) have developed similar models. As we will see, Reel News is especially interesting in this regard, having developed a funding strategy that enables it to solely produce radical video-activism.

### **Direct action and anti-globalisation**

In the 1990s, Britain's video-activists were largely aligned with the direct action community which, beginning with the Poll Tax revolt at the start of the decade, was characterised by a series of vibrant campaigns centred around particular issues: road-building; live-exports; GM foods; fox-hunting and so on. As the decade wore on, these initially distinct struggles increasingly overlapped and developed a heightened awareness of their shared national and international interests. By the end of the 1990s, many of those involved in direct-action campaigns earlier in the decade were part of an international anti-globalisation movement<sup>1</sup> which identified capitalism as a primary cause of global injustice and inequality.

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<sup>1</sup> There are a variety of names for this movement (other prefixes include 'anti-capitalist', 'global democracy' and 'global justice'), each of which has advantages and drawbacks that have been discussed elsewhere (for example, see Graeber 2002). Although 'alter-globalisation' perhaps more accurately indicates that the movement's target was global capitalism, rather than globalisation *per se*, I have opted for the less clumsy 'anti-globalisation' here.

Characterised by a series of large, globally-coordinated anti-summit protests that explicitly targeted some of capitalism's key global institutions, this period consolidated an internationalist anti-capitalist current among many British activist networks.

In Britain, the global Carnival Against Capitalism on June 18<sup>th</sup> 1999 marked the beginning of this new wave of anti-capitalist protest. J18, as it was known, was followed by N30, the infamous 'Battle in Seattle' on 30 November 1999, when five hundred thousand activists successfully shut down four days of World Trade Organisation meetings despite extraordinarily high levels of police brutality. In 2000, prominent anti-capitalist protests took place in Washington, London, Prague, and Nice, and in Davos and Genoa in 2001. The global justice movement generated a significant body of British video-activism: the spectacular tactics displayed at the protests were suited to visual media; there was much excitement about the potential of the internet as an alternative media source (Indymedia, the international network of radical media organizations (discussed below), began at N30 in Seattle); and many felt that the global nature of the movement was potentially revolutionary.<sup>2</sup>

However, Genoa was the last big demonstration of the anti-globalisation movement. The ferocious response of the police – who shot and killed one protestor and seriously injured many more following a raid on the Indymedia Centre – confirmed what many already knew: that anti-summit protests were becoming increasingly dangerous events, marked by the extreme violence of militarized police forces and taking place at a date and location necessarily chosen by the state. The shockwave of Giuliani's death stalled the movement, which was then effectively halted by the events of 9/11 four months later. Following George Bush's abstract declaration of 'war on terror' and the UK and US' joint-invasion of Afghanistan in October, anti-war activism became the key imperative for the left.

### **The anti-war movement, climate change and the Latin American Left**

Unlike the anti-globalisation movement, the anti-war movement failed to generate any substantial video-activism. Partly, this was down to the differing kind of politics and protest tactics adopted by the Stop the War Coalition, a broad alliance of socialist groups which quickly became the dominant anti-war voice in the UK. In contrast to the anarchist-oriented politics of the anti-globalisation movement and its theatrical, experimental tactics, Stop the War adopted more mainstream tactics designed to appeal to the widespread demographic that

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<sup>2</sup> Key films from the anti-globalisation movement include *J18: The First Global Protest Against Capitalism* (Undercurrents, UK, 1999) *Revolting in Prague: IMF Protests 2000* (various, UK, 2000), *Behind the Barricades* (Guerrillavision, UK, 2000), *Suits and Savages: Why the World Bank Won't Save the World* (Conscious Cinema, UK, 2002) and *Globalisation and the Media* (Undercurrents, UK, 2002).

opposed the war. Though popular (the 2003 anti-war marches were some of the largest ever recorded), the marches failed to grasp the imagination of video-activists and the dismissive response of those in power left many disillusioned with that form of protest. The lack of anti-war video-activism was also a result of exhaustion in video-activist organisations and the uncertain technological context in which they were operating. As Paul O'Connor, co-founder of Undercurrents, one of the most established video-activist groups in the 1990s, explains,

in the early 1990s with the roads protests it was all kinds of local. But by the end of that decade it was a worldwide movement. So people were going off to summits, Prague, Genoa and all that ... I think we realised that we just couldn't sustain it ... Indymedia was out there and things were going online and you were thinking 'great, we're going to have videos on the web'. [But] video on the web didn't take off for another four, five years.<sup>3</sup>

With VHS fast becoming obsolete and web video not quite viable, there was no reliable distribution platform for anti-war video-activism and the few attempts at newsreel production were unsuccessful. Instead, most anti-war films produced at the time were feature films such as *Not in My Name I, II and III* (Platform Films, 2002-4), *Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror* (John Pilger, 2003), *Letter to the Prime Minister* (Julia Guest, 2005).

In contrast to the anti-war demonstrations, which were for the most part peaceful and within the parameters of the law, the radical environmentalist movement in the UK largely maintained the traditions of direct-action and broadly anarchist modes of organising that characterised the movement in the 1990s. Partly as a result of this continuity (and partly because climate change is arguably the most serious political issue in the world, a fact which the mainstream plays a central role in obscuring), radical video-activist groups like Undercurrents and visionOntv, the London-based aggregator of video-activism, found a natural affinity with climate activists, providing media support with projects like Climate Camp TV in the mid-2000s (which broadcast live news updates and reports from within the camps) and at anti-fracking sites today.

Another significant influence on Britain's video-activists was the grassroots struggles and electoral successes in various Latin American countries; the so-called 'Latin American

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<sup>3</sup> Quotation from an unpublished interview with the author conducted in Swansea on 19 May 2011.

Left Turn' (Cameron and Hershberg 2010). This influence was partly derived from the anti-globalisation movement's emphasis on non-Eurocentric perspectives, which both celebrated and was shaped by various movements and campaigns, such as the Zapatista uprising of 1994 or the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998. While election successes attracted most attention from the mainstream media, it was grassroots movements and their attempts to develop forms of popular democracy adequate to them, such as the People's Global Action (PGA, 1998-) or the World Social Forum (WSF, 2001-) that had most effect on video-activists in Britain. visionOntv, for instance, adopted the Hallmarks of the PGA as its organisational principles. Reel News, meanwhile, was especially influenced by the workers cooperatives in Argentina that emerged in the wake of the protests that toppled Fernando de la Rúa's government in December 2001. It is to that organisation that we now turn.

### **Reel News**

Prior to founding Reel News in 2006, Shaun Dey had accrued almost fifteen years' experience of video-activist production working with various radical filmmakers in Britain and abroad. Consequently, Reel News is well connected to contemporary video-activist culture and organisations such as visionOntv, SchMOVIES and Camcorder Guerrillas, and is familiar with the recent history of British video-activism, acknowledging key 1990s groups such as Undercurrents, Despite TV and Conscious Cinema as 'trailblazers' of the movement and as influences on its own work.<sup>4</sup> Like those earlier groups, Reel News is a newsreel for the radical left but, having already released its bi-monthly newsreel for nearly a decade, it has already outlived its predecessors by some time. Reel News is also distinct from both its recent predecessors and contemporaries by virtue of its explicit class consciousness and its distinctive (in the UK)<sup>5</sup> funding model: Reel News is funded solely by donations and subscriptions to its newsreel, and performs none of the more commercial, less overtly political activities adopted by many other advocacy-based film organisations. For these reasons, Reel News is unique in the history of British video-activism.

Reel News' distinctive ideological perspective derives from the trade-unionist background of those involved in the collective (Dey is currently its only full-time member but the 'immediate circle' consists of seven people – three video-activists, a designer, a still photographer and two activists who help connect the groups to campaigns – with more

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<sup>4</sup> All unattributed quotations come from an interview with Dey conducted by the author in London, 19 November 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Submedia.tv is a Montreal-based anarchist production collective which is also funded exclusively by its supporters and, like Reel News, is similarly outspoken about its ideological orientation.

assisting on the periphery of the organisation). According to Dey, “not just me but the other people involved in Reel News are all or have been activists and in trade-unions”, and these roots in the labour movement are the source of the organisations’ ideological outlook:

I think what we bring to it is more of a class edge, to be honest. Because of where we come from. I suppose it’s that old Marxist idea that power, real working class power, is withdrawing your labour, because without that the whole thing can’t function. So I suppose we’re always looking for how to galvanise that at that level.

Dey was thus acutely aware of the absence of class when watching Undercurrents’ newsreel in the 1990s. “That was more about social and community struggles with direct-action going on ... I was always thinking ‘yeah this is good, you can get inspiration and often results from this but the most serious direct-action you can imagine is a mass strike’”.

A former activist for the public sector trade union, Unison, Dey quit his job to return to education in the mid-1990s, just prior to the development of the alter-globalisation movement. Studying lens-based media at Camberwell Art College in London, Dey used his experience to support a number of student protests and occupations, and focused his own research on student radicalism and the relationship between art, culture and working class politics. Graduating from the course in 1999, this art education and trade-unionist background meshed with the political context of the emergent alter-globalisation movement, and motivated Dey to start making his own work:

that’s where it all started really, in 1999. Then the next thing that happened was J18 and Seattle ... [what] stood out of all that for me, apart from obviously this new movement that was happening, was that kids were getting hold of all this new technology that was available, digital technology, and actually reporting on their own struggle. I remember for J18 they put it live up on the net. And it was completely unheard of ... I looked at that and thought, ‘that’s what I should be doing’. So I came out of Camberwell, got myself a video camera and went to the Prague World Bank/IMF protest. So it was all that that led to me doing all this now. It was the synthesis of my trade-union background and the arts school background and thinking that the obvious thing to do is to carry on going to protests and getting involved in disputes but with a camera in my hand.

Following the Prague demonstration, Dey attended the G8 summit protest in Genoa the following year, working as part of the burgeoning Indymedia movement. After Giuliani's killing, some Colombian activists remarked on the tragedy of the event but pointed out that people were killed in the same struggle every day, telling him: "if you really want to see what the fight against neoliberalism is about then you should come to Latin America".

Following the death of his father, Dey used his small inheritance to purchase some equipment and travel to Argentina, where he arrived two weeks after the 2001 uprising that toppled Fernando de la Rúa's government. In Argentina Dey met Rick Rowley and Jackie Soohen from Big Noise Films, one of the most prominent oppositional film collectives in the US (*This is What Democracy Looks Like* (1999), *Fourth World War* (2003), *Dirty Wars* (2013)), and together they worked with Argentinean Indymedia for six weeks.

Working with Indymedia in Europe and Big Noise in Argentina was a significant influence on Dey, as was Argentinian oppositional film culture. For example, Indymedia activists at the summit protests in Prague and Genoa practiced the pooling of their footage, from which anyone could then make their own edit – a practice Reel News would later replicate. Argentina Indymedia operated similar practices, and when Big Noise arrived Dey worked closely with them and Argentinian filmmakers to produce "short, sharp, functional films" from the pool of footage they had shot together. While the practical skills Dey learned in this period were invaluable, it was also here that he saw the value of screening those films in public:

there would be a big assembly every Sunday where all the popular assemblies would come together – you'd get about 5000 people in this park – and they would not only be filming it but they would also show footage on a big screen at the end of all the things that had happened over the last few days. That was when I started to see the potential of video as a really useful tool for a movement.

Returning to Britain, Dey produced a short film about Argentina, six hundred copies of which was distributed through *International Socialism*, the quarterly journal associated with the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). He continued with this model for a few years, producing films sporadically and releasing each one as a separate project, working on building sites in the meantime to supplement his income.

Frustrated by a process in which more time was spent working to pay for the films than actually making them, Dey began to consider the possibility of producing video-activism



full-time. Accompanying a trade-union delegation to Bolivia in 2006, he stopped off again in Argentina and revisited the factories under workers' control. This experience was decisive, and directly inspired Dey and some of his colleagues to found a newsreel when they returned to Britain:

it was meeting the women of Brukman's that really got conversations going amongst a few of us, because they sat down and told us the whole story. From the reason they occupied in the first place – most of them didn't have the bus fare to get back home because they were owed so much money by the owner – to going through this nine-month struggle where they were living on nothing ... And we were sitting there with them and they were *running the place*. And you think 'fucking hell, if these people who we're sitting with who had nothing, can go through all that suffering and all that hardship and then run an entire factory, then surely we can get a newsreel off the ground'.

Developing a sustainable funding model for a radical newsreel was their most significant challenge, however, especially given Reel News' decision not to adopt any of the typical approaches used by other groups: applying for funding; offering training; or selling footage to the media.

Although this means that 'money is the main problem' for Reel News, financial difficulties are outweighed by the political independence they afford. With no need to moderate its rhetoric to appeal to more liberal funding sources, Reel News is the most outspoken of contemporary video-activist groups. The organisation's website, for instance, proudly declares that "Reel News is completely independent and non-aligned. We are completely against sectarianism in all its forms, anti-capitalist in outlook, against the anti-trade-union laws and in favour of mass collective action in the workplace and on the streets to change society" (Reel News 2012).

Another reason for not applying for funding is more practical: the demands of regular newsreel production mean Reel News must dedicate all of its time to making films, not working on applications to fund them. Having discussed with Hamish Campbell and Richard Hering their drawn-out experience of applying for funding for visionOntv, Dey notes that "they spent a year doing that and didn't make any films ... [T]he way Reel News works, I'm not in a position to not be making any films". In any case, funding opportunities for such an overtly political project are few and far between, and Dey is reluctant to take on the

paperwork that funding applications require: “to be honest whenever I look at a funding application form I just get completely miserable. Because you’re thinking ‘how do I wrangle what I’m doing into this’ or ‘how do I lie about that’”.

With regards to training, despite Reel News’ informal policy that it will train anyone who wants to learn and Dey’s belief that political filmmakers have a responsibility to pass on their skills, he argues that this role is better left to other, more technically proficient groups such as Spectacle (a London-based, anarchist-oriented production company run by former Despite TV video-activist, Mark Saunders). Although Dey is certainly capable of offering training to new filmmakers, his reluctance to do so comes from a self-effacing attitude derived from his “punk attitude to filmmaking” and a sense that, because the production values of the films are less important than the political motivations for making them, they have little to offer aspiring filmmakers. Uninterested in making films for posterity, Dey describes Reel News’ work as “throwaway” filmmaking, designed to be used in the moment as campaign tools for whichever organisation the group is working for at that time.

Political reasons also underpin the policy of not selling footage to mainstream news sources. Television news companies tend only to be interested in the kind of footage Reel News has if it includes political violence, such as clashes between police and protestors. Aside from not wanting to contribute to the way in which the media already focuses on violence against property or the police to the detriment of the political issues that cause it, Dey also argues that “without 100% editorial control I wouldn’t trust what they were going to do with it”. Citing well-known examples from the miners’ strike and Poll Tax riots as well as the BBC’s unauthorised (and misleading)<sup>6</sup> use of Reel News’ footage, taken from YouTube, in October 2013, Dey is adamant that he would not consider selling footage to the media.

While the incident with the BBC might have prompted other organisations to adopt a stricter approach to its intellectual property, since 2010 Reel News has in fact made all of its work available online for free, alongside an option for audiences to pay for it. Due to differing opinions among the group about what the consequences of this move would be, the first time this practice took place was during the Copenhagen Climate talks in December 2009, when it was deemed useful for those present at the talks to have access to the material immediately. As a result, the rushes were placed online at the end of each day’s shooting before being sold on DVD as *Reel News 22: System Change Not Climate Change* (2010).

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<sup>6</sup> A BBC report on the peaceful strike at Grangemouth petrochemical plant in Scotland was illustrated with Reel News’ footage of conflict between police and demonstrators at a protest against blacklisting in London six-months previously.

Similarly, when the student movement against fee increases began in Britain in late 2010, the feeling within the organisation was that making the footage of the various protests freely available online could help build the movement. As a result, Reel News had more visitors to its website and its work was distributed more widely, with campaigners able to access and share films of the protests and demonstrations with which they were involved almost as soon as they had taken place. Moreover, contrary to the risk that this would erode Reel News' ability to generate income from its work, subscriptions and sales of its DVD have been steadily growing ever since.

## **Conclusion**

Despite its growth in recently years, analysis of the contemporary political avant-garde in Britain is a notably absent from scholarship on British film culture. Of course, video-activism is just one facet of that avant-garde and Reel News is just one among many organisations that comprise contemporary video-activist culture. Nevertheless, I hope this chapter has gone some way towards demonstrating the extent to which the historical record of oppositional film in Britain is in need of updating. Twenty-five years have passed since the period covered in *Rogue Reels* and, as we have seen, many significant changes have taken place in that time which have transformed radical film culture and the social and political contexts from which it emerges and which it attempts to engage.

And yet, as the case of Reel News demonstrates, while the spectacular expansion of grassroots filmmaking in the digital era has resulted in a contemporary video-activist culture that is in many ways unrecognisable from that of the 1990s, today's dominant video-activist organisations are intimately bound-up with that earlier period and cannot be understood in abstraction from it. To be sure, the next generation of video-activists will be influenced by those organisations and the struggles and campaigns in which they are involved. From Occupy and the indignados to migrant solidarity movements, campaigns against fracking and the struggles against austerity in Greece, Spain and the UK; these movements are the soil from which tomorrow's video-activists will grow, just as the direct action campaigns and the anti-globalisation movement forged groups like Reel News. Recovering the history of such organisations is thus essential if we are to understand both the nature of our contemporary video-activist culture and the various directions it may take in the future.

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## Filmography

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*Not in My Name III* (Platform Films, 2004)

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*Suits and Savages: Why the World Bank Won't Save the World* (Conscious Cinema, UK, 2002)