THE POLITICAL AVANT-GARDE:
OPPOSITIONAL DOCUMENTARY IN BRITAIN SINCE 1990

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Abstract

This thesis explores radical left-wing documentary produced in Britain since 1990. Despite constituting a lively and diverse part of contemporary British film culture, oppositional documentary has been overlooked by film and media scholars for much of the last twenty-five years. Indeed, the last book-length study of radical British filmmaking was Margaret Dickinson's *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (1999). The lack of subsequent research on the topic suggests that a politicised documentary film culture in Britain is now all but non-existent. Yet, on the contrary, the thesis reveals oppositional documentary to be a thriving aspect of alternative British culture, albeit one that has undergone significant changes as it has adapted to the major technological, socio-economic and political developments that have taken place since 1990.

As well as recovering this history, this thesis also suggests some reasons for its neglect in the first place. Asserting an admittedly problematic yet necessary distinction between the aesthetic and the political avant-garde, I claim oppositional documentary as a manifestation of the latter: an explicitly partisan and committed kind of filmmaking in which the need for aesthetic innovation is subordinate to the communication of political ideas. The legacy of a trend dominant in political film theory since the 1970s, I argue that the values and priorities of the aesthetic avant-garde have become the benchmark of political film practice such that the very existence of the political avant-garde has been effaced altogether. Exploring both the video-activist and feature-length efforts of oppositional documentary filmmakers over the last two decades, this thesis re-claims the political avant-garde as an important part of contemporary radical filmmaking in Britain.

Introduction

One of the most straightforward reasons for researching oppositional documentary in Britain is simply to assert its existence. Left-wing filmmaking in Britain has received scant attention in Film Studies (or anywhere else, for that matter) since Margaret Dickinson's book, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90*, was published in 1999. Picking up largely where she left off, I argue not only that this kind of filmmaking still exists in Britain, but that it constitutes a lively and diverse aspect of our film culture. Furthermore, the contemporary landscape of oppositional documentary has strong genealogical ties to previous cultures of radical British filmmaking. I want to unearth these ties, making clear that the films and filmmakers of the left today are a continuation of the rich tradition of radical filmmaking in Britain, despite the continued marginalisation of that tradition by those hegemonic histories and ideologies that dominate our culture.

This thesis is organised into two parts which correspond to two broad typological categories: video-activism and feature films. These parts are then subdivided by decade. So, Chapter One looks at video-activism in the 1990s, while Chapter Two looks at video-activism from 2000 to 2010. Chapters Three and Four then investigate then feature documentary from 1990 to 2000, and from 2000 to 2010. Like all histories, however, this is a partial and incomplete account, and I make no claims to comprehensiveness. Nevertheless, the many films I do discuss have hitherto largely been ignored or obscured (with the exception of a handful of oppositional auteurs or liberal-humanist filmmakers, discussed in Chapters Three and Four), and those I have not mentioned (or have yet to discover) demonstrate the amount of research that remains to be done on the topic.[1] Given the historiographical nature of the thesis, dividing the chapters according to decade is appropriate, although of course such a structure belies the more organic and complicated ways in which film cultures develop. For example, the anti-summit video-activist films of the early 2000s are discussed in Chapter Two but are

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[1] The one omission that I should like to acknowledge at the outset is that of Marc Karlin, one of the few British oppositional feature filmmakers who attempted to combine radical aesthetics with radical politics in the 1990s. When I began researching this thesis none of his work was available, though a separate project had just begun the process of rescuing it from obscurity. Entitled *The Spirit of Marc Karlin,* the project is led by his former colleague, Holly Aylett, and is ongoing, but included a major retrospective of his work at the Arnolfini gallery in Bristol in 2012.

part of a trend that began in the 1990s, while my discussion of Franny Armstrong's career in the 1990s in Chapter Three culminates in 2005 with the second version of *McLibel*.

Furthermore, the categories 'video-activism' and 'feature documentary' are themselves contingent. Very broadly, here video-activism denotes shorter, often ephemeral,[2] audio-visual works, typically in the form of radical newsreels, such as Undercurrents in the 1990s or Reel News today but which also draw on such traditions as agit-prop and access television, Scratch and the remix video.[3] Of course, my definition of 'feature' documentary can also include those influences, but refers to works with longer running times usually designed to have more lasting life-spans. That said, many films described as 'features' here are shorter than the more conventional 90 minute mark – most works discussed in this category are around an hour, with a few running thirty minutes either side of that. So, while these categories and temporal boundaries are somewhat arbitrary, they nevertheless provide a necessary structure with which the thesis can be organised and delimited, and the chapters themselves account for the complexities belied by such a straightforward structure.

Terms like 'the political avant-garde', 'oppositional', 'British' and 'documentary' constitute other important boundaries and limitations to the topic, and in this introductory chapter I will explain and justify my interpretation of them via a discussion of the variety of ways in which they have been approached in the past. I begin with an overview of some key contemporary debates in documentary theory. From the differences between fiction and non-fiction to the impact of postmodernism and digital technology on the field, I will explore both how documentary's orientation towards the public sphere and more recent work on the affective dimension of documentary films have seen theorists reiterate the importance of the form for political filmmakers.

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[2] For a recent study of less oppositional 'ephemeral media' see Grainger (2011).

[3] Historical and theoretical sources on oppositional or alternative news include Pronay (1982), Hogenkamp (1986 and 2000), James (1996), McKernan (2002), Atton (2002 and 2008) and de Jong et al (2005). On access TV, see Dovey (1993), Rose (2000 and 2007) and Dowmunt (2000, 2002 and 2007b). On Scratch, see Walker (1987) and Barber (1993). Older traditions of political montage are discussed in Eisenstein (1929), Leyda (1964 and 1986), Kuleshov (1973), Plant (1992) and Roth (1992). On more recent developments, such as remix or mash-up, see Foster (1985), Wees (1993), Mackenzie (2007), McIntosh (2008) and Horwatt (2009). Almost all oppositional filmmakers reject 'objectivity' as a value to which documentary should aspire, acknowledging the importance of political commitment over pretending to impartiality. For discussions of impartiality, see Glasgow Media Group (1976, 1980, 1982, and 1995), White (1978), Chomsky (1991), McNair (1995), Stephens (1995), Harding (2001), Atton (2002 and 2008), Kaplan (2002) and Wayne (2003).

Focusing more closely on British work, I justify my use of 'oppositional' and my positioning it as part of 'the political avant-garde' by exploring a range of alternative terms that have been used in the past and their accompanying historical and theoretical contexts. A discussion of political cinema variously conceived as 'realist' and 'independent' necessitates an engagement with the debates on politics and aesthetics in the 1930s and 1970s, for example. I also argue that Third Cinema and the British work to which the term was applied in the 1980s is of relevance to oppositional documentary since 1990, without claiming the latter as a manifestation of Third Cinema. Perhaps most contentious is my discussion of the political avant-garde and radicalism in relation to the aesthetic avant-garde. Throughout my discussion of the theoretical contexts listed above, I will argue that the political avant-garde has been marginalised in favour of its aesthetic equivalent – often despite the intentions of those theorists in whose name that marginalisation has been justified.

These debates are not new. Indeed, in his contribution to the discussion of politics and aesthetics in the 1980s, Colin MacCabe described the debate between modernism and realism as 'ancient', citing both the Brecht-Lukács debate in the 1930s as well as the revisiting of that debate in the 1970s (1988, 32). Time has moved on, yet these issues are as relevant as ever. Writing in the same collection as MacCabe, Stuart Hall tried to move beyond the stale dualism of modernism and realism, suggesting that 'the language of binary oppositions will no longer suffice' (1988, 27). Despite this argument, I will show that a trend dominant in political criticism since the 1970s has all but eradicated one half of the binary altogether, asserting the modernist qualities of the aesthetic avant-garde to such an extent as to effectively efface the political avant-garde. Arguing for an explicitly political interpretation of the word 'radical', my assertion of the existence of the political avant-garde is intended as a corrective to this one-sidedness.

However, words themselves are sites of struggle and I therefore often describe the films here simply as 'radical' or 'explicitly political' as much as 'oppositional', with my usage of these words being part of that struggle for meaning. I also consciously eschew other potentially useful descriptors, such as 'underground', 'counter', or 'autonomous'. While 'underground' is a suitable way of describing some of the less-than-legal organisational tactics of the radical left, it is also suggestive of the mainstream portrayal of radical politics as illegitimate. 'Underground' is also evocative of 1960s

and 1970s America,[4] as are 'counter-culture' or 'counter-cinema' (although the latter was used in Britain in the 1970s). Following Dowmunt and Coyer, I also reject 'autonomous' (2007a, 10). The use of the term in Uzelman (2005) to distinguish revolutionary positions from reformist alternatives is potentially helpful, but rarely are the films discussed in this thesis so easily categorised (although most lean toward the former). Moreover, as Dowmunt and Coyer point out, '[g]iven the pervasiveness of media power in our societies, it is difficult to see how any absolute goal of "autonomy" can be achieved, or should even be striven for' (2007a, 10). Other terms, such as 'anarchist' (Lovell, 1975a; Porton, 1999), and 'tactical' (Garcia, 2007), are either too specific or too vague or, like Jim Pines' 'militant-political-revolutionary' (1972, 103), too unwieldy.

'Britain' is more easily defined but equally problematic. Since I have not included work from the north of Ireland, 'Britain' should be read as shorthand for the three countries of the mainland.[5] However, considering only work from this area imposes a geographic boundary often not recognised by filmmakers with internationalist politics and who are, moreover, often influenced by work from elsewhere. That said, the geographic boundary provides a valuable limitation to the topic: peripheral study becomes more manageable, access to rare primary sources easier, and familiarity with socio-political contexts higher. Furthermore, Hardt and Negri's suggestion in *Empire* (2000) that nation states no longer have relevance goes too far. They continue to provide a crucial (de-)regulatory interface for transnational capital and national identities, however contradictory and imagined (Anderson, 1983), and as such have significant material consequences via their impact on policy and behaviour. For these reasons I differ from Wilma de Jong et al (2005, 2) when they argue that studies of 'activist' media today necessarily require global views. Whilst it is important not to approach the national as if in a vacuum, totally divorced from its global context, we surely need a diversity of approaches, some of which will explore the national in the detail I have attempted here at the expense of a wider focus on the international.

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[4] See Renan (1968, 18), Tyler (1995) and Mendik and Schneider (2002).
[5] Many of the filmmakers I discuss would not recognise Britain's sovereignty over Ireland, but my reason for excluding radical film produced there is more a result of access issues than political principal. Needless to say, both northern and southern Ireland have lively radical film cultures, although their exploration is beyond the scope of this study. See video-activist organisations like Dole TV, for instance, or the numerous feature films that have emerged from the resistance to Shell's environmentally destructive activities in County Cork, such as *Those Who Dance* (2007) or *Pipe Down* (2009).

'Politics' is another obviously contentious term. As already indicated, the politics I am interested in are the politics of the radical left, since 'left-wing' is too broad (although words like 'oppositional' and 'radical' can also be applied to right-wing media, of course). The British Labour Party still claim a left-wing status, for instance, but are so close to the centre of British politics that many commentators would deem this tokenistic at best. The politics of those films I judge oppositional here are, for the most part, far to the left of Labour. Marxism and anarchism are key reference points, and though relatively few filmmakers explicitly identify themselves in these terms, many of the films share the values of these traditions.

Finally, limiting the research to the documentary form (another problematic designation, as we shall see) has allowed me to focus on this culture in much more detail than would a study which incorporated fiction forms as well. Nevertheless, given the 'blurred boundaries' (Nichols, 1994) between fiction and documentary, a focus on one over the other arguably lends false clarity to the distinction. While this is true at the level of the films, the distinction is much more pronounced among the filmmakers themselves. Certainly among the oppositional documentary makers I explore here, few have branched into fiction filmmaking, although this is another facet of oppositional film culture in need of further exploration. In the digital era 'film' is also an unsatisfactory term for audio-visual works made in an electronic medium rather than celluloid, but here the medium is of less concern to me than the work that is made with it, so I will save specifying the technological origins of every work mentioned and stick with 'film', that being the common parlance.

Documentary

Fiction and Non-Fiction

Since this is a study of a particular kind of documentary rather than documentary as a whole, I mostly want to steer clear of the definitional minefield surrounding the term 'documentary'. Nevertheless, it is helpful to situate my own position in relation to some of these debates. Half a century after cinema

verité locked horns with direct cinema over the most suitable way of articulating documentary truths,[6] it is no longer contentious (in Film Studies at least) to claim that documentary and fiction are *both* subjective, constructed art-forms in which access to reality is never direct, but always mediated. Indeed, such similarities mean that debates on the nature of the relationship between fiction, non-fiction and documentary (and their relationship to reality) persist. As Michael Renov put it, 'fictional and nonfictional forms are enmeshed in one another' (1993, 2).[7] Many documentaries draw on the tropes of fiction film practice,[8] for example, using editing and narrative techniques to tell a story, while films more commonly understood as fictions are also documents of the social, political and economic contexts from which they emerged. Michael Chanan has acknowledged that this lack of clarity over the meaning of the word means that 'a watertight definition of documentary is effectively impossible' (2007a, 5), a problem John Corner acknowledged earlier when he argued that 'documentary' is safer used as an adjective than a noun (1996a). Indeed, Chanan reminds us this was the case in what is commonly cited as the first use of the term, in John Grierson's description of *Moana*'s 'documentary value' (2007b, 27).[9] Nevertheless, while the line between documentary and fiction is not a clear one, there are a variety of ways in which we can get beyond simplistic notions of documentary as just another form of fiction.

Index, Icon, Symbol and the Documentary Address

In semiotic terms, it is film's status as index, icon and symbol that gives the medium such persuasive representational power. In other words, analogue photography makes records of things which are directly connected to them in some way, and as such acts as an index or indicator of their existence. In

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[6] Though 'direct cinema' and 'cinema verité' are often used interchangeably, they more accurately describe the US and French wings of the movements, respectively. The increased reflexive presence of the filmmakers in the latter, in films by Jean Rouch or Edgar Morin, for instance, are compared to the lack of it in the work of American directors like D. A. Pennebaker, Albert and David Maysles and Richard Leacock.

[7] Some distinguish between non-fiction and documentary on the grounds that the Lumière films, or un-edited films like the Zapruder footage of the JFK assassination or the Rodney King assault are more accurately described as non-fiction because they lack the creative treatment implied by documentary (Ward, 2005, 7). Since actualities always have an aesthetic dimension anyway and forms of video-activism (such as sousveillance) are often very close to actuality films, I have opted for the broader approach, treating documentary and non-fiction as largely synonymous.

[8] See Waugh (1998) and Keil (1998).

[9] Although Winston (1995, 8-9) has shown that the term was in fact in use by 1914 at least, by American photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis.

addition to these indexical qualities, photographs are also iconic and symbolic signs, in that they both bear resemblance to the subject (irrespective of the medium's indexical register of that subject) and can be read as aesthetic objects, in which meaning can be inferred via cultural and social association. However, this applies as much to fiction as to documentary, since the camera cannot tell a pro-filmic event that is fictional from one that is not (something highlighted by documentary forms like the drama-doc or mockumentary).[10]

Theorising the particular relationship between documentary and the reality it claims to represent, critics such as Jane Chapman have distinguished the documentary address as one that implies a 'shared, public world' between the audience and film (2009, 14). Michael Chanan (2007a, vi) also argues that documentaries address their audiences as social citizens. Compared to the private, subjective address of fiction, documentary posits its spectator as a 'putative participant in the public sphere' (2004, 1). The same sentiment motivates Renov's argument that '[f]iction is oriented towards a world, non-fiction towards *the* world' (2004, 220). These arguments might seem obvious at first, given the common-sense association of documentary with the real world. Indeed, this is another way in which documentary can be distinguished from fiction. The referent of the documentary image (the actual object or event depicted) is a historical one, belonging to the same historical, social and physical world in which the audience exists, rather than some fictional 'imaginary double' (Chanan, 2007a, 4). This is often cited as one of the most straightforward qualities of the documentary: fiction film is 'made up', documentary images are from the real world. However, at a time when digital imagery has cast the indexical quality of photography into doubt, the relationship between documentary images and the real world has been subject to renewed questioning and the validity of the documentary truth claim the cause of renewed anxiety. In this context, definitions of documentary based on its mode of address rather than the ontological status of its image are deemed increasingly useful.

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[10] See Roscoe and Hight (2001), Rhodes and Springer (2006) and Paget (2011).

Postmodernism and Digital Technologies

Anxieties over the potential loss of documentary's indexicality cohered with the epistemic scepticism of postmodernist cultural theory. A dominant force in 1990s academia, postmodernism provided an apt theoretical context for the development of digital technologies. As postmodernist theorist Jean Baudrillard questioned our ability to distinguish reality from representation in a hyper-mediated world (1983 and 1995), so technological developments led film theorists to question 'the very possibility of documentary reference' (Corner, 1996b, 90). Contrary to the imprint of the pro-filmic subject on a film strip, digital cinema converts light into digital information, troubling the indexical relationship that gives such weight to celluloid's truth claims (Willis, 2005, 33). Although this was the case much earlier with the magnetic qualities of video (see Elewes, 2004, 17), the increased capabilities and ubiquity of computer-generated images (CGI) became more apparent in the 1990s with films like *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *Titanic* (1997).

With Hollywood foregrounding the possibility of undetectable image-manipulation,[11] the indexical integrity of the documentary image was also cast into doubt. Brian Winston, for instance, opens his 1995 book *Claiming the Real* with the observation that 'the status of the photographic image as evidence [has become] somewhat tattered' (5), a remark reiterated more urgently in the second edition: 'it is now vital ... to find a replacement for "truth claim" legitimations that rely solely on some innate quality of the image' (2005, 9). In lieu of such replacements, some have welcomed the increased scepticism towards audio-visual media that digital image manipulation has entailed. Linda Williams (1993b), for instance, has argued that documentary's access to the real has always been strategic and contingent, and that the genre is perfectly capable of recognising the non-absolutist nature of truth at the same time as acknowledging its existence and striving to represent it. For others, declining textual integrity has also meant turning away from the films themselves, developing definitional approaches that refer not so much to the documentary address, but to the role of audiences or the ethical and political implications associated with the idea of documentary.

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[11] Foregrounding undetectability is of course oxymoronic, and many critics have noted the reflexive qualities of contemporary Hollywood blockbusters (such as Elsaesser (1990)). Of course, Hollywood highlighting its ability to manipulate photographic images also asserts the possibility of not acknowledging that manipulation.

Audiences and Rules of Engagement

Winston, for example, calls for the audience to be the arbiters of documentary authenticity, arguing that 'grounding the documentary idea in reception rather than in representation is exactly the way to preserve its validity' (1995, 253). This is also suggested in Dai Vaughan's description of documentary not as a textual quality, but as a spectator response (1999, 58). For Vaughan, '[w]hat makes a "documentary" is the way we look at it' (cited in Bruzzi, 2006, 7). Others have responded by insisting on certain rules of engagement if films are to claim 'documentary' status. The tension between these two positions has been identified by Corner, who finds in both Winston's work and that of Paula Rabinowitz (1994) 'an ambivalence over the question of whether to regulate/encourage professional practise into propriety or simply to come to terms with the different, more anarchic, conditions of audiovisual documentation' (2006b, 94).

However, Corner also sees a need for documentary 'to regulate its activities by a discipline of principles and codes of practise' (1996c, 4), and this has remained a concern in more recent work. Nick James writes of the need for documentarians to refocus 'towards responsible mediation' (2007, 5), while Chapman notes that 'we probably have to maintain our genre differentiations ... in order to maintain our ethical distinctions' (2009, 9), sentiments shared by Dave Saunders' discussion of documentary's 'obligations' (2010, 18). Nevertheless, attaching rules and regulations to something as protean as documentary is difficult, as Chapman acknowledges by citing John Ellis' observation that while 'the documentary genre depends on a series of assertions about the truthfulness of its material', those 'criteria of truthfulness differ between cultures and historic periods' (2009, 4). As well as shifting contexts, the documentary form itself is of course also subject to change, something Paul Ward is aware of in his explorations of the genre in relation to comedy and animation (2005).[12] Indeed, it seems the only quality of the genre that remains constant is the *idea* of the documentary project itself (Ellis, 1989). As Ward puts it, '[t]he only unchanging thing about documentary is that it is a form that makes assertions or truth claims about the world' (2005, 8).

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[12] See *The Day Today* (1994), *Brass Eye* (1997), *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) or Leo Murray's climate change animation, *Wake Up, Freak Out* (2008).

Categories of Documentary

If their truth claim is the only thing all documentaries have in common, attempts to define the genre

have understandably begun with efforts to categorise their differences.[13] Many of these adopt a

taxonomical approach, of which Nichols' six[14] modes – expository, observational, participatory,

poetic, reflexive, and performative – are perhaps the best known. Though he has been criticised for

suggesting the modes correspond roughly to the historical development of the genre (see Bruzzi,

2006), they remain in widespread use. Corner (1996c) has attempted to expand on some of the

principle ones, dividing the image into four modes and sound or speech into three (1996c, 27-30).

Elsewhere Corner has adopted other, more abstract taxonomical approaches, arguing that

documentary can be identified by four dominant functions (democratic civics, journalistic exposition,

alternative interrogation and diversion (1996a)) or by dividing the documentary aesthetic into three

dimensions (pictorial, aural and narratological (2003)).

These typological approaches have been criticised for their reductiveness in the face of the

proliferation and 'hybridisation' of the genre (Ward, 2005, 29). Stella Bruzzi, for instance, challenges

what she sees as this 'imposition of a family-tree model' (2006, 3), arguing that it has been forced

upon documentary theorists faced with the impossible task of making sense of an otherwise

unmanageable body of work. Instead, she defines documentaries as 'performative acts' (2006, 6). For

Bruzzi, the documentary is a text which is constituted in the process of 'a performative exchange

between subjects, filmmakers/apparatus and spectators' (2006, 6). Because this process of exchange is

historically contingent and therefore ongoing, she argues that documentary is therefore 'inherently

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[13] There is obviously not space for a comprehensive literature of documentary studies here (see Nichols (2012) for one of the best attempts at that), though it is worth citing some of the key texts. Paul Rotha (1939) provided one of the first attempts at an historical account of the form, and many theoretical writings of the Griersonian school have been collected in Forsyth (1966) and Aitken (1998). Three more modern histories are, Barnouw (1983), Ellis (1989, second edition 2005) and Barsam (1992), while the key works published in the first half of the 1990s which re-established documentary studies as a field within Film Studies are Nichols (1991), Renov (1993), Rabinowitz (1994) and Winston (1995, second edition 2005). Other useful and important works include Cousins and Macdonald (1996), Corner (1996c), Plantinga (1997), Grant and Sloniowski (1998), Gaines and Renov (1999), Bruzzi (2000, second edition, 2006), Renov (2004), Ellis and McLane (2005), Rosenthal (1988, second edition Rosenthal and Corner (2005)) and Aitken (2006).
[14] An original four modes ('expository', 'observational', 'interactive' and 'reflexive') were proposed in *Representing Reality* (1991, 32-75). 'Performative' was added in *Blurred Boundaries* (1994, 92-106), while *Introduction to Documentary* (2001) introduced the 'poetic' mode (33, 88-91) and replaced 'interactive' with 'participatory' (115-124). These modes remain unchanged in the second edition of that work (2010).

fluid and unstable' (2006, 1). Though Bruzzi's criticisms are refreshing[15] and insightful,

categorisations remain useful markers and the genealogical approaches to documentary persist.

Chanan (2007), for instance, adopts exactly that, borrowing – as does Michael O'Pray when

discussing avant-garde film (1996) and Richard Porton when exploring related strands of anarchist

theory (1999) – a Wittgensteinian approach to categorisation. As Wittengenstein wrote of forms of

life like games, which also come in families and are related by family resemblance, so documentary

'comprises an extended family with its own different branches, where the films can be quite unlike

each other' and yet remain documentary (5).

As mash-ups and remix forms of documentary multiply online, some critics have attempted

taxonomies of these forms[16] while others have sought to develop theoretical approaches flexible

enough to account for this rapidly diversifying form. Drawing on Plantinga (1997), for example, Paul

Ward provides a useful way of adapting Bruzzi's position to documentary classification by reminding

us that classification itself can also be fluid and unstable. According to Ward, a dialectical relationship

exists between documentaries and the categories which help us understand them, because we are

constantly pairing one off against the other in a process in which both adapt and change: it is 'the

ways [in which] we *negotiate* whether or not something "fits" that we are constantly made to

reappraise the things themselves and the categories' (his emphasis, 23-4). As he says, 'language and

ways of understanding the world are social phenomena, subject to change' (23). Like language,

'categories ... are only meaningful if people broadly agree on their usage' (25). The same is true for

the division between video-activism and feature documentary that structures my chapters here.

Temporary agreement on categories and their meaning is a necessary pre-condition for debate and

disagreement.

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[15] She points out, for instance, that it is sometimes necessary to remind ourselves that 'reality does exist and ...
can be represented without such a representation either invalidating or having to be synonymous with the reality
that preceded it' (2006, 5).
[16] See, for instance, MacGregor (2000), Horwatt (2009), Birchall (2008) and Hight (2008).

Politics of the Documentary

One thing many documentary theorists agree upon is the implicitly political nature of the form. Irrespective of the ontological status of the image, for instance, some kind of indexicality in the documentary is still seen as a political necessity (Corner, 1996b, 91). Indeed, that the documentary relates to the real world in some way is what gives rise to arguments about documentary's 'obligations' and 'responsibilities'. This implicitly political quality of the genre is what makes documentary a suitable choice for those who wish to use film for explicitly political purposes. Thus, while documentary is often cited as the first genre of cinema (Aitken, 2006, xxxv), the radical use of it to question 'dominant political and social systems' is also the one with the 'longest lineage' (Corner, 1996c, 4). Because of documentary's claim to engage with the same social and political world we inhabit, it is a form suited to exposing injustice and inequality within that world. Thus deemed to have politics 'in its genes' (Chanan, 2007, 16), documentary has consistently been claimed as the most appropriate form for radical filmmakers[17] not only because of its reduced material requirements (no need for actors, scripts or sets), but also because it is predisposed towards interventions in the public sphere.[18] Indeed, it is the notion of the *interventionist* power of documentary that causes so many politically committed critics and filmmakers to emphasise the importance of local, public screenings and, more specifically, the debate the films inspire afterwards.[19]

The Public Sphere and the Affective Turn

This predisposition towards the public sphere has led some to note that while the documentary, as both art and record (Corner, 199c, 2), is deeply concerned with both aesthetics and politics, the latter is its primary concern. Chanan reminds us, for instance, that John Grierson thought of the documentary in 'sociological rather than aesthetic' terms (2004, 2). Expanding on this position

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[17] For example, Ralph Bond, a key figure in Britain's workers' film movement, argued that of all the forms '[t]he documentary type is ... the one most suited to our aims ... We can take our cameras out into the streets and, at the expense of little more than film stock, patience, and infinite capacity for taking trouble, photograph our material as it actually exists ... And if we do this, we are at the same time exposing the stupidity and false values of the commercial film' (cited in Hogenkamp, 1986, 147). Later, Third Cinema filmmakers and theorists Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino continued to describe documentary as 'the main basis for revolutionary filmmaking' (276).
[18] See Chanan (2000 and 2004).
[19] For instance, see Downing (2001, 198), Greenwald cited in Haynes and Littler (2007, 26) and Heritage (2008, 156).

without denying the 'visual poetry' of which the genre is capable, Chanan has pointed out that 'the documentary vocation to bear witness and offer evidence about the actual state of the world' results in its particular 'orientation towards the public sphere' (2004, 2). As such 'the documentary is less interested in aesthetic creation for its own sake than in its subject matter, which it locates in the external and punctual world' (2004, 2).[20] This is especially true for the political avant-garde, which also prioritises political over aesthetic concerns (an argument to which I will return throughout this introduction).

However, while Chanan locates the politics of the documentary in its relation to the public sphere, others have located the politics of documentary in its aesthetic dimension, exploring the emotional responses elicited by engagements with aesthetic objects. Part of a wider 'affective turn' (Tate, 2008) in which, since the 1990s, Film and Cultural Studies have given renewed attention to the role of emotional responses to audio-visual media,[21] these tendencies are not necessarily as contradictory as they might seem. While aesthetic innovation and analysis for their own sake are problematic (something I will discuss below in relation to the aesthetic avant-garde), many theorists highlight the importance of affective responses to political communication. Karen Lury, for instance, has explored the role of the close-up in stimulating our desire to 'think, feel and learn from moving images' (2003, 105). Elsewhere, Rabinowitz, exploring the political consequences of ideas first outlined in Metz (1982, 823), has argued that political films elicit affective, *political* responses by eclipsing the distance between screen and spectator (1993a, 130), a communicative function Maple Razsa has called 'intimacy without proximity' in relation to riot porn (2009, 3).[22] Others have also attempted to explore the role of affect in audience relationships with oppositional documentary. Jane Gaines, building on Linda Williams' work (1991), has conceived of oppositional documentary as a 'body genre' capable of producing a 'political mimesis', in which emotional experience that moves the spectator to political action (1999, 90). Gaines' position can be read as a fusion of affect theory

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[20] This is echoed in Nichols (1991) when he argues that documentary is outward-facing, towards the 'magnitude' (xvi) and 'full dimensionality of the world' (230).
[21] See Sobchack (1991, 1992, 2000 and 2004), Shaviro (1993), Grosz (1994), Massumi (1996), Gibbs (2001), Marks (2002 and 2004), Rutherford (2003), Sedgwick (2003), Ahmed (2004), Bennett (2005), Hemmings (2005), Shouse (2005), Tincineto Cough (2007), Razsa (2009), Gregg and Seigworth (2010) and Young (2010).
[22] See also Presence (2011).

with Winston's location of the documentary idea in the audience. Arguing that films interested in social change must be grounded in social movements, she singles out Waugh (1984) as indicative of overly text-based approaches which side-step this issue. (For my part, although I explore the social context of the films I discuss, analysis of their role in social movements of protest and resistance is beyond my scope).

Although the turn to affect is partly a response to the anti-illusionist film theory of the seventies (discussed in more detail below),[23] it is also an answer to the subjectivist, de-politicising effects of postmodernist relativism, which reduces concepts like right and wrong to supposedly equally valid (albeit conflicting) perspectives. Arguing that feelings are at least as important as intellectual or cognitive responses to aesthetic objects, and indeed that affective and cognitive responses are in fact inseparable, affect theory stages an encounter between the subjective and the objective that affirms rather than negates the possibility of political action. Asserting the politics of documentary at both the subjective and the objective level has been an important step in the face of the much noted return of documentary to the big screen in recent years. While many commercially successful documentaries are explicitly political, such as the work of Michael Moore or Morgan Spurlock, others, such as *March of the Penguins* (2005), are less so (although anthropomorphism is hardly non-political). Irrespective of their political content, these films can often be viewed as post-post-modern texts, foregrounding the intensely subjective or performative role of the subjects. Whether it is Moore's faux political buffoonery, Spurlock's bodily abuse or Morgan Freeman's swooning voice-over celebrating the monogamy and self-sacrifice of penguins, the performative mode is in evidence. These films all 'reject objectivity in favour of evocation and affect [and feature] a strong emphasis on their emotional and social impact on the audience' (Nichols, 2010, 32).

The evident potential of documentary as a form of commercial entertainment has resulted in a proliferation of similar non-fiction forms on television, in series like *Big Brother* (2000–) and *Wife Swap* (2003–). Some have noted this rise in documentary entertainment as contiguous with the

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[23] See, for instance, Shaviro (1993): the equation of passion, fascination and enjoyment with mystification, he says, 'manifests a barely controlled panic at the prospect … of being affected and moved by visual forms … as if there were something degrading or dangerous about giving way to images … so easily falling under their power' (14). It is, therefore, 'high time we rid ourselves of the notion that we can somehow free ourselves from illusion (or from ideology) by recognising and theorizing our own entrapment within it' (10.1).

neoliberal de-regulation of industry in the 1990s and a corresponding 'lurch towards the private in public speech' (Dovey, 2000, 3).[24] Performative and subjective documentary is also predominant in the non-commercial sector, however, with films such as *Tarnation* (2003) and *Bodysong* (2003), for instance, and first-person documentary has also received some recent academic attention.[25]

These recent documentary trends have rightly received a good deal of critical attention. However, research on explicitly political documentaries has tended to concentrate on high-profile works with widespread distribution, invariably from the US, thus overshadowing Britain's thriving oppositional documentary culture.[26] Older histories of radical British film traditions have been taken into account. Bert Hogenkamp's (1986) work on the British workers' film movement before WWII, as well as left film culture more broadly after it (2000), are invaluable. Stephen Jones (1987) covers similar territory to Hogenkamp's earlier book but with more focus on industrial relations in the film industry and the Labour Party's relation to the medium, while Don MacPherson's edited collection (1980) brought together some of the key writings from the thirties with contextual pieces from those involved in the resurgence of political film and theory in Britain in the seventies (discussed in more detail below). Dickinson's aforementioned collection (1999), bringing together key documents from the period as well as original interviews and contextual introductions, remains the most recent volume on the subject, leaving an absence of some twenty years.

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[24] See also Naden et al (2004) and Dovey (2008).

[25] See Lane (2002), Lebow (2008 and 2012) and kydd (2010).

[26] This results in a frustrating US bias throughout the literature on the topic. For example, the entry on 'Activist Filmmaking' in Ian Aitken's *Encyclopaedia of the Documentary Film* (2006, 6-9) mentions only the Griersonian school before swiftly moving onto the Workers Film and Photo League in the US, Direct Cinema, Barbara Kopple and Michael Moore. The same tendency is present in the otherwise excellent PhD thesis of the author of the entry, Angela Aguayo, which is entitled *Documentary Film/Video and Social Change* (2005) yet discusses almost entirely texts produced in the US. Other examples of such bias include Juhasz (1995), Downing (2001), Bodle (2004) and Edwards (2004), though the focus on US work is tempered in Bodle's discussion of international activity. Couldry (2000, 73), and Arthur (2007a) discuss respectively British activists and a British filmmaker (Adam Curtis) but seem so unaware of the wider contexts of either activism or radical filmmaking in Britain that the US contexts are offered instead.

Alternative

There is an overwhelming choice of synonyms with which to describe radical or left-wing media. 'Alternative' is one of the most common, which one might think justifies its continued use. After all, a proliferation of *competing* terms and phrases is not helpful, since all the different adjectives that get applied to this kind of media usually need qualification anyway. One might argue, then, that an inclusive adjective such as 'alternative' is a useful starting point and one worth maintaining. And indeed it is – almost all the films and filmmakers I discuss in this thesis would be broadly happy with a description of their work as alternative (and perhaps much less inclined to call themselves 'oppositional'). Such inclusivity is useful for scholars such as Chris Atton (2002, 2004 and 2008), John D. H. Downing (1984, 2001 and 2008) and Mitzi Waltz (2005), who wish to explore kinds of media production that might differ radically from mainstream or commercial practises at the level of organisation or production but which may have no explicitly political content at all.

The inclusivity of 'alternative' is unsuitable for me, however, since an absence of an explicit left-wing politics in the content of a work is one of my criteria for exclusion. This is one way in which my use of 'oppositional' can be distinguished from 'alternative', in that the former denotes work that adopts an antagonistic relationship to the status quo, usually with a view to changing it. Of course, many, indeed most, of the production and organisational practises of filmmakers producing work from an explicitly left-wing perspective also differ from the hierarchical, profit-orientated practises of the 'mainstream'. This has been a prerequisite of oppositional media production at least since Walter Benjamin's claim that political art *must* transform the mode of its production as much as it urges revolutionary struggle in its content (1970). Atton, Downing and other leading figures in radical media, such as Michael Albert (1997), have also insisted on the centrality of radical modes of production as a key criterion of 'alternative' media. While recognising the importance of transforming modes of production, however, often this will be a transformation of degree rather than kind as oppositional filmmakers struggle to make work in a capitalist society that is fundamentally hostile to their aims. For that reason, I am not as insistent as some on absolutely non-hierarchical, consensus-based decision making being the organisational base of the filmmakers I look at. In this thesis,

'oppositional' documentary *must* have radical content. The means with which that content is produced can (and probably will) be radical to some degree.[27]

My perspective is thus more aligned with Dickinson's, who points out that '"alternative" [is] linked to phrases like "alternative society" and "alternative lifestyle" suggest[ing] an extension of personal choice in a plural culture in which different values are not necessarily in conflict with one another'. By contrast, '"Oppositional" implies taking a position within a struggle"' (4). This position has been criticised, however, for the way in which 'oppositional' or 'alternative' is defined in terms of its relationship with the mainstream.[28] Akin to the way in which excluding Hollywood from definitions of 'world cinema' reinforces western perspectives on the world (Dennison cited in Nagib, 2006, 34), situating 'oppositional' in this way reinforces the mainstream as normal or natural, and suggests anything other than that is secondary. Nevertheless, the global Hollywood aesthetic (Olsen, 2001) and its associated practises remain overwhelmingly dominant, and the mass media of which they are a part are therefore often the first target for filmmakers on the left. Rather than lamenting the fact that oppositional filmmakers are locked into a relationship with that to which they are opposed, I would argue that it is more useful to accept our historical moment for what it is and support those filmmakers prepared to fight back.

Another criticism of the relationship to the mainstream implied by 'oppositional' comes from a reading of the word as derived from 'opposite'. Mike Wayne, for instance, has argued that a political cinema must be neither completely new – which would be ahistorical – nor entirely 'oppositional' to the mainstream, since that would alienate rather than communicate with its audience (2001, 10). My meaning of 'oppositional' differs from this. As indicated by my claim that this film culture constitutes the political avant-garde, here 'oppositional' relates to political perspective rather than aesthetic style. While many of the films do have an aesthetic approach that is distinct from mainstream documentary aesthetics,[29] they are too concerned with communicating political ideas to attempt to create works which are diametrically opposed to the commercially oriented mainstream. In

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[27] I will address these issues in more depth when I discuss Undercurrents in Chapter One, the 1990s video-activist group who were heavily criticised for not being radical enough in this area.

[28] See, for example, Sue Braden, cited in Dowmunt and Coyer (2007, 9-10).

[29] Something I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three, relation to oppositional feature documentary in the 1990s.

any case, it is hard to see how any works could be 'completely new'. Given that filmmakers always respond to the context in which they find themselves, 'new' can only be understood in relation to whatever is deemed 'old'. Indeed, relativism is the cause of much definitional confusion. 'Alternative' has been criticised by Downing, for instance, for being almost 'oxymoronic ... [g]iven that everything is, at some point, alternative to something else' (2001, ix).

The Political Avant-garde

Radicalism and Artists' Film and Video

Regardless of the philosophical validity of the notion of originality, filmmakers associated with the aesthetic avant-garde make most frequent claims to it. More recently referred to as 'film and video art'[30] or 'artists' film and video',[31] this is another sector of film production which I have excluded from this study. In part this is due to reasons of space: to include artists' film and video in my discussion of oppositional documentary would have resulted in an insufficient focus on either. Of course, even distinguishing between 'artists' film and video' and 'oppositional documentary' foregrounds another definitional problem. Many artists producing works of oppositional film and video would rightly argue that their work is documentary, for instance, while the filmmakers I refer to here could equally be considered artists (though fewer would claim that title for themselves). In this sense the distinction between artists' film and video and more 'conventional' oppositional documentary is hard to sustain.

One might begin to make such a distinction with the observation that artists' film and video, as the name suggests, tends to be more preoccupied with questions of aesthetics, and make films that engage with aesthetic questions as well as political ones. By contrast, in the work I am grouping under 'oppositional documentary' here, political issues are the primary concern. Another related point of distinction is that the predominant exhibition venue for artists' film and video is the gallery. Those filmmakers I call 'oppositional' distribute and exhibit their films much more widely, on DVD and in cinemas as well as in more unconventional public spaces (social centres, squats, meeting halls etc)

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[30] See Comer (2009), Elewes (2004) and Knight (1996).
[31] See Curtis (2007), Danino and Mazière (2003) and Rees (1999).

and online (often for free). There are exceptions to the rule, of course. Ken Fero and Adam Curtis are included here as oppositional filmmakers but have both produced artists' film and video that have been exhibited as installation pieces or in gallery spaces (see *Newspeak* (Fero, 2011) or *It Felt Like a Kiss* (Curtis, 2009)), while artists' film and video works like Duncan Campbell's *Bernadette* (2008) or John Smith's *Blight* (1994) could equally qualify as oppositional documentary. As Dickinson says in her introduction, '[w]hatever it is called, the subject is fluid and the boundaries always controversial' (5).

Since controversy is guaranteed, another reason for my exclusion of artists' film and video is more consciously provocative and, I hope, productive. Another word that is often used as a synonym for 'oppositional' documentary is 'radical'. This is a suitable word for a number of reasons. It derives from *radix*, the Latin word for 'root' (Button, 1995, 5), and as such connotes the bottom-up, grass-roots forms of organisation that characterise much oppositional film culture and left-wing politics. It also suggests a concern with the fundamental or essential that is appropriate for films which frequently stage political critiques of capitalism as systematically flawed. Many on the radical left would be uncomfortable with the association of radicalism with extremism, however, viewing politics that are committed to sharing and equality, peace and responsibility as perfectly reasonable. Yet 'radical' can also describe a view of the status quo as one of such extreme or radical inequality that radical changes are required before a more equitable society can be achieved.[32]

Unfortunately 'radical' is also frequently used to describe works of artists' film and video with only the most tenuous connection to the politics of the radical left. Yet because oppositional documentary prioritises political communication over aesthetic innovation it tends to be excluded from both the academy and art-gallery alike. In these spaces radical politics are all too often acceptable only if they come dressed in the formal attire of the aesthetic avant-garde. Anything else tends to be ignored or held at arm's length, dismissed as 'community work' or 'activist film'. As a result of such intellectual and cultural elitism, aesthetic innovation for its own sake is frequently accorded 'radical' status, while works of oppositional documentary which explicitly address, promote

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[32] See Norman Finklestein in David Ridgen and Nicolas Rossier's documentary, *American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finklestein* (2009).

and critique radical politics are denied that status. In this way, the bourgeois gatekeepers of the art world contribute to the effacement of the political avant-garde from the public sphere. Despite possessing the required cultural capital to bestow value on the political avant-garde, they choose not to, the process of accumulating that capital having rendered them horrified by anything so 'vulgar' as the direct articulation of political ideas.

In part then, my exclusion of the aesthetic avant-garde is a response to this exclusion of the political avant-garde from the gallery space. It is a challenge to the gatekeepers of such spaces to deny that the works discussed here constitute *radical* left-wing filmmaking, and an appeal to those who claim to be producing politically radical artists' film and video to reflect on the relationship of their work to radical politics outside of the gallery or museum space. It is for this reason that I claim this body of work as 'the political avant-garde', a designation which, it is hoped, will horrify those intellectual and cultural elites whose claim to radicalism depends upon an aesthetic vanguard that has marched so far into the distance 'that the main army cannot follow it' (Brecht, 1967, 72).

This is indeed a controversial position. Before engaging with the historical and theoretical trajectory that has led me to it, I want to briefly make four other related points of clarification. First, to accusations that I am misusing the meaning of 'avant-garde', a term more commonly used as a synonym for 'experimental' (see Rees, 1999; or Dixon and Foster, 2002) or 'modernist' (Weightman, 1973) aesthetics, I point to the origins of the term: as is well-documented,[33] the 'avant-guard' translates from the French for 'advance-guard', denoting the foremost part of an army marching into battle. Following on from Gramsci, if the battle for ideological hegemony is a battle of ideas (Harman, 2007), the films included here are decidedly avant-garde, expressing the most militant and radical left-wing political arguments in the last twenty-years of British documentary. Second, I am not suggesting that aesthetic questions are unimportant. On the contrary, an engagement with the politics of representation is a crucial part of oppositional culture, one arguably all too often lacking in many of the films included here as 'oppositional'. Nevertheless, I would argue that this is less of a problem than other films which address purely aesthetic questions as if that somehow equates to politically radical filmmaking.

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[33] See O'Pray (2003, 3), for instance, or Stam (1998, 254).

Third, I do not wish to patronise those of the aesthetic avant-garde who are genuinely engaged with radical politics, and I have no interest in reproducing what Esther Leslie has called (albeit in a slightly different context) a 'phoney war' between artists working in popular forms and those more interested in aesthetic innovation (2002, v). It is hardly my intention to foster internecine divisions and disputes among an already embattled left culture. Any work attempting a left intervention on any of the multiple sites of cultural struggle should be applauded. That said, it is also worth bearing in mind that 'commitment to a cause, even unequivocal commitment, is not the same as suspending your critical faculties' (Wayne, 2001, 13). The spirit of such criticism lies behind the position I have adopted here. Documentary works of the political avant-garde have been ignored and dismissed by guardians of the aesthetic avant-garde for too long. Identifying this imbalance and arguing against it is the first step towards rectifying it and developing a more effective, holistic radical film culture.

Fourth, excluding the aesthetic avant-garde in favour of the political avant-garde is likely to elicit criticisms for reproducing a false dichotomy between aesthetics and politics, or for misunderstanding the dialectical relationship between a film's content and the form in which it is represented. In some respects this is a justifiable criticism. Aesthetic questions are of course also political ones – the means with which one represents always shapes what is represented – and political filmmakers should, at the very least, be sensitive to the political implications of film language. Nevertheless, I would argue that distinguishing the aesthetic from the political avant-garde is a necessary step in order to address the exclusion of the latter that already exists. Again, in some ways this exclusion is understandable: museums and art galleries are designated exhibition spaces for aesthetic objects and, along with those fields of study dedicated to arts and culture, are not obliged to consider political communication exclusively. Nevertheless, one must not forget that *all* cultural production – produced by social subjects enmeshed in deeply unequal matrices of political and socio-economic class relations – is political to some degree. So, although it is an argument more often invoked by those who foreground aesthetic questions to the effacement of political ones, it is they who need reminding that aesthetic questions are therefore also always political ones. Therefore I would withdraw the label 'radical' from any film more interested in aesthetics than in how to use

aesthetics politically, on the grounds that the filmmakers who make them have forgotten that to talk of the aesthetic is also to speak politically.

This argument is likely to irritate those advocates of the aesthetic avant-garde who argue that films with challenging and experimental aesthetics are ultimately politically radical in themselves. These films, they argue, push against the restrictive and reactionary codes and conventions of mainstream audio-visual culture and stimulate new and 'revolutionary' uses of the medium which, it is suggested, will in turn lead to new and revolutionary consciousness. Arguments of this kind confine politics to aesthetics and as such are profoundly asocial, transforming what should be the public function of art into a private, elitist one. As Tom Kuhn reminds us of Bertolt Brecht's politically committed aesthetics, Brecht argued that political art must 'speak not to some self-regarding artistic elite, but to people' (2003b, 209). The communication of political ideas *must* be a fundamental concern of radical works of art. To formulate the issue another way, as Walter Benjamin argued that political art had to combine political content with politicised production values (1970), so it is insufficient for the form of a work to be radical if the content is not. The Marxist critique of capitalism, as a system in which a ruling class owns and controls the means of production, and depends for its wealth and power upon the extraction of surplus value from the labour of the working class, is as relevant as ever. In this context class alignment should be a *pre-condition* of political art, which by definition must communicate with the working class or articulate ideas in its interest. Benjamin begins his essay by stating that a capitalist context forces the artist to choose whom their activity will serve (1970, 1). In the current social context that remains the case: oppositional documentary must express that which is 'useful for the proletariat in the class struggle' (Benjamin, 1970, 1).[34]

This argument could itself be accused of elitism if it were misread as a suggestion that abstract or experimental art was beyond the comprehension of the working class. However, as Brecht's contemporary, Georg Lukács, said, 'without abstraction there can be no art – for otherwise how could anything in art have representative value?' (1938, 38). Thus it is hardly my intention to

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[34] Of course, questions of what exactly constitutes the working class and proletarian expression in the 21st century are among the debates oppositional documentary should stimulate.

criticise abstraction or experimentation per se. On the contrary, cinema is a complex medium with a range of 'representational strategies' open to it (Wollen, 1975, 175), and a fully developed political film practice is surely one in which the expressive capacities of the medium (sound, image, colour, editing, time, space and so on) are deployed to the maximum degree possible. The strongest works of oppositional film are therefore those which achieve the rare combination of radicalism in both form and content without sacrificing the lucidity of their political arguments. Lukács argued that 'the broad mass of people can learn nothing from [an] avant-garde [which requires] 'a certain "knack" to understand' (1938, 57) and so while ambiguity, reflexivity and experimentation are valuable tools available to political filmmakers, they must be calibrated for use in the class struggle. This was something of which Brecht was acutely aware when he argued that one can:

> paint something red and indeterminate … and some people cry … because it reminds them of a rose, while other people cry because it reminds them of a child covered in blood who has been torn to bits by flying bombs … Things are at stake, not eyes. If we want to teach people to see differently, then we must teach this with reference to things. And we don't, of course, just want them to see 'differently', we want them to see in a quite specific way, a way which is different, not only from every other way but correct. (Brecht, 1939, 241)

Brecht repeated this sentiment elsewhere when he argued that, given the exploitative nature of capitalism, showing the realities of that system can only ever be in the interests of the working class. Art must 'therefore', he claimed, 'be absolutely comprehensible and profitable to them – in other words, popular' (1967, 80). Any work that is not is thus in the 'service of the ruling class' (1939, 240).

Realist

For Brecht, Lukács and others involved in these debates in the 1930s,[35] the question of what constituted 'radical' or 'oppositional' art therefore became a question of realism. As these authors asked themselves what constituted the reality of life under capitalism and how that reality could best be expressed to the workforce, the realist debate became much more than a question of aesthetics. It was rather, as Brecht put it, 'a major political, philosophical and practical issue' (1967, 76). Philosophical disagreements over the answers to these questions are thus at the heart of the realist debates in the 1930s.

Ernst Bloch, for instance, argued that revolutionary art must be radically new, and that any representations of the world as logical, unified and coherent were conservative. He argued that these forms 'plaster over the surface of reality', playing 'doctor at the sick-bed of capitalism' by sustaining the bourgeois values of the era in which they emerged (1938, 23). Drawing on the Dadaist tradition (Hughes, 1991, 61),[36] Bloch argued that in the transition from the old world to the new art must also play a transformative role, smashing old forms in the drive to find new means of representation. If that meant rendering confusion and incomprehensibility, it was because those things were part of life and expressing them was thus part of the revolutionary struggle.[37]

For Lukács, capitalist reality was comprised of what he called 'totality', or, the 'unity of economics and ideology' to the extent that they presented themselves as an entire integrated system (1938, 30-1). He therefore argued that the abstraction and discontinuity of modernist art mystified the entwined reality of ideological, economical and political relations. As Mike Wayne puts it, for Lukács

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[35] Though often characterised as the 'Brecht-Lukács debate', this is misleading in the sense that, though Brecht was one of the three editors of the journal in which many of these debates were published and wrote vigorously against Lukács' position at the time, none of his responses were published in Brecht's life-time. See Livingstone et al (1977, 62).

[36] Hughes describes the avant-gardist perspective of the Dadaists as one limited to aestheticism: 'The Dadaists still believed, as many artists did, in the power of art to "save mankind" from political abominations ... [T]he central myth of the avant-garde, that by changing the order of language, art could reform the order of experience and so alter the conditions of social life, had not yet collapsed' (1991, 61).

[37] There is a contradiction in Bloch's logic here. On one hand he asserts the necessary existence of 'confusion, immaturity and incomprehensibility' in art as 'part of the transition from the old world to the new' (22-3). Yet on the other, he suggests this incomprehensibility should be perfectly understood by the observer, and if it is not, then this is not a fault in the art work, but indicates rather that 'the observer possesses neither the intuitive grasp typical of people unformed by education, nor the open-mindedness which is indispensible for the appreciation of new art' (26). Aside from the fact that confusion and incomprehensibility by definition should not be understood, to then go on and blame that lack of understanding on the audience rather than the artist is exactly the kind of elitism political art needs to avoid.

modernism expressed 'only the surface features of life under capitalism, missing the fact that beneath the appearance of flux, fragmentation and unpredictability lies an ever more integrated and concentrated socio-economic system' (2005, 15).Thus, for Lukács, the most progressive form of representation available was the descriptions of social totalities in the work of nineteenth-century realist writers such Balzac, Tolstoy and Thomas Mann. However, this elicited accusations of formalism from his critics, one of whom was Brecht.

Like Lukács, Brecht also believed the ultimate aim of realism was to reveal the underlying structures, or 'causal complexes', of society (1967, 82). Yet this was for Brecht an end whose means could be variable. Indeed, he argued, the formal properties of realist works must be variable if they are to remain realist, since what constitutes a realist technique for one set of social conditions will cease to be realist when those social conditions change. 'Reality changes', he says, 'in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change' (82). From this perspective, Lukács' argument that realist writers of the nineteenth century provided the ideal model for realist representation in the twentieth constitutes a decidedly anti-realist position. Brecht's concept of realism was thus much broader, fluid and adaptable:

> [w]e must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master... Our concept of realism must be wide and political, sovereign over all conventions. (82) [38]

As this suggests, Brecht's inclusive, political definition of realism combines a monopoly on formal strategies and tactics with accessibility: whatever its characteristics the form must be popular, in the Marxist sense that it is from 'the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour of power from them' (Williams, 1976, 198-9). As I have said, for Brecht, realist works of art aim to reveal the nature of reality under capitalism. Since this is a reality in which the many are exploited

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[38] In this way, Brecht's attitude to realism is akin to his attitude to theory generally: 'a man [*sic*] with one theory is lost. He must have several, four, many! He must stuff them into his pockets like newspapers, always the most relevant, you can live well between them, you can dwell easily between the theories' (cited in Kuhn, 2003a, 13).

and oppressed by the few, and since it is not in the interests of those few for this reality to be depicted, any truly realist work must, by definition, be a popular work of art. Irrespective of its formal qualities, then, accessibility is another pre-condition of realist art. If it is to unmask the 'causal complexes of society' in the interests of 'the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up', it must communicate with that class (1967, 82). In other words, to be inaccessible is to be unpopular, and so unrealistic.

For Brecht, accessibility was not at odds with the need for formal innovation, something he also took for granted: '[o]ne can arouse a sense of outrage at inhuman conditions by many methods … [i]t is hardly open to debate that the means must be questioned about the ends they serve' (1967, 83). Influenced by the modernist aesthetics of his time, one of the key means through which Brecht incorporated modernism into his plays was by developing techniques which encouraged the audience to reflect upon the theatrical process itself. He wanted to avoid the creation of a deep emotional connection between the audience and the text which, he argued, encouraged escapism and was therefore politically ineffective. Instead, the aim was to distance the audience from the text, allowing them the space to consider it in relation to its social and political context. In Brecht's 'epic theatre', one of the main aims of such 'distanciation' was to avoid 'the engendering of illusion' (Brecht, 1948, 122).[39] Though an important part of Brecht's aesthetic, anti-illusionism would later be foregrounded at the expense of other aspects of his theory, allowing some to claim as Brechtian work which eschewed those other qualities Brecht himself considered integral to politically radical oppositional art.

For Brecht's theatre was engaging and entertaining as much as it was inclusive and accessible. Reflexivity, for instance, did not equate to the complete emotional disengagement with the text on the part of the audience. On the contrary, for Brecht the point of reflexive techniques was to reconnect the theatre to the people, so that '[t]he stage is still elevated, but it no longer rises from an

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[39] Epic theatre involved a variety of techniques, such as breaking the fourth wall (the imagined boundary between audience and actors), having actors perform their parts in ways that foreground the act of impersonation (addressing the audience out of character for instance), dividing the narrative of play into a series of fragments or episodes (hence the name 'epic') to break up the narrative flow, incorporating stage direction into the performance and openly displaying props and costume changes on stage. Like Brecht's concept of realism, however, distanciation is also historically variable and can be achieved by many means. See Leslie (2005).

immeasurable depth; it has become a public platform' (Brecht cited in Heath, 1974, 109). Reflexivity in epic theatre was intended to make drama confess the process of its own creation. Like a magician revealing her tricks, art was thus shown to be within reach of the public. 'The aim is no longer to fix the spectator apart as receiver of a representation but to pull the audience into an activity of reading; far from separating the spectator, this is a step towards his [*sic*] inclusion in the process' (cited in Heath, 1974, 111). Because of this concern to include the spectator, Brechtian distanciation was not aiming to abolish audience identification altogether because this would entail complete emotional detachment and prevent the audience from developing any kind of useful relationship with the text (Heath, 1974, 111). Therefore, the kind of critically engaged identification Brecht was looking for would not only come from an inclusive, accessible theatre, but one that was also, crucially, entertaining:

> Let us therefore cause general dismay by revoking our decision to emigrate from the realm of the merely enjoyable, and even more general dismay by announcing our decision to take up lodging there. Let us treat the theatre as a place of entertainment, as is proper in an aesthetic discussion, and try to discover which type of entertainment suits us best. (1949, 180)

Despite Brecht's insistence that a reflexive, political realism must also be a popular, accessible and entertaining one, by the time these debates resurfaced in Britain in the late 1960s and 1970s this would be displaced by a concern with the illusionary power of the cinema, the medium around which the debates now centred.

Independent

When debates about politics and aesthetics reignited, the preferred term for 'oppositional' film was 'independent', as evidenced by key organisations such as the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA) or events like the Bristol Festival of Independent Cinema (held at the Arnolfini Gallery in 1975). As was recognised at the time, 'independent' is also open to criticism. Like 'alternative', for

instance, it also begs the question: independent from what? While some claimed a definition of the term as 'an oppositional practice' (Willemen, 1980, 1) others, such as Simon Blanchard and Sylvia Harvey (1983), were more critical. Noting its 'insistently relational' quality (226), they trace a lineage of the word 'whose dominant values are '"non-partisan", if not frankly "anti-political"' (227), another reason for my adoption of the more straightforward 'oppositional'. Although they argue in favour of exploring degrees of 'inter-dependence' (227), Blanchard and Harvey also cite other criticisms of 'independence' as more accurately signalling varying states of being 'in-dependence'. That is, the term is unsatisfactory because without the developed infrastructure of the mainstream industry this kind of filmmaking is actually more dependent than most on external sources for support.

Another attempt at defining 'independence' was made in one of the IFA's founding documents, 'Independent Film-Making in the 70s' (IFA, 1976). Financial independence from 'big capital' was one of their key concerns, but more specifically they asserted the need for independence from 'the artistic and political delimitation big capital invariably tends to impose' (128). This consciousness of the need to struggle on both cultural and economic fronts, to 'defend and develop ... political and aesthetic independence' (129) is indicative of the IFA's broadly Marxist orientation (by no means shared by all in the organisation), in which cinema is understood as straddling both the economic base and the social, cultural and ideological superstructure of capitalist society. In part, as the authors acknowledge (132), this is a result of a historical context in which the French ruling class had narrowly avoided revolution a few years previously. A period of struggle in which the French film industry was intimately involved (Harvey, 1980), May '68 spurred radical political activity across British campuses and acted as a catalyst for the development in Britain of 'an explicitly political vanguard in independent filmmaking' (IFA, 132). This context shaped the IFA and the upsurge in political filmmaking it represented. However, while some filmmakers in this period were very much in keeping with the political avant-garde of more contemporary British filmmaking (see films by Cinema Action or the Sheffield Co-op, for instance), others were more closely aligned with the 'anti-illusionist' theory of the time, most clearly exemplified in work by filmmakers who were

also theorists (such as Peter Wollen, Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston).[40] Still others, such as the Berwick Street Collective, tried to marry the two, most notably in their film *The Nightcleaners* (1974).

The IFA document also demonstrates the way in which this upsurge of struggle encouraged its authors, filmmakers who were also theorists and historians, to rediscover earlier periods of radical British film histories. Critical of the 'anti-theoretical' Free Cinema and the 'liberal-humanist' class perspective it shared with John Grierson's Documentary Movement (130), the document's approval of Ralph Bond, Sidney Cole and Ivor Montagu of the Workers' Film Movement is articulated in terms of support and recognition for the earlier movement's

> [s]truggle for an independent cinema conceived not simply in economic terms but also in terms of the necessity for seeing it in relation to a broader social struggle; they challenged the static situation in which films were simply part of leisure and consumption in capitalist society by setting up different relationships between audiences and films as well as different production relationships, establishing film-activity as part of a struggle in ideology (131-2).

As this indicates, many of those in the IFA were historically informed and class conscious, keen to develop an organisation able to represent the variety of other groups and collectives who viewed cinema as part of an ideological and cultural struggle and who wanted to use the medium for oppositional means.[41] Indeed, the IFA proved a key force in the development of the so-called 'independent' sector, agitating for a dedicated space in the new fourth channel (which eventually became the Independent Film and Video Department), launched in 1982. The IFA also spearheaded

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[40] Including Paul Willemen, Claire Johnston, Marc Karlin, Laura Mulvey and Simon Hartog (Dickinson, 1999, 94).

[41] Other groups, some of whom are cited in the document (133), include: Cinema Action (founded 1968), Amber Films (1968/9), Berwick St. Collective (1970), the London Women's Film Group (1972), Four Corners (1973), Independent Cinema West (1974), the Merseyside Communications Unit (1974), the Newsreel Collective (1975), Sheffield Film Co-op (women-only, 1975), the North-East Co-op (1976) and Leeds Animation Workshop (1978). The London Film-Makers Co-op (1966) was originally established to support artists' film but was also closely involved with left politics and supported more conventional oppositional filmmakers, while other groups focused on distribution and exhibition, such as Angry Arts (1967, became Liberation Films in 1972 when they began producing films), Politkino and The Other Cinema (see Harvey, 1985, 1986a and 1986b). Two distributors specialising in women's films were also established: CoW (Cinema of Women) in 1977 and Circles in 1979 (Dickinson, 2003).

the campaign for the Workshop Agreement (1984), a contract between Channel 4, the film workers' union (ACTT) and the British Film Institute (BFI) which secured unionised wages for those recognised as conforming to 'workshop' practises (ACTT, 1984). Although the Workshop Agreement was controversial and often criticised (see Lovell (1990) and replies by Stoneman (1992; 2005), for instance), such structural financial and institutional support for oppositional filmmaking was an unprecedented achievement and one which has not been replicated since.

Seventies *Screen* Theory and 'Independent' Film[42]

As well as these achievements at a practical level this period also spawned an era of intense theoretical debate, primarily in the journal *Screen* but also elsewhere, in journals such as *After Image*, *Framework* and *Cinema Rising*. As Robert Stam notes, 'film theory in this period ... "relived," and specifically cited and reworked, the Brecht-Lukács debate over realism in the 1930s' (2000, 226). Clearly favouring what they claimed were Brechtian approaches to realism, authors in this period, as Stam says, 'came to regard reflexivity as a political obligation' (226). Unfortunately, this was very much at the expense of Brecht's insistence that oppositional art be inclusive, accessible and pleasurable, and resulted in a powerful 'anti-illusionist' current in which the political avant-garde was deemed 'just as oppressive as the established media' (Johnston, 1974, 150).

Such a skewed emphasis on reflexivity in this period was, in part, down to a combination of the especially powerful ideological influence accorded to the cinema in the wake of Wollen's landmark semiological analyses,[43] and the impact of Althusserian Marxism and its theorisation of the subject.[44] Dramatically reformulating the vulgar Marxist notion of ideology as 'false consciousness' (Engels, 1893), Althusser theorised ideology as a 'profoundly unconscious' phenomena central to the constitution of the human subject (cited in Eagleton, 1994, 88). 'Human societies', he wrote, 'secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensible to their historical respiration and life' (88).

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[42] Although one might question the homogenising effect of referring to a decade of output as '*Screen* theory', the character of the journal at this time was such that others have also found this phrase apt (such as Stoneman (1992, 175), Hollows and Jancovich (1995) and Kuhn (2009, 4).

[43] The significance of which is evident in the title of the *Screen* reader, *Cinema and Semiotics* (1981), which reprinted many articles published in this period.

[44] Eagleton (1994) includes a good introduction to Althusser's ideas on ideology, while Philips (2005) provides an extensive discussion of his legacy and impact.

This alarming notion of ideology as an inescapable and necessary aspect of human subjectivity fused with Wollen's work on the cinema. As a sign system that 'comprises all three dimensions of the sign: icon, symbol and index' (Wollen, 1969, 97), film was deemed a key tool in the maintenance of ideological hegemony for the way in which it presented ideologically charged representations of the world as neutral reflections of it. The primary task of political cinema thus became *primarily* to reveal the processes of its own making. Peter Gidal, for instance, declared the need for 'a continual attempt to destroy the illusion' (1976, 1) in order to show that all cinema was always already subjective and ideological, the result of a long series of decisions and judgements that were political by definition. Although this period contributed much to Brechtian critiques of realism and political film theory more generally, the false dichotomy between revolutionary reflexivity and reactionary illusionism also meant that films deemed insufficiently self-reflexive were dismissed, a theoretical discrimination from which the political avant-garde is still suffering.

Christopher Williams' article 'Politics and Production' (1971) is indicative of the 'ultra-rationalist discourse' that would go on to characterise this period of *Screen* theory (Stoneman, 1992, 175). Emphasising the need to circumvent the illusionary power of cinema with reflexive techniques, Williams' conception of a radical cinema becomes an elitist, exclusionary one as he foregrounds the need for reflexivity to the detriment of accessibility, inclusivity or enjoyment. Citing May 1968 as the event which forced a re-evaluation of 'the whole concept of political cinema', he describes how the cinema is 'confronted by a dilemma: it seems to represent things, facts, phenomena, but in fact it is not representing them but giving an image of them, and this image is necessarily not an innocent one' (17). Therefore, he says, '[i]t is the role of the text to make this lack of innocence clear' (17). Focusing on Jean-Luc Godard's work as the paragon of such reflexive cinema, Williams' favourable comparison of Brecht with Godard is another trait typical in this period of theory.[45] However, the principle means by which he defines Godard's work – as a cinema of consciousness – is a good example of the way in which this theory does not tally with Brecht's. Identifying a variety of 'consciousnesses' in Godard's work (consciousness of himself as a director; of cinematic history; of

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[45] See, for instance, McCabe (1974, 1975 and 1976), Brewster and MacCabe (1974), Heath (1975 and 1974), Johnston and Willemen (1975), Lovell (1975b) and Pettifer (1975).

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the spectator and spheres of fashion; of aesthetics), Williams describes how this 'confluence of consciousnesses ... implies only one thing: an intellectual cinema' (8). Although he attempts to expand his definition of 'intellectual' to include 'anyone capable of responding to political ideas anywhere' (19), the subsequent acknowledgement that these films are in fact intended only for 'small groups conscious of ideological questions' (20) is revealing of an elitism that is decidedly un-popular, and thus distinctly anti-Brechtian.

This is not to deny the similarities between Godard and Brecht or that the theorists in *Screen* did not attempt to develop many of Brecht's insights for their own historical conjuncture. As well as their shared Marxist ideological orientation, the correspondences between Brecht and Godard were explored in relation to distanciation techniques, such as separating out elements of representation (MacCabe, 1974) or structuring works into series of tableaux (Barthes, 1974), for instance, while Brecht's emphasis on the historically contingent nature of political aesthetics was also addressed by many critics (see Brewster and MacCabe (1974) or Harvey (1982b)). Consequently, many critics attempted to update Brecht's work for their own moment. Paul Willemen (1972) and Andrew Tudor (1972), for instance, expanded upon the Brechtian critique of realism by drawing on Roman Jakobson's writings on the subject. Their critiques of previous efforts to theorise realism are useful, pointing out how Bazin and Kracauer's belief in the screen as 'a window onto reality' (Willemen, 1972, 41) limited their theories to a hunt for 'some absolute aesthetic standard' (Tudor, 1972, 34).

However, their criticisms are limited by the ascetic view of cinema as an illusionary medium that must be exposed. Tudor speaks of Eisenstein's 'distortion' of reality (31), for instance, while Willemen describes the very apparatus of cinema as some sort of criminal device designed to 'commit mystification' (41). Barthes' exploration of tableaux-like compositions is similarly formalistic when he suggests that the content of a work is irrelevant compared to this implicitly radical structure (37), a tendency which is also present in Colin MacCabe's critique of *Days of Hope* (1975), Ken Loach's series on working class radicalism from WWI to the 1926 general strike. Despite its radical content, MacCabe builds on his critique of the 'classic realist text' (1974, 7) to dismiss *Days of Hope* on the grounds that its form is 'fundamentally inimical to the production of political knowledge' (145).

Equally polemical is Claire Johnston's (1975) endorsement of *The Nightcleaners* as the 'most important political film ever to have been made in this country' because of its intense reflexivity (150). There is not space here for a full examination of *The Nightcleaners*[46] – one of the few films which at least attempted to hold together politically radical subject matter in a formally radical structure – or of Johnston's analysis of it. This and other discussions of *The Nightcleaners* are nevertheless useful examples of the way in which even the more subtle and self-aware theory of this period emphasises form over content in the assertion of reflexivity as the ultimate arbiter of political cinema. Johnston's piece, for instance, applauds the film's attempt to articulate the contradictions between the class position of the cleaners and those of the filmmakers and rightly celebrates the Brechtian attempts of the filmmakers to foreground their own subjective interventions in the filmmaking process. However, this and other sensible observations, such as noting that the emphasis on illusionism potentially encourages a belief in 'pure, unmediated "truth"' (120), are undermined when they subsequently question whether or not films which are not formally reflexive in fact 'do more harm than good' (Johnston and Willemen, 1975, 114).

As we can see, attempts to build upon Brecht's thought for a radical political film theory in the 1970s were warped by an undue emphasis on reflexivity, resulting in another formalist conception of radical film which effaced those other qualities Brecht himself deemed integral to radical art. The tendency allowed elitism and obscurity to creep into so-called politically radical filmmaking, and justified the dismissal of films which privileged accessibility, inclusivity and pleasure over reflexivity. Though acknowledged by critics at the time, Brecht's warning that 'the most dangerous thing of all is to speak of one model' (1940, 251) was exactly the trap into which 1970s theorists fell. Rather than adopting a Brechtian approach for the seventies, this theoretical period resulted in 'all forms of opposition to the ruling class ... [being] lumped together with the ruling class itself' – a criticism Ernst Bloch levelled at Lukács more than thirty years previously (1938, 20-1). Furthermore, the anti-illusionist current reproduced a gulf between the aesthetic and political avant-garde of which many

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[46] For more developed analyses see Johnston and Willemen (1975), Karlin et al (1980) and Caughie (2011).

were conscious but could not resolve.[47] Many of these problems were identified at the time – indeed, half of *Screen*'s board resigned because of them in 1976 (Buscombe et al, 1976).[48] My observations here do not constitute a comprehensive assessment of seventies *Screen* theory or a full analysis of Brecht's contribution to political aesthetics,[49] and I am certainly not suggesting the films selected here are Brechtian either (at least not in the dominant, reflexive sense of the word). The point is rather to note that this period constituted a key turning point in political film theory the legacy of which has meant the theoretical rejection of much oppositional documentary in the name of Brecht, despite much of that theory being decidedly un-Brechtian.

Third Cinema

By the end of the 1970s the theoretical drive that had characterised much of the decade was exhausted (Mercer, 1986, 97). At the start of the 1980s, however, the field was re-invigorated both by the arrival of Third Cinema on the radar of Western film theory, and the emergence of a number of politically and aesthetically motivated Black[50] film collectives in Britain – which many were quick to suggest was a Third Cinema practise in Britain.[51] Third Cinema originated in the 'Third' World in the 1960s and 1970s, and as such many Third Cinema films from this period advocate the nationalist, anti-imperialist and other revolutionary arguments prevalent in Africa and Latin America at that time. However, the 'Third' in 'Third Cinema' stands not for any geo-political status but for the rejection on the part of the filmmakers of both the industrialised Hollywood 'First' cinema and the auteurist, art-

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[47] The IFA document notes that the 'aesthetic avant-garde' and the 'political vanguard' have developed separately (IFA, 133), for instance, while Willemen observed a gulf between 'radicalism in film criticism ... and radicalism in film practise', and between those involved in cultural and aesthetic struggle and those in political or economic struggle (Johnston and Willemen, 114). A.L. Rees, meanwhile, noted both that the distinction between 'political-ideological illusionism and illusionism as an ontological issue' was seldom clear and that '[it] is as simplistic to refer to illusionism as it is to *the* avant-garde' (1977, 41). Though my title arguably reproduces this latter criticism, this is a necessary step on the ways towards a more complex, useful position.

[48] Among their reasons, for instance, is an 'objection to an analysis that confronts one ill-defined monolith (classical or mainstream cinema ...) with another (the passive audience) and leaves space only for the avant-garde ... [resulting in] the implied rejection of all film and television which cannot be characterised as "code-breaking"' (Buscombe, 1977, 108).

[49] For instance, there is not the space here to explore the distinction between labour and leisure time, which theorists in the 1970s frequently discussed, nor analyse their thinking in relation to Brecht's ideas about the relationship between form and content.

[50] I capitalise the term 'Black' to indicate my use of the word in its political sense, as a term adopted by many Asian, African and Caribbean people to 'not only trample on a history of negation, but also to find a cohesive voice in order to fight collectively for greater political rights and better representation' (Malik, 1996, 204).

[51] For example, see Hill (1999, 223), Diawara (1993, 147) and Street (1997, 187-9).

house 'Second' cinema associated with Europe (Solanas and Getino, 1969). Instead, the Third Cinema was a politically revolutionary cinema, made in the interests of the people and against those of their oppressors. Third Cinema is thus 'not a cinema defined by geography; it is a cinema primarily defined by its socialist politics' (Wayne, 2001, 1). It is these socialist politics that make Third Cinema relevant to contemporary oppositional documentary in Britain.

Just as the body of work in this study is not strictly 'Brechtian' though, neither is it a manifestation of Third Cinema. Nevertheless, as a critical appreciation of Brecht and the reworking of his ideas in the 1970s can enhance our understanding of British oppositional documentary since 1990, so too can an appreciation of Third Cinema and its application to the Black collectives in the 1980s bring us closer to an understanding of the political avant-garde in Britain since 1990. Indeed, this proximity is chronological as much as theoretical. As well as the numerous theoretical continuities that can be perceived, one of the best known collectives, the Black Audio Film Collective (BAFC), produced work from 1983 to 1998, well into the period examined in this thesis. Their work, however, is not considered here for three reasons. First, although they combined oppositional politics with aesthetic concerns, the group was primarily of the aesthetic avant-garde. According to Kowdo Eshun, for instance, over more explicitly political concerns, 'the Collective's films sought to re-imagine the aesthetic values that cinema ascribed to properties of enlightenment and occultation' (2007, 94). Second, given these aesthetic emphases and a deregulated media landscape that further eroded limited sources of funding and broadcast exhibition, 1990 marks the year their work moved almost completely into the gallery space (Eshun, 2007, 96).[52] Third, they have recently received sufficient attention elsewhere, in the form of a gallery retrospective and edited collection (Eshun and Sagar, 2007).

Indeed, the divide between aesthetic and political avant-gardes is well illustrated by the wealth of attention accorded to those collectives who experimented with aesthetic forms compared to the relative dearth of work on those who opted for more conventional forms of documentary address. For example, Sankofa, another aesthetically minded Black film collective, also garnered critical and

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[52] A move marked by a change of name as the group reformulated itself as Black Audio Films (Eshun, 2007, 96).

academic attention for such films as *Territories* (1984) and *The Passion of Remembrance* (1986),

while other groups, such as the Asian Re-take Film and Video Collective, which steered clear of

experimental forms in favour of emphasising communication and democratic working practises

(Ogidi, 2003a), and Ceddo, another political collective with African and Caribbean personnel (Ogidi,

2003b), have not. This divide was not as pronounced among the filmmakers as it was in the critical

literature they inspired. Sankofa's *Who Killed Colin Roach?* (1983), about the alleged suicide of a 21-

year-old black man with a shotgun while in police custody, is as conventional as anything produced

by Retake or Ceddo, for instance, while footage from Ceddo's *The People's Account* (1985), about

the Broadwater Farm riots (caused in part by police involvement in the death of another black person,

Cynthia Jarrett) appears in BAFC's *Handsworth Songs* (1986). Nevertheless, considerably more

attention was accorded those collectives working on an aesthetic front than those who communicated

political arguments more straightforwardly.

   This imbalance, though not addressed explicitly, was often justified by recourse to Third

Cinema theory and the question of a Third cinema in Britain, despite many Third Cinema theorists'

emphasis on the primacy of political communication. There are indeed many comparisons to be made

between Third Cinema and collectives such as BAFC and Sankofa,[53] but Third Cinema is pertinent

not only for those working on aesthetic problems. Thus, the foregrounding of these groups at the

expense of other collectives who opted for more conventional aesthetics is yet another example of the

valorisation of formal innovation over other qualities, such as Third Cinema's opposition 'to

imperialism and class oppression' (Gabriel, 1982, 1), or its use of film as a 'pretext' for or 'detonator'

of discussion (Solanas and Getino, 1969, 283). These qualities can be found in the oppositional

documentary of the 1990s as much as in those Black film collectives in the 1980s whose vanguardism

was political more than it was aesthetic, and it is in that sense that Third Cinema and the context of

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[53] Though rejected by BAFC themselves (Auguiste, 1989, 215). Indeed, much of the debate about the question
of potential manifestations of Third Cinema in Britain centred on the danger of a cultural imperialism on the
part of Western critics, hijacking the excitement and vigour of cultural movements from elsewhere.

the 1980s Black British workshops form an important reference point for oppositional documentary in the 1990s.[54]

As the subject matter of *Who Killed Colin Roach?* and *The People's Account* suggest, the social context in which the Black workshops emerged was one in which widespread racism was manifestly present in the state, the police and the media. In addition to racist forces and discourses such as the National Front and Margaret Thatcher's infamous description of a Britain 'swamped' by immigrants (cited in *Handsworth Songs*), other aspects of identity were also attacked, as when Thatcher's government banned education about homosexuality (Hill, 1999, 13). Gender and sexuality (Diawara, 1993, 152) as well as race thus became prominent sites of struggle as national identity emerged as a 'central political and social issue' (Malik, 1996, 203). However, the first six years of Thatcher's government was characterised by massive waves of rioting (see Taylor cited in Hill, 1999, 10-11), the racist reporting of which designated those riots as 'race riots' (as opposed to 'poverty' or 'class' riots). As a result, the audio-visual media became the focal point for exploring and combating both racist discourses themselves as well as the form through which those discourses were transmitted (Hill, 1999, 219).[55]

This focus on the need to challenge both the forms of audio-visual communication as well as their reactionary and racist content is indeed part and parcel of many of the Third Cinema manifestos.[56] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino (1969) argued, for instance, that the adoption of cinematic languages led to the adoption of ideological forms (272), and that the political filmmaker must 'discover his [*sic*] own language' (276). Julio Espinosa called for a 'new poetics of the cinema'

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[54] The political avant-garde in the 1980s was composed of much more than those formally conventional Black collectives, of course. A number of the aforementioned groups, including the many feminist collectives, collaborated to produce what has been recognised as a classic of workshop practise, *The Miners' Campaign Tapes* (1985). Much Third Cinema theory could also be applied to these groups, but was not. As Mike Wayne has argued, 'the art world would rather define [*The Miners' Campaign Tapes*] as "community" based work', because it is 'far too closely involved in social practises … to qualify' as art (1997, 29). Indeed, as evidence of such exclusion, James (1996) is practically the only extended, article-length consideration of this landmark work.

[55] Another key factor in the emergence of the Black collectives was the infrastructural achievements of the previous decade. When Black filmmakers responded to the racist media representations of the early eighties riots there were funding structures and broadcast deals already in place, largely thanks to the Workshop Agreement brokered by the IFA. The Greater London Council (GLC) was also crucial, providing – along with Channel 4's Independent Film and Video Department – much of Sankofa's funding, for instance (Hill, 1999, 219).

[56] For collections of Third Cinema manifestos, see Chanan (1983) and Martin (1997).

(1969, 294), while Teshome Gabriel, one of the first critics to attempt to develop the 'critical theory'

of these films, declared that 'a general overhaul of film form is required' (1983, 313). As we have

seen, formal reflexivity and experimentation had been a central concern of political film theory for at

least a decade prior to that moment, and indeed the two most prominently reflexive collectives (BAFC

and Sankofa) were composed of film and media studies graduates well-read in seventies *Screen*

theory as well as other key intellectual reference points as Franz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Paul Gilroy,

James Baldwin and Stuart Hall (Diawara, 1993, 150). Clearly aware of their critical context, John

Akomfrah wrote in BAFC's 'statement' that their

> interests did not only lie in devising how best to make 'political' films, but also in taking the
>
> politics of representation seriously. Such a strategy could take up a number of issues which
>
> include emphasising the form and the content of films, using recent theoretical insights in the
>
> practice of filmmaking. (2007, 144)

Elsewhere, responding to the flurry of debate (see Proctor, 2000, 263-75) stimulated by *Handsworth

Songs*, Auguiste asks '[w]hatever happened to the debates that took place in the pages of *Screen*,

Framework and other journals concerning the problem of documentary realism?' (2007, 156). It is

unsurprising, then, that critics in the West drew connections between Third Cinema and the work of

Sankofa and the BAFC, seeing in them the potential to 'unblock the dead-ends of 70s cultural theory'

(cited in Willemen, 1989, 2).

However, the Third Cinema manifestos' emphasis on developing new and revolutionary

forms of film language was articulated along with a number of other characteristics they deemed

essential to a political cinema – characteristics which are at least as evident in the work of the more

formally conventional Black film collectives as they are in oppositional documentary since 1990, and

which were often *not* as prominent in those films by Sankofa and BAFC that were lauded as works of

Third Cinema. For instance, the manifestos pleas for new forms of film language never lose sight of

the *political* purpose of those languages. Solanas and Getino are unambiguous that Third Cinema is an

instrument of class warfare, for example. Specifying their opposition to both 'the ideological and

economic interest of the *owners of the film industry*' (1969, 267), their language is militant throughout, describing the camera as a 'rifle' (278) and the projector as '*a gun that can shoot 24 frames per second*' (emphases in original, 279). Espinosa's call for a new poetics specified that it must 'above all' be 'a "partisan" and "committed" poetics' (1969, 294), while Gabriel chose to foreground as the 'principle characteristic' of Third Cinema not its aesthetic qualities but 'the ideology it espouses' (1982, 2). As Willemen recognised, political communication was deemed paramount: 'all authors, from Birri to Espinosa and even the more mystically inclined Glauba Rocha, stress the need for a cinema of lucidity' (1989, 6).

As these fragments indicate, the need to communicate political ideas is *never* subservient to the need to develop or experiment with new film forms. While Espinosa later reiterated the notion that 'new content requires new forms', for instance, he qualified that by warning against the making of 'an artistic cinema' which later became 'part of an anthology of great films' and which was 'estranged from a public which had the potential for substantially changing reality' (1985, 93). Likewise, while recognising that one needs both aesthetic and political transformation, Fernando Birri's reflections on Third Cinema also explicitly place the transformation of reality above the transformation of aesthetics in order of importance: 'in the first instance it is a cinema which is generated within the reality, becomes concrete on a screen and from this screen returns to reality, aspiring to transform it'. It is, in other words, more political than aesthetic: 'closer to blood than to ink, closer to death than philosophy' (1985, 90). Despite these warnings it was primarily the aesthetic achievements of the Black collectives which garnered them academic attention and gallery exhibition.

As well as the insistence that new forms of film language remain committed to communicating revolutionary politics, there are other resonances between Third Cinema theory and the political, rather than the aesthetic, avant-garde. For instance, the Third Cinema theorists (along with Brecht and some of the more politically astute theorists in the 1970s) acknowledged the distinction between aesthetic and political struggle, recognised the relationship between the two to be a dialectical one enmeshed within class structures, and aligned themselves with the political. Espinosa, for example, acknowledged that '[w]hen we talk of a new economic order, we have to accompany it with a new cultural order', but stressed the need to align one's work along class lines, to

openly 'express interests' and 'dedicate our production to those who are indeed struggling' (1985, 94).[57] Similarly, Solanas and Getino acknowledge the respective spheres of political and aesthetic struggle when they note that 'the struggle to seize power from the enemy is the meeting ground of the political and artistic vanguards engaged in a common task which is *enriching to both* (1969, 274). Nevertheless that common task is always a political one, the guerrilla cinema they envisage necessarily prejudiced toward the working class, 'involved with the interests, aspirations, and prospects of the vast majority of the people' (1969, 282).

Still other indications of the political, rather than aesthetic, alignment of the Third Cinema theorists can be seen in their view of films as the means to an end rather than an end in themselves. As I noted earlier, Solanas and Getino describe how films should be viewed as important only to the extent that they act as a 'detonator' or pretext for discussion (1969, 283). In other words, it is the political outcome that is of interest. Neither do they specify exactly what form the films should take. On the contrary, they emphasise the need for action on all fronts so long as it is militant action (276), and are not afraid of inciting emotional responses from the audience so long as they remain committed to the 'activation of a revolutionary consciousness' (Willemen, 1989, 6). Indeed, many Third Cinema filmmakers actively advocate the need to combine intellectual and emotional stimulation.[58]

Conclusion

The majority of oppositional documentary produced in Britain since 1990 is neither Brechtian nor a British manifestation of Third Cinema.[59] However, as this discussion of the various trends in British

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[57] Glauba Rocha is perhaps the exception in this case, because he does not see the political as being of greater importance than the aesthetic. Even so, when asked to clarify the distinction between the two he refused to value the aesthetic *above* the political. Correcting a *Cineaste* interviewer who suggested he placed more emphasis on aesthetic rather than political revolution, Rocha replied that he thought in 'all revolutions the cultural development is as important as the economic development ... [I]n Latin America today we are beginning to think that it's more important to make a political revolution than a cultural revolution. But at the same time we think that a political revolution is nothing without a cultural revolution ... [W]hen we talk about art and aesthetics, we're talking about something very political, very ideological ... To speak *purely* in aesthetic terms is very difficult for us' (Rocha, 1965, 14-15).
[58] See Espinosa (1969, 296) and Alea (1984).
[59] Although some of the films' relationships to Third Cinema are ambiguously close, as indicated by Michael Chanan's description of *McLibel* and *Injustice* as 'two-and-a-half' (2007, 11).

and European political film theory has shown, these debates clearly resonate with what I am claiming is the political avant-garde. Despite differing historical contexts and artistic media, many major figures in radical film theory have prioritised political communication over aesthetic innovation, and have recognised the need to reconcile the interrelated nature of politics and the aesthetics in favour of a class conscious practice. In spite of these priorities, since the 1970s there has been a tendency within political film theory to privilege the aesthetic over the political avant-garde and to fetishize formal reflexivity as a necessary pre-requisite for political filmmaking. This tendency has been critiqued elsewhere,[60] yet the exclusion and effacement of the political avant-garde as insufficiently radical and unworthy of critical attention continues. Furthermore, as we have seen, such exclusion and effacement has often been carried out in the name of those theorists whose work urged the primacy of the political. Though many of the filmmakers discussed here make no mention of these theoretical contexts and would not consider themselves part of an avant-garde film culture, the films they have produced constitute some of the most politically radical documentaries produced in Britain in the last twenty years. That they have received little acknowledgment as such is testament to the extent of the gulf that still exists between filmmakers and theorists addressing principally aesthetic issues and those whose concerns are primarily political. That it is almost exclusively the aesthetic avant-garde who receive critical validation and academic attention for their work shows how unbalanced the playing field is and, I hope, justifies the antagonistic position I have adopted here in order to draw attention to the political equivalent.

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[60] See, for instance, Bould (2009, 8-13), Mulvey (2009, 125-29), Kuhn (2009, 3-5), Stam (2000 and 1992, 10-7, 209-15), Hollows and Jancovich (1995, 123-50), Williamson (1988), Harvey (1982), Ruby (1977) and Polan (1974).

1   Video-activism in the 1990s: Despite TV, Conscious Cinema, Undercurrents

Introduction

Undercurrents (1993-) was the most established video-activist organisation in Britain in the 1990s, and thus the oppositional newsreel it produced from 1994 to 1999 is the focal point of this chapter. One of Undercurrent's co-founders, Thomas Harding, has rightly pointed out that the 'explosion in the use of video as an activist tool in the 1990s' can be explained by the convergence of three factors: the 'emergence of a vibrant form of activism, the availability of the new camcorders; and the failure of mainstream TV to adequately cover the boom in grassroots politics' (1998, 83). However, this does not account for the ways in which Undercurrents' success was a result of its particular engagement with these factors. One of my aims in this chapter is to unpack this engagement in more detail. Undercurrents' newsreel was not simply the inevitable result of colliding socio-political, communicational (media) and technological contexts. Rather, its success was conditional, dependent on a complex blend of material resources and the organisational and structural flexibility and shrewdness required to take advantage of those contexts. These factors that must also be taken into account if we are to understand how Undercurrents, rather than their contemporaries, became the dominant video-activist organisation of the 1990s.

Although Undercurrents' contemporaries in the 1990s have received almost no critical attention,[1] at least two other video-activist organisations need to be considered. Despite TV (now Spectacle) was an anarchist collective founded in London in 1981 which released an oppositional newsreel on VHS from 1984 to 1993, predating Undercurrents by some ten years. Indeed, Undercurrents' claim to be the UK's first radical newsreel is somewhat disingenuous considering its

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[1] In the little academic attention British video-activism since 1990 has received, Conscious Cinema get one passing mention (Harding, 1998, 88). The rest focus exclusively on Undercurrents, and most of these are in Chris Atton's studies of alternative media (see 2003, 20; 2004, 42-3; 2005, 22-3; 2008, 87-9). Ruth Heritage's (2008) chapter on Undercurrents and public spheres is one of the most in-depth studies, while Gillian McIver (1997) explores Undercurrents' relationship to television ethics and aesthetics.

founding members visited Despite TV for advice earlier in the decade (Saunders, 2011, 9). The other

organisation is the Brighton-based Conscious Cinema. Founded in 1994, the same year as

Undercurrents, there was a close, albeit sometimes strained, relationship between the two

organisations. While Despite TV and Conscious Cinema are also of note for their feature films

(explored, respectively, in chapters Three and Four), their video-activist production in the 1990s

provides important counterpoints to Undercurrents, and an assessment of video-activism in that

decade is incomplete without them. The first section of the chapter thus provides an overview of all

three organisations.[2]

While Despite TV and Conscious Cinema were similar to Undercurrents, they also had

smaller, more local ambitions compared to Undercurrents' national and international scope. Although

this difference was certainly a choice on the part of the two smaller groups, Undercurrents'

significantly wider reach was an impressive achievement and is part of the reason for the latter's

relatively widespread recognition. Investigating how Undercurrents maintained a newsreel of such

proportions, I will explore how its tactical approach to camcorder technology allowed the production,

distribution and exhibition of the newsreel to be decentralised, enabling key tasks to be outsourced

from the core of the organisation. This tactic was underpinned by more sustainable, long-term

strategies, such as the establishment of what Undercurrents called the Camcorder Action Network and

a training model which aimed to maintain and expand that network. Finally, these strategies were

themselves underpinned by material advantages, both in the form of a grant from the European

Commission and a membership which included ex-media professionals. While this latter is arguably

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[2] In Chapter Two, in my discussion of video-activism since 2000, I refer to a number of access organisations and other groups which, while distinct from contemporary oppositional video-activists, nevertheless remain an important aspect of the culture as a whole. However, in the 1990s, access groups appear to have been a much less significant part of the video-activist landscape. Indeed, aside from Mark Saunders, who worked with some of the earliest access organisations in the 1970s and 1980s (such as Albany Video, Lambeth Video and Oval house), there is little evidence of any access groups in the 1990s having anything to do with the three dominant video-activist organisations that I discuss here. This is odd given that access groups seem to have reached a high-point in the 1980s when, in Graham Wade's estimation, there were more than one hundred such groups (cited in Fountain (2007, 35)). However, Wade's estimation may well be overstating the case. As Dickinson argues, it is difficult to ascertain which access groups established as such actually managed to sustain themselves and produce any work (1999, 68-9). Furthermore, that much of the support structure for access groups in the 1980s (such as the IFA and the Workshop Agreement) had been dismantled by the end of the decade could also have resulted in their sharp decline around the start of the 1990s.

more intangible, I will argue that Undercurrents' class composition did constitute a material advantage, albeit one fraught with political contradictions.

In order to explore the strategic and material bases of Undercurrents' success, it is useful to return to a period characterised by very different socio-political and technological contexts. For, while Undercurrents' approach was not preordained, it was prefigured: in attempts to establish oppositional newsreels by the Workers' Film Movement (WFM) in the 1930s. That the seeds of contemporary video-activism can, on both sides of the Atlantic, be located in the workers' film movements between the World Wars is not a new observation (Downing, 2001, 193). Nevertheless, subjecting these origins to closer analysis brings into relief how some of Undercurrents' strategies were, however unconsciously, the culmination of long-held beliefs about the need for oppositional newsreels and how best to make that need a reality. These strategies and their relationship to the WFM are discussed in section two of this chapter.

In spite (and arguably because) of its success, Undercurrents was heavily criticised towards the end of the 1990s by sections of the direct action movement for practices that were deemed at odds with the values of that movement. In particular, these revolved around Undercurrents' relationship with the mainstream media and the organisational hierarchy within the group itself. Recourse to the 1930s also helps explain some of these criticisms. In contrast to the predominantly anarchist-oriented direct action scene of the 1990s, the principle ideology of the WFM was Marxist. While class struggle is a founding principle of both philosophies, during the shift of emphasis from Marxism in the 1930s to anarchism in the 1990s, that principle was effaced from some sections of the movement. So, while many of the criticisms of Undercurrents which emerged from the direct-action movement of the 1990s were valid, they often could not grasp the more complex dynamics at the root of those problems, such as the fact that Undercurrents' relations to the mainstream media was both a product of the organisation's contradictory class position and crucial to its success. Furthermore, such criticisms could not stage the critique which should have been at the heart of both Marxist and anarchist analyses of Undercurrents: that the organisation and its newsreel were themselves products of their ideological context and as such also reflected the lack of class consciousness that characterised

aspects of the movement it tried to represent. These ideological contexts, criticisms and contradictions form the third and final section of this chapter.

Section One

Despite TV

Despite TV came to prominence in 1991 with *The Battle of Trafalgar*, its feature documentary on the poll tax riots (see Chapter Three). However, it was first and foremost a video-activist organisation, having made films for the better part of ten years prior to the broadcast of its feature work. Mark Saunders, the founder of the organisation, studied Film and Television at the London College of Printing (now The London College of Communication) before volunteering at both Oval House and Albany Video in South London, two of the first video access projects in the country. Responding to an advertisement for a community video worker at the Tower Hamlets Arts Project in 1981, there Saunders founded Despite TV and, driven by political motivations but determined to avoid the pitfalls he had seen at other access projects, established some clear organisational values and guidelines. The principle of Despite TV, as he describes it,

> was fairly simple. Its sole aim was to produce video magazines, on which no one programme would be longer than five minutes, and the whole thing was run by an editorial team. So there would be editorial meetings once a week to which anyone could come. Anyone could propose an idea for a magazine item, and anyone could volunteer to get involved in making it.
> (Saunders, 2011, 3)

Despite TV's open, non-hierarchical structure was quite different to the more hierarchical configuration Undercurrents would develop more than ten years later. Furthermore, rather than develop and expand, Despite TV was designed to remain a local, sustainable organisation with clearly defined parameters regarding the internal qualities of the organisation and the nature of the service it provided. It intentionally limited itself to the London boroughs of Tower Hamlets, Hackney, and

Newham, for instance, and one had to either live or work in those areas to be a member. The subject matter of each magazine also had to have some (global or local) relevance to one of those boroughs.

Despite TV also practised role rotation, giving everyone in the group a roughly equal share of all tasks, from camerawork to toilet cleaning. These rules ensured more equal opportunities to improve since, as Saunders says, 'mostly the only reason [a] person is good [at something] is because they've done it' (2011, 3). Role-rotation also helped combat gender hierarchies, which otherwise meant that 'women always ended-up holding clipboards and the guys would all end up on the cameras' (2011, 3). The organisation also operated by consensus for the entirety of its existence.

These rules, built into Despite TV's constitution, were explicitly motivated by Saunders' interest in anarchism as a preferred mode of social organisation:

> the idea behind Despite TV was to show that, whereas not everyone's equal in the skill levels they have, you can basically run on a flat structure, in a non-hierarchical way. Mutual aid was a very clear principle behind it, trying to democratise not only editorial decisions but practical things like who's behind the camera and how things are made. (Saunders, 2011, 4)

The fifteen videos released by Despite TV from 1984 to 1993 certainly demonstrate the possibility of this mode of organisation. These were predominantly newsreels, compilations of short films on local issues, often alongside videos of local bands or other cultural activities and topics (although they also included occasional feature documentaries such as *Despite the Sun* (Despite TV 9, 1986), about Rupert Murdoch's decimation of the print unions, and *Despite the City* (Despite TV 12, 1988), about the City's colonisation of London's docklands).

While Despite TV was successful, the anarchist principles governing the organisation's internal structure excluded them from the funding opportunities provided by the Workshop Agreement (ACTT, 1984). A deal struck between the IFA, the film workers' union (ACTT), the Regional Arts Associations, the BFI and Channel 4 (see Introduction), it ensured unionised levels of funding and employment for the workshop sector. However, the terms and conditions of the agreement did not account for the large numbers of people involved with Despite TV (on average

between ten or twelve, sometimes as many as twenty) or the horizontal working methods it employed.

Thus, according to Saunders, 'if we wanted to be funded on the Workshop Agreement we had to create a hierarchy of four people who would be very well paid while everyone else got nothing' (2011, 11). This was incompatible with the ethos of the organisation and thus rejected, yet such a principled decision was also arguably fatal for the organisation. Indeed, while there were surely other reasons for the organisation's demise, financial difficulties are one of the chief problems for radical filmmakers and Saunders describes the primary reason for Despite TV's decline as 'economic' (2011, 5). Had Despite TV adapted itself to the Workshop Agreement and received the unionised rates of pay, the increased financial stability might have resulted in more films and opened doors to other funding opportunities. Undercurrents did not apply such a principled approach to its internal structure. Although this was one of the things for which it was later criticised, it is also one of the factors which allowed it to survive in a commercial environment in which the Workshop Agreement no longer existed.

Undercurrents

Undercurrents was born on the second major UK anti-road protest,[3] the No M11 Campaign in north-east London, in September 1993 (Harding, 1998, 83). The proposed road, advertised as reducing commuters' journey time by six minutes (Welsh, 1996, 36), required the bulldozing of three hundred and fifty houses and a community green (on which lived a two-hundred and fifty year old chestnut

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[3] The anti-roads protests were the start of a new chapter in British direct action history (see McKay, 1996, 127-58). Following the election of John Major in November 1990, the Conservative Party sparked a new period of social unrest by announcing plans to embark upon the massive road-building programme outlined in the 1989 white paper 'Roads for Prosperity' (Hansard, 1989). Heralded by Margaret Thatcher as the 'biggest road-building programme since the Romans' (Sadler, 2006), the government's proposals included the construction of five-hundred new roads at a cost of twenty-three billion pounds (DfT, 2007), beginning with the M3 motorway extension through Twyford Down in 1991. Although the Twyford site was a designated Area of Outstanding National Beauty and a Site of Special Scientific Interest, the project was given the go-ahead and destruction work began in December that year, as did the massive campaign to resist it. For a list of UK roads protests up to 1997 see The Green Fuse (2011)). Unsurprisingly, the government's proposals have since been found to have exacerbated the problems they were allegedly intended to resolve. In 1994, a government committee found that 'building more roads encourages more traffic, and that the way to ease congestion and pollution was not to accommodate more of it, but to take measures to control car use' (Kingsnorth, 2003a). One could argue this was clearly understood by the government of the time, who chose to act in the interests of their class over those of the majority of the population. Roads are, for example, an essential part of the infrastructure which moves raw materials and commodities around as part of the accumulation of capital, and the production, sale and maintenance of cars is a significant industry which itself generates a large amount of capital for the capitalist class (see Aufheben, 1998, 103).

tree), at a cost of two hundred and forty million pounds (Harding, 1998, 83). Unsurprisingly, the

resistance to such a proposal was fierce and determined. For instance, although houses along the route

were compulsorily purchased by the council prior to their demolition, many residents refused to leave

and squatted their homes (Shepard, 2002, 218).[4] Those that were vacated provided free housing for

the many activists that travelled to the site from elsewhere in the UK and abroad, including some

more experienced anti-road activists from Twyford Down, and the No M11 Campaign became the

latest front in the struggle against the government's road programme.[5]

It was towards the end of this fifteen-month campaign that the four founding members of

Undercurrents met. Paul O'Connor, originally a sports photographer from Ireland, was introduced to

Thomas Harding and Jamie Hartzell, two ex-media professionals, by his friend Zoe Broughton, an

activist and Media Studies student (O'Connor, 2000, 2). Taking a break from work, O'Connor had

been travelling through Europe before ending up in London's activist scene, and was living on the

M11 site 'full-time, in every squat and every tree possible' (O'Connor, 2010, 3). Harding and Hartzell

had become disillusioned with establishment news values while working in mainstream television,

and had decided to set up their own not-for-profit production company – Small World Media – with

which they intended to provide 'media support to grass-roots groups working on environmental and

social justice issues' (Harding, 1998, 84). Having traded in his photography equipment for a

camcorder some time earlier, O'Connor showed some of his footage of the protest to Small World,

and the group decided on this as the raw material for its first project. Along with footage compiled

from fifteen other video-activists (Harding, 1998, 86), this became 'You've Got to be Choking', a

promotional film for the No M11 campaign. Their original plan to make this one film quickly

developed, however, as they became aware of other campaigns that were also being filmed. As

O'Connor explains:

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[4] Including ninety-two year old Dolly Wharton, who subsequently had a watchtower on the site named after her (Duncombe, 2002, 351).
[5] The arrival of external activists caused some tension among local protestors, with the latter group feeling that their campaign had been hijacked. This changed when Jean, a local lollipop lady in Wanstead, learned of the Chestnut tree's impending doom and enlisted the support of local children (an act for which she was later fired for wearing her uniform while doing so), who in turn recruited their parents. On November 6th, 1993, locals and external activists arrived for a 'tree dressing' ceremony but found the green had been cordoned off overnight by security, and was now surrounded by seven foot-high fencing. Any tension was dissolved as everyone tore down the fence together (for footage of this event see: 'You've Got to be Choking', *Undercurrents 1*, 1994).

as this film was being made we were getting involved in other campaigns. So we'd hear about Twyford Down and we'd go down there, or about nuclear convoy protests. The Criminal Justice Bill [CJB] was starting up around then as well so we thought we've got to cover that. So we put out a call and suddenly all this camcorder footage came in, all these tapes with mad actions on them, people disrupting AGMs and things. So we thought, 'okay let's put this together: we've got a whole stack of films here, why don't we make a video cassette as a magazine and get people to subscribe to it?' And that was that really. (O'Connor, 2010, 2)

Thus Small World's aim to provide media support for activist groups materialised as Undercurrents, a video-activist organisation which produced a newsreel for the direct action movement as a whole, and 'You've Got to be Choking' became one of six films that were released on the first tape on April Fool's Day, 1994. Undercurrents would go on to produce another nine tapes over the next five year period, finally releasing *Undercurrents 10* in April 1999.[6]

Conscious Cinema

1994 was also the year that Conscious Cinema was launched in Brighton by Dylan Howitt, Johnny Cocking and Gibby Zobel. This marks the beginning of what were two incarnations of the collective. In the second period, from 1999 until 2003, Conscious Cinema was resurrected by Howitt and Zoe Young,[7] but focused predominantly on feature documentary and as such is discussed in Chapter Four. In this first period, from 1994 to 1997, Conscious Cinema functioned similarly to Undercurrents, producing a video-activist newsreel on subjects ranging from direct action, forest gardening and graffiti to ecstasy hysteria in the media.

The CJB that O'Connor mentions above played a key role in the development of Conscious Cinema, which formed alongside the Justice? campaign to oppose the Bill in Brighton. With the anti-

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[6] Another issue, *Undercurrents 10 and ¾,* was released in 2001. A collaboration between O'Connor and the Bristol based video-activist group, i-Contact, it is in a slightly different format and, as the name suggests, is not part of the original newsreel series (see Chapter Two).
[7] Young had been present during the first stage of the group but was not as active in this period as she was in the second (Young, 2011).

roads protests in full-swing, the CJB's criminalisation of many formerly civil offences associated with activism was widely regarded as an attack on citizens' right to protest.[8] It criminalised a whole range of alternative ways of living, for instance, but especially targeted travellers, free parties and squatting. It also cut back unemployment benefits, clamped down further on trespass and unauthorised camping, and dramatically increased police powers, allowing in particular for unsupervised stop and search and for inferences to be drawn from what had previously been a right to silence. With its road-building programme being met with determined and resourceful resistance, the CJB was a powerful weapon for the government and an urgent response was needed from the communities it attacked.

Conscious Cinema was a key part of the video-activist response to the CJB. The Justice? campaign had squatted an abandoned courthouse in central Brighton to draw attention to the resistance to the bill, and Conscious Cinema screenings were a common feature of events held there. However, in the 1994–97 period, Conscious Cinema was closer to Despite TV in its smaller scale. Its organisational structure was also more haphazard than both Despite TV and Undercurrents, and few tapes from this time remain.[9] However, the impact of Conscious Cinema goes far beyond its films. It is also the forerunner of SchMOVIES, one of the most radical video-activist and feature filmmaking groups in contemporary British oppositional documentary (see Chapters Two and Four).[10] Furthermore, during this period Young also hosted a series of weekends for 'independent, underground filmmakers' at 'The Lacket', her family's cottage in Wiltshire (Young, 2011, 5). Frequently mentioned by those involved in oppositional film (and photography) at this time,[11] the Lacket weekends were a significant contribution to video-activist culture in the 1990s, providing opportunities for co-ordination, networking, critique and so on. So, though it was more short-lived

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[8] For more on the CJB and resistance to it, see McKay (1996, 159-181).

[9] Though a 'best of' was released as *The Campfire Tapes: Tales From the Frontline, '94-97* in 1997.

[10] As well as Conscious Cinema, the Justice? campaign is also known for being the birth-place of SchNEWS, a radical newsletter for the direct action movement that has gone on to become Britain's longest-running (and only) weekly radical new-sheet. Conscious Cinema and SchNEWS are closely related – indeed, live performances of the newsletter were often followed by Conscious Cinema screenings. Having existed as the video-activist wing of SchNEWS since 2004, SchMOVIES are direct descendants of this period (see Chapters Two and Four).

[11] The list of filmmakers who attended these events reads like a roll-call of video-activist filmmakers from the 1990s and beyond (Young, 2011, 5). There is no mention of Mark Saunders or Despite TV though, probably because their video-activist period had come to an end by the time the Lacket weekends began.

than Undercurrents, Conscious Cinema played a significant role in British video-activist culture in the 1990s and beyond.

However, while Conscious Cinema's smaller, more haphazard nature was one of the reasons for its more limited production and impact, it is important to note that it was not trying to emulate Undercurrents' model. Indeed, Conscious Cinema was increasingly seen as an antidote to Undercurrents, who had quickly become so dominant as to be associated with the mainstream themselves. As Young says,

[Undercurrents was] the McDonald's of activist video at the time. They were kind of everywhere, you know? And everyone and anyone who was doing anything to do with activist video would kind of come under the umbrella of Undercurrents. Part of the reason for Conscious Cinema being Conscious Cinema was to have something that *wasn't* Undercurrents. (2011, 2)

So, Conscious Cinema intentionally distinguished themselves from Undercurrents who, as we will see later on, came in for heavy criticism because of this association with the mainstream (though in fact Young sided with Undercurrents on many of the issues that were raised (Young, 2011, 2)). Nevertheless, Undercurrents' dominance did not occur simply because other groups did not aspire to the national and international scope of their newsreel. Nor was it simply the predictable result of intersecting contexts. Of course, as Harding argued, activists' vibrant response to their socio-political context and the inability of the mainstream media to accurately represent progressive movements set the stage for Undercurrents' intervention. But it was Undercurrents' strategic approach to those contexts that led to its success, and which warrant further investigation. For instance, Undercurrents' took advantage of the widespread dissatisfaction with the mainstream media by staging criticisms of it constantly, both in the press coverage it received and on the tapes themselves.[12] I will return to this

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[12] The cover of *Undercurrents 1*, for instance, declares it a video 'published in response to growing frustration with the mainstream media's inability to cover environmental and social justice issues', while subsequent issues simply state that the video magazine 'challenges mainstream definitions of news'. For press coverage in which Undercurrents' members cite similar criticisms, see O'Connor (2011, 2004, 2001 and 2000), Rees (2010),

relationship with the mainstream media later, when we consider aspects of Undercurrents' practice for which it was criticised. For now, I want to focus on three other factors crucial to Undercurrents' success: its decentralised strategy with regards to the production, distribution and exhibition of the newsreel; its training model; and its material (including financial and class) advantages.

Section Two

Camcorder Technology and Decentralisation

Undercurrents' decentralised approach to camcorder and VHS technologies was a key means with which it capitalised on the technological context of the 1990s. This approach enabled Undercurrents to outsource key aspects of the production process, leaving the core of the organisation to focus on securing its long-term sustainability. Outsourcing proved especially important for the production of the raw material on which the newsreel was based, as is evident from the first tape. With this strategy not yet fully developed, the initial newsreel clearly suffers from a lack of material, consisting of only six films produced mostly by the core team (albeit using footage from a range of video-activists), and set mainly in London and Oxford. Of course, this is, in part, also likely to be a result of the limited availability of camcorder technology at this stage in the decade. Prices were still prohibitively high when Undercurrents launched, and cameras were precious (O'Connor, 2010, 3).[13] However, this eased as prices came down and the technology quickly diffused into the population. By the second tape (November 1994), Undercurrents' efforts to outsource the production of the newsreel's raw material were evidently paying off. As well as anti-road protests at Twyford Down, Solsbury Hill, and an update of the struggle against the M11, *Undercurrents 2* also includes films from Britain, Madrid, Tibet, Holland and Indonesia. By the third issue (April 1995) the running time was twice as long as the first, with more than twice the number films. This trend continued throughout the newsreel's existence so that, according to O'Connor, by the tenth tape the amount of material actually shot by the Undercurrents' team was as low as ten percent (2010, 6).

Mansfield (2001), Bazargan and Hayton (2001) and Sibley (1994). Bazargan and Hayton's piece even reproduces the exact bias it claims to report, their story about stereotypes of violent activists appearing alongside images of masked men throwing rocks (needless to say, images of police violence are not included).

[13] As evidenced both by Undercurrents' gratitude to Japan's Okomedia film festival for sending them a camera (mentioned at the beginning of *Undercurrents 2*).

Undercurrents' approach to video technology was as critical for the distribution and exhibition of the newsreel as it was for its production. Distributed independently of the mainstream film and television networks, Undercurrents' tapes were posted out via Royal Mail to a range of subscribers, from individuals to public and university libraries, social centres and squats. The exhibition of the newsreel was a similarly decentralised affair. Requiring at the most basic level only a VHS player and a TV, Undercurrents encouraged its audience to host their own screenings. This strategy then combined with the reproducibility of VHS to facilitate further decentralisation – once copies began to be distributed, people began producing their own duplicates. O'Connor recalls that Manchester Earth First! distributed two thousand copies alone, for instance, and that he and his colleagues discovered bootlegged Undercurrents' tapes overseas, in shops, squats and other alternative cultural spaces (2010, 5).[14] A key part of Undercurrents' success, then, was the way in which it capitalised on its technological context in order to decentralise and outsource key parts of the newsreel's production, distribution and exhibition. Indeed, so successful was this strategy that by the final issue of the newsreel in 1999, Undercurrents was focusing the majority of its efforts on post-production and distribution, and had become a hub for video-activists across the country.

The Camcorder Action Network and Undercurrents' Training Model

Given that many of the films were shot by video-activists outside of the immediate organisation, ensuring the continued production of this material was paramount. There were two key means through which Undercurrents sought to sustain the video-activist production on which the newsreel depended. The first was the development of what was called the Camcorder Action Network: a network of video-activists around the country on which Undercurrents could depend for material. The second was the development of a training model through which other activists, trained in the use of video as a political tool, could make that network grow.

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[14] This makes it difficult to work out the audience figures for the Undercurrents tapes, and what numbers there are have often been recalled from memory rather than documented. Nevertheless, in addition to what was duplicated, O'Connor claims there were a thousand tapes printed for the first eight issues, with perhaps two thousand for issues nine and ten (2010, 5). Harding, meanwhile, estimates that fifty thousand people saw *Undercurrents 1*, and thirty thousand on the opening night for the co-ordinated launch of *Undercurrents 6* (1996).

Though the title makes it sound considerably more organised than it actually was, the Camcorder Action Network nevertheless functioned to create a web of video-activists around the country who were available to cover actions taking place in their vicinity. As O'Connor explains:

we just asked anyone with a camcorder if they wanted to join a network. We would then contact them by email, but it was mainly post and phones really ... So somebody phones us up and goes 'we're having a protest tomorrow in Leeds' or wherever, 'can you come up and film?' And we go, 'Well, no. But we have somebody there, Bob, who's been filming actions, here's his number, give him a call' ... And we built up from there. But it was quite loose, we used to send out a newsletter ... whenever we got round to it really. But that would say: 'here's what happened, here's Bob who sold his footage to local television, supported his campaign and his video will be on the next Undercurrents', and that inspired people and got it going. (2010, 4)

While developing this network, Undercurrents also focused on developing a training model which enabled the core membership to facilitate the production of many more films than they would have been capable of producing alone. According to O'Connor:

With *Undercurrents 2* the idea was to find people who wanted to make films but didn't necessarily have the experience. But they knew the issues and had the passion for whatever it was. Say if it was hunt-sabbing [sabotaging] or whatever. They'd come in and sit with us, who had experience from working on *Undercurrents 1*, and we'd say 'ok, I'll be the editor, you be the director, you tell me what you want the film to be'. They would watch us edit and say 'I want to do that' and of course then you get to a point where you can go 'I'm just going to go home now and leave you to it'! So they'd learn how to use it. It was that kind of rolling process. So on each video, say we had twelve films, three of us would be editors, we'd work with four different groups or whatever it was, and then eventually they'd be trained up, so on

the next one we had even more people who would work with other groups. It was an informal

training, but actually when we look back on it was a great model. (2010, 6-7)

With this model, Harding estimates that by 1997 Undercurrents had trained 'over five hundred

activists how to make use of video tactically as part of their campaign work' (1998, 91). Clearly, then,

it was Undercurrents' strategic interventions into its technological context that proved so crucial to its

success.

Material Advantages

Undercurrents also benefitted from some considerable material advantages. Perhaps the most

significant of these is the £50,000 grant received from the European Commission within the first year

of Undercurrents' existence (Harding, 1998, 90). Although the details of this grant are unclear, its

effect on the newsreel is hard to overstate. Indeed, funding of that magnitude for oppositional

newsreels is practically unheard of, so while Harding claims it 'support[ed] a couple of issues' (1998,

90), one can assume it stretched a lot further. It was almost certainly used to purchase Undercurrents'

edit suite, for example, which Harding acknowledges was essential to its success:

> [o]ne of the reasons we were even able to contemplate producing a video magazine was that
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> we had acquired our own edit suite. [This was] a professional-standard machine which was
>
> able to play camcorder tapes to the maximum capacity. Without this edit suite we would
>
> never have been able to afford the hour upon hour of edit time spent viewing and selecting
>
> from the hundreds of hours of material we now had at our disposal. (1998, 86)

Though he is rather oblique about the means with which they 'acquired' it, the importance of this

equipment is unambiguous. As O'Connor mentions elsewhere, 'we had a digital editing suite then

which was pretty much unheard of anywhere else. That's what started it really' (2010, 6). The funding

was also likely to have paid for Undercurrents' designated studio space, the advantages of which are

also not lost on O'Connor: 'our main thing was to have an office ... I think that's one of the things that distinguished us. [Having] a base where people could come was really important' (2010, 6).

However, these more tangible advantages should not be abstracted from the class composition of the group. Though O'Connor came from an Irish working class background, Harding was a Cambridge graduate from a wealthy family and both he and Hartzell were ex-media professionals.[15] Though harder to quantify, the confidence, skill and experience of middle class professionals were also part of Undercurrents' material resources and should not be underestimated. In fact, understanding Undercurrents' contradictory class position – as an oppositional organisation composed largely of the middle class – is an important part of appreciating both its successful strategic approach and the ways in which aspects of that approach brought it into conflict with parts of the radical movement it claimed to represent.

According to Erik Olin Wright, all class positions are in some sense contradictory, because they all involve antagonistic relations with others (cited in Edgell, 1993, 17). However, Wright argues that the middle class is an especially contradictory position because it is 'torn between the basic contradictory class relations of capitalist society' (cited in Edgell, 1993, 17). According to Marx's classic formulation, the transition from feudalism to capitalism 'simplified class antagonisms' into 'two great hostile camps ... directly facing each other – bourgeoisie and proletariat' (Marx, 1848). The middle class occupies an especially contradictory relationship to this principle antagonism for a variety of reasons, irrespective of whether it is conceived as the petit bourgeoisie (small business people) or petit bourgeois employees (the professional or managerial class of wage earners (Evans, 1983)).[16]

On the one hand, conceived in Marx's original sense as the petit bourgeoisie, the middle class is separate from the proletariat because it is not compelled to sell its labour for a wage. Indeed, it sometimes owns sufficient capital to purchase the labour power of others and in this sense is aligned

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[15] Broughton also later supplemented her work as an oppositional filmmaker with commissions from the BBC (McIver, 1997).

[16] Cited as proof of embourgeoisment as much as of proletarianisation, the growth and development of middle class wage labourers is both one of the most readily acknowledged features of late capitalist societies (Milner, 1999, 148) and the site of one of the most 'intractable' debates in contemporary sociology (Abercrombie and Urry cited in Edgell, 1993, 62). Although I am more inclined to view this 'new middle class' as part of the modern proletariat, here I want only to demonstrate the contradictory nature of those in this class position.

with the bourgeoisie in an exploitative, antagonistic relation with the proletariat. At the same time, the petit bourgeoisie also occupies an antagonistic relation to the capitalist class, because of the constant need to resist the greater power and competitiveness of the large capitalists. Indeed, because of its generally diminutive capital, the petit bourgeoisie often labour themselves, re-aligning the middle class with the working class.

On the other hand, conceived as petit bourgeois employees, the middle class also occupies a contradictory position with regards to both bourgeoisie and proletariat. Often described as white-collar workers, the pay scales and the social, cultural and educational capital of middle class professionals – including members of the professional intelligentsia – align the middle class with its bourgeois employers. Yet other factors, such as the intellectual autonomy afforded by many of these middle class roles, or the significantly greater income of the employing class, prevent the complete identification of the middle class with the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, both white- and blue-collar workers sell their labour for a wage, and thus by definition do not own capital or control the means of production. From this perspective, middle class professionals and the proletariat share an exploited class position and an antagonistic relationship with the bourgeoisie.

Undercurrents' class composition combined working class with petit bourgeois and white-collar elements, and many of its contradictory practices can be understood as stemming from these broadly middle class qualities. According to Alan Sinfield's definition, as cultural producers who 'contribute directly to the creation, transmission and criticism of ideas', Undercurrents belonged to that sector of petit bourgeois employees known as the intelligentsia (Sinfield, 2004, 308). Discussing the radical potential of this sector of the middle class, Gary Day argues, drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1993), that while the 'cultural capital' of the intelligentsia 'moves them closer to the centre of power ... its subordinate nature in relation to economic capital distances them from it' (2001, 42). From this perspective, we can see how Undercurrents' contradictory class position both oriented the organisation towards the bourgeoisie at the same time as it allowed them to adopt an oppositional stance in relation to it. The skills, experience, knowledge and working relationships within the organisation – largely derived from its members' middle class roles in the media industry – saw Undercurrents adopt similar practices. Yet it was this experience of wage labour, combined with other

factors such as educational, cultural and economic autonomy, which saw Undercurrents turn those practices to oppositional ends.

Another defining characteristic of this aspect of the radical intelligentsia, one which is also a result of its contradictory class position, is that it does not recognise that position as one which is constituted within class relations. As Day argues, as a result of its loose constellation of alignments and antagonisms with both bourgeoisie and proletariat, the radical intelligentsia does not possess any strong sense of class identity itself (2001, 43). Indeed, according to Sinfield, while the consistent feature of this 'dissident fraction' of the middle class is 'hostility' to 'the businessmen, industrialists and empire-builders' of the hegemonic class (2004, 46), that dissident fraction does not acknowledge its own constitution and even disavows its traditions (311). That Undercurrents' newsreel was generally absent of any notion of class is testament to this argument. Indeed, that the criticisms of Undercurrents which were voiced later in the decade also came predominantly from the radical intelligentsia may also help explain the lack of class consciousness there, too. I will explore these criticisms in more detail later. First, though, it is useful to underscore the importance of Undercurrents' various strategies by looking at the ways in which they were prefigured by efforts to develop oppositional newsreels in the 1930s. As we will see, understanding the WFM's earlier efforts, and the ideological trajectory of the radical left since that time, is an important part of appreciating the ideological contexts, criticisms and contradictions surrounding Undercurrents in the 1990s.

Undercurrents and the Workers' Film Movement

Staging a comparison between Undercurrents and the WFM is not to disparage any of the other radical film practices in between times, yet of all the radical filmmakers in Britain between the 1930s and 1990s, Undercurrents have by far the most in common with their most distant progenitors.[17]

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[17] The claim that the WFM was the first instance of oppositional filmmaking in Britain is challenged in Alan G. Burton's book, *The British Consumer Co-operative Movement and Film, 1890s-1960s* (2005). Whilst he is right to claim, generally speaking, that left film practises began with the Co-operative Movement and not the WFM, the claim of radicalism in these earlier movements is harder to substantiate. So, whilst I am sympathetic to his argument that the moral economy proposed by the Co-operative Movement provided a legitimate (if limited) challenge to capitalist social relations, and agree that a politics of consumption is as important for the left to muster as it is for the right, for me at least, the first oppositional filmmaking in Britain did indeed begin with the WFM.

However, comparisons between Undercurrents and the WFM might also appear unfair given that the WFM consisted of a variety of groups with a wide range of aesthetic and political positions, and which produced an assortment of material over a roughly fifteen year period. Nevertheless, although the core team of Undercurrents was small, the project they developed became the hub which gave coherence and continuity to 1990s video-activism as a whole, justifying Ruth Heritage's description of Undercurrents as 'both an alternative media organisation and a video activism *movement*' (my emphasis, 148). Furthermore, until Undercurrents, the WFM represents the first and only attempt to establish a long-term nationwide oppositional newsreel in Britain.

Their efforts to establish an oppositional film network is the first similarity between Undercurrents and the WFM. However, the difficulties involved in producing oppositional film in Britain in the 1920s, coupled with the revolutionary cinema emerging from the Soviet Union at that time, meant that the most sensible starting point for those wishing to develop a radical film culture was in distribution and exhibition rather than production. As has been well documented though,[18] censorship proved a significant impediment to such a culture. Described by Ralph Bond as 'rigid, at times hilariously ridiculous, and above all politically reactionary', he recalls how the authorities were able to 'ban any film with political content unfavourable to the established order of things' (Bond, 1979, 246).[19] Private screenings for so-called 'film societies' were more difficult to ban, however, and the Federation of Workers' Film Societies (FWFS) was established in October 1929 with the aim of screening revolutionary films for the British working class.[20] Yet almost as soon as the FWFS was founded people were calling for the production of oppositional newsreels, so while the FWFS was initially based on exhibition, it very quickly attempted to move into production.

This desire for an alternative news source, and the dissatisfaction with a mainstream media biased towards the existing status quo, is one of the most evident similarities between Undercurrents and the WFM. As in the 1990s, many on the left in the 1930s felt that the most pressing issues facing

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[18] Though I rely mostly on Hogenkamp (1986) here, see also Hogenkamp (1979 and 1982), Pronay and D. W. Spring (1982), Winston (1995, 79-82 and 1996, 67-9), Williams (2002) and Dickinson (2003).

[19] For instance, the BBFC refused to certify Germaine Dulac's surrealist film *La Coquille et Ie Clergyman/The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928) on the grounds that it was: 'so cryptic as to be almost meaningless. If there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable' (Jamieson, 2007).

[20] Not to be outdone, the Labour Party set-up the Masses Stage and Film Guild (MSFG) in the same year.

working people were ignored by the mainstream newsreels, leading to complaints strikingly similar to those on which Undercurrents' capitalised. For example, in an article entitled 'Why Not a Socialist Newsreel?', radical film critic 'Benn'[21] complained of the mainstream newsreels consisting of '[a]lways militarism, jingoism, sabre-rattling or sport – never internationalism, peace, scientific advance or any matters likely to raise the intellectual and moral standards of the people' (Benn, 1929, 133).[22]

Furthermore, as Undercurrents rejected '"impartiality", "objectivity" [and] any other bogus journalistic concept designed to keep the mass audience ill-informed and inactive' (Harding, 1998, 85), so the WFM also perceived notions of politically neutral reporting as politically bankrupt, albeit from a more class conscious perspective. For instance, in an article entitled 'The Cinema: An Instrument of Class Rule', Benn argued that 'there is no such thing as non-political cinema' (1931, 138), while Ralph Bond openly stated that the WFM was 'trying to sell working class ideas and working class politics through a medium that is popular in every town and village' (1950, 150).[23] Responding to the need to combat the ideologically reactionary mainstream newsreels, the WFM produced the first issue of its newsreel, *Workers' Topical News*, just one year after the FWFS was founded.[24] As important in the 1930s as it was in the 1990s, adopting an explicit position of

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[21] The actual identity of Benn is unknown, but he is believed to have been the left-wing intellectual Gary Callaghan (McKernan et al, 2002, 66).

[22] This sentiment is echoed by Ralph Bond writing retrospectively fifty years later: '[w]ithout exception, the events covered fell into a few clearly defined and monotonous categories – sport, royalty, military, or military, sport, royalty. The newsreels never covered the real issues of their time, for instance the emerging threat of Nazi Germany and all its implication for the peace of the world' (Bond, 1979, 245).

[23] As today, of course, there was a spectrum of opinions on the question of journalistic impartiality. One author argued that a 'check on recent newsreel tendencies shows that the old impartial presentation of news is disappearing ... whether this is to the Right or Left, it is in any case something to be regarded as dangerous...' (World Film News, 1936, 120), while others critiqued the notion from more liberal perspectives. George Dangerfield, for instance, noted that *The March of Time* (1935-51) 'claims to represent both sides of the question, and that is an admirable aim: except that there is generally a third side to every question, and frequently a fourth and fifth' (1936, 120). Others would rather politics were left out of films altogether. Lord Tyrell (appointed President of the BBFC in 1935), warning against what he saw as the 'creeping of politics into films', declared: 'from my past experience I consider [political films] to be dangerous ... nothing would be more calculated to arouse the passions of the British public ... So far, we have had no film dealing with the burning political questions, but the thin end of the wedge is being inserted' (Sight and Sound, 1936, 118).

[24] Largely due to the difficulties of production at this time, only four issues of *Workers' Topical News* were made. Nevertheless, these covered issues explicitly related to working class interests. No. 1 focused on the Unemployed Workers' Movement, for instance, while No. 2 covered the 1930 Hunger March and May Day in London. No. 3 concerned a successful mass action against benefits cuts for the unemployed, while No. 4 covered May Day in 1932 (Hogenkamp, 1986).

opposition with regards to the mainstream news and rejecting its purported objectivity was a key part of the identity with which radical newsreels distinguished themselves.

16mm and the Development of the WFM Network

Like Undercurrents, the WFM cannot be understood outside of its technological context, but at least as important as the particulars of that context was the strategic response the WFM developed in relation to it. Working in 35mm, the WFM could not produce enough of its own films to supply the FWFS and was thus still forced to show mostly imported films. Furthermore, as already mentioned, the FWFS and MSFG screenings were also frequently subject to censorship.

As Hogenkamp (1986) and others have shown, this problem was finally overcome when the WFM switched to 16mm. With its non-flammable acetate base, this smaller gauge was not subject to the same regulations as its 35mm nitrate counterpart,[25] and could thus be screened anywhere without the need for a license. However, the FWFS had come to an end in 1932 when the introduction of sound forced their primary source of imports, the German distributor, Weltfilm, to close-down (Bond, 1979, 248). Consequently, as Hogenkamp has pointed out, '[a]fter the demise of the FWFS ... there was no organisation in place to take care of the financial, technical and organisational details' that a network in a new gauge required. A new organisation, Kino, eventually emerged out of the Workers' Theatre Movement and, according to Hogenkamp, became 'the most important distributor of left-wing films on 16mm in the United Kingdom' (1986, 82). 16mm significantly enhanced the potential for the WFM to not only decentralise and expand its distribution and exhibition activities but also to outsource its film production to camera people across the country. In this period more parallels emerge between Undercurrents and the WFM.

Kino's distribution and exhibition strategy, for instance, closely prefigures Undercurrents' decentralised approach. Charlie Mann, one of Kino's founding members, described how their 'method was to try and get a local organisation to book us to give a film show, more than doing it on our own initiative' (Hogenkamp, 1986, 83). As we have seen, encouraging others to take the initiative with

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[25] This was in spite of the best efforts of the police and government to make the same laws apply to both 35 and 16mm film (Hogenkamp, 1986, 85-9).

putting on film shows was a key part of Undercurrents' strategy. Of course, with video technology Undercurrents did not have to physically accompany the films to the locations in which they were screened, but the principle of encouraging local supporters to develop radical film culture in their own areas was the same. From dust jacket suggestions that audiences should 'throw a video party and invite all your friends to watch Undercurrents' (*Undercurrents 6*) to filmed guides on distribution (*Undercurrents 3*), Undercurrents clearly understood the importance of creating an engaged audience who would participate in the project, and who were willing to become active nodes in the network. Given that neither Undercurrents nor, considering the technological limitations of 16mm, especially the WFM, were capable of instigating oppositional film cultures alone, emphasising the importance of audience participation in this way was crucial.

16mm also raised the possibility of a collaborative, decentralised approach to production similar to that which allowed Undercurrents to flourish. As with video, 16mm technology was 'relatively easy to handle, light and comparatively cheap' (Hogenkamp, 1986, 105), and this significantly increased the diffusion of the technology into the population. Thus, for the national day of protest against the Unemployment Act in 1934, the Workers' Film and Photo League (WFPL)[26] were able to issue a request for footage just as Undercurrents would sixty years later. As Undercurrents suggested that, 'if you have a campaign that you want others to hear about, grab a camcorder, film it and send the footage to the address below' (from *Undercurrents 1* jacket), so the WFPL appealed to 'any reader in the provinces [who] has got a movie camera, or can borrow one', and requested that 'he [*sic*] make sure to get some shots of his local demo. The League will pay for all film used. Average length needed is 25 feet (on 16mm stock)' (Hogenkamp, 1986, 119).

That this request for footage from the WFPL appears to have gone unanswered (Hogenkamp, 1986, 120-1) is also indicative of similarities in the class composition of Undercurrents and the WFM. Composed predominantly from the wealthier middle-class, the financial resources oppositional filmmaking required in the 1930s were too scarce among the rest of the population for decentralised

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[26] In 1934 Kino's production department merged with the Workers' Camera Club to form the Workers' Film and Photo League. There appears to have been a rift between the two groups, and, unsatisfied with the WFPL's output, Kino resumed production again just two years later (see Hogenkamp, 1979, 261 and 1986, 90 and 128-31).

production strategies to work. As Hogenkamp has said, 'the working class element in the league was minimal, with the cameraman of *Construction,* building worker Alf Garrard, being the exception rather than the rule' (Hogenkamp, 1986, 129). Further, though the WFM suffered from a lack of other resources which Undercurrents did not, this only reinforces their importance for the latter. As we have seen, for example, Undercurrents received funding and obtained a studio space early on, whereas members of the WFM cited their 'main difficulty [as] a lack of premises and cash' (Hogenkamp, 1986, 129).

Irrespective of its success, the WFM's appeal 'to the crowd' for footage nonetheless prefigures Undercurrents' decentralised production strategy. Furthermore, the WFM also envisaged the establishment of similar network architecture to that developed by Undercurrents in the 1990s. Just as Undercurrents acted as facilitators of the video-activist network on which it depended, providing training and support, so the organisations of the WFM also saw themselves as co-ordinating hubs from the beginning, offering training and assistance to help the network develop. In Kino's 1936 manifesto, for instance, it lists a number of aspirations to fulfil a role very similar to that which Undercurrents would provide for video-activists in the 1990s:

> (1) to discuss and determine themes and treatments for films of social significance; (2) to form units throughout the country for their production, on sub-standard [16mm] stock, and to act as a co-ordinating body to all such units and give assistance in every possible way; (3) to offer existing units a source of distribution for suitable productions in a sub-standard market, and to assist and advise them on scenarios. (Hogenkamp, 1979, 261)

Clearly, those in the WFM movement were as conscious as Undercurrents that a successful oppositional newsreel required outsourcing production to multiple news gatherers, essential to which was a well trained and equipped network of camera-people.

Indeed, the potential of 16mm to form the basis for an oppositional newsreel network was exciting radical filmmakers across Europe. The following was published by Korea Senda and Heinz Lüdecke in a German film journal in 1931:

We have to found film agitprop troops, i.e. small collectives, which are in very close touch

with the factories and the agricultural workers. Their members must be 'worker film

correspondents', who not only record campaigns and other big demonstrations of the workers,

but also make regular film reports from the factories and the countryside. But their task will

not be limited to the making of film reports. They will use the collected material for longer

compilation films, which will criticise in a revolutionary way the existing conditions by

means of the dialectical method. (cited in Hogenkamp, 1986, 105)

Aside from the political differences indicated by words like 'class', 'revolution' and 'the dialectical method', the similarities with Undercurrents' newsreel are clear. While Undercurrents did not call the video-activists with whom it worked 'film agit-prop troops' or 'worker film correspondents', essentially that is the role they fulfilled. Senda and Lüdecke's insistence that the agit-prop troops must be in close touch with 'the factories and the agricultural workers', meanwhile, is echoed in O'Connor's observation that the value in training a diverse range of activists was that they 'knew the issues and had the passion' (2010, 6). Undercurrents' video-activists also worked alone or in small groups, and their work was also not limited to 'film reports'. Just as Senda and Lüdecke anticipated of oppositional filmmakers in the 1930s, each issue of Undercurrents' newsreel was a compilation tape, consisting of shorter films which were often compilations themselves. Furthermore, since its founding Undercurrents has compiled one of the largest archives of video-activism in the world, from which there are plans to produce a feature production (O'Connor, 2010, 15).[27]

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[27] In the meantime, films such as *WTO: Showdown in Seattle* (Seattle IMC, 1999), *This Is What Democracy Looks Like* (Big Noise, 1999), *Breaking the Bank* (Washington D.C.'s IMC, 2000), *Crashing the Party* (Los Angeles IMC, 2000) and *Rebel Colours* (various, 2000) have since become classic compilation features of activist documentary using this method, often combining footage from hundreds of video-activists. Given the collective nature of Independent Media Centres (IMCs), these productions were often a lot more collaborative than the credit to one organisation indicates (see Chapters Two and Four). For more information, see Kingsnorth (2003, 157-60), Bodle (2004), Edwards (2004) and Coyer (2005).

Section Three

Political Differences and Criticisms of Undercurrents

While there are some striking similarities between Undercurrents' and the WFM's strategic responses to their technological and socio-political contexts, the respective ideological climates in which the groups were operating were very different. In particular, in contrast to the predominantly Marxist orientation of the WFM, the dominant political reference points in the 1990s were direct action and anarchism. Since Undercurrents was heavily criticised towards the end of the decade by sections of the direct action movement for practices that were deemed at odds with the principles of that movement, accounting for these ideological differences is important. Indeed, this is doubly so given that the particular blend of anarchism and direct action that gave rise to such criticisms in the first place included a certain class blindness in some areas of the movement.

An absent class paradigm in an allegedly anarchist critique is itself a contradiction that not only prevented complexity in the criticisms that were expressed but also meant that the general lack of class consciousness in Undercurrents' newsreel – a criticism that should have been at the forefront of both anarchist and Marxist critiques of the newsreel – was not identified at all. As we saw earlier, one possible explanation for this contradiction is that, like Undercurrents, its critics also occupied the contradictory class position of the radical intelligentsia. Instead of investigating that possibility here, I want to explore the ways in which direct action and a kind of class blind anarchism became the dominant ideological reference points for the movement more generally. Not only does this help to contextualise some of the many justified criticisms of Undercurrents in this period, but it also foregrounds the limitations of those criticisms. To understand this ideological trajectory, it is helpful to return to the 1930s once more, when class struggle was still the prevailing rhetoric in oppositional film culture.

The Ideological Context of the 1930s

Contrary to Ian Aitken's argument in his monograph on John Grierson and the Documentary Movement (1990), the 1930s was not a period suited to reformist politics.[28] Indeed, many argue that Britain in the 1930s was ripe for revolution and that the ruling class knew it.[29] Stanley Baldwin, for instance, expressed fears of a 'growing feeling of class-consciousness' after WWI and of voices urging 'let us bring this war to an end and get on with the only war that matters' (cited in Pronay, 1982, 9). Another future Tory prime minister also understood the situation clearly. Writing in 1966, Harold MacMillan recalled that:

> [A]fter 1931, many of us felt that the disease was more deep-rooted. It had become evident that the structure of capitalist society in its old form had broken down, not only in Britain, but all over Europe and even in the United States. The whole system had to be reassessed. Perhaps it could not survive at all; it certainly could not survive without radical change ... something like a revolutionary situation had developed, not only at home but also overseas.
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> (cited in Klugmann, 1977, 16)

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[28] Countering Clare Johnston's (1980) argument that the social reformist nature of the Documentary Movement was an insufficient basis for an oppositional film culture, Aitken suggests that given the 'consensualist' politics of the period, the Documentary Movement's emphasis on gentle state intervention was indeed an oppositional one (1990, 8). Consequently, he claims those who are critical of the social-democratic politics of these films make the mistake of assuming that 'what was progressive or reactionary in one period would be so in all periods' (1990, 8). These critics' arguments are, he argues, shaped by the time in which they are writing (late 1970s and early 1980s) when the Left was in a much stronger position than Aitken claims it was in the 1930s. If, he says, these critics were to review their arguments a few years later, following the defeats of the Miners' Strike and the breaking of the print unions, the Documentary Movement's politics might appear the more suitable approach. It is true that one's perception of the past is shaped according to one's own historical conjuncture, and Aitken is right to point out that different strategies are required at different moments: clearly not every struggle is a revolutionary one. The critics to whom he is replying are undoubtedly writing from a position, aligned with *Screen* in the 1970s and 1980s, in which radicalism was very much in vogue. He is also right to draw attention to the fact that, in any case, this divide between the Documentary Movement and the Workers' Film Movement is to some extent artificial, with many individuals working with both. However, leaving aside debates between reform or revolution, Aitken's claim that, given the social and political context of the time, Grierson's was the more 'appropriate' strategy, is mistaken (1990, 182). Irrespective of the wisdom of diluting one's politics to appeal to a broader range of people, justifying this strategy on the grounds that the 1930s political landscape was one of harmony and agreement is contentious to say the least.

[29] See, for example, Brockway (1932), Branson and Heinnemann (1971) and Klugmann (1977). Winston cites the LeftFilmFront as saying that 'the situation is critical ... Everywhere there are poignant scenes in the breakdown of capitalism and stirring aspects of the new social order ready to be documented to win new comrades for the cause' (1995, 79). Even historians who portray the 1930s as a much calmer period, such as Andrew Thorpe (1992), suggest this is because the politicians on offer gave people 'less of what they did not want than the other parties' (59).

Indeed, as James Klugmann has argued, Conservative slogans of the late twenties, such as 'Fordism not Marxism' and others that celebrated an apparent post-war economic stability, were scuppered following the economic crash of 1929 (1979, 14).[30] The suffering of the working classes during the Great Depression created a space for alternatives to capitalism to be sought, and gave rise to other slogans, such as 'poverty in the midst of plenty' (Klugmann, 1979, 14), which more accurately described conditions for the majority of the population. According to Klugmann, to a hungry, unemployed work force in 1930, a social reality in which '[p]otatoes were being ploughed back into the land and coffee was being thrown in bags into the sea ... seemed to demonstrate in an easy way the total bankruptcy of the capitalist system and shouted loud for some sort of quick, rational, simple alternative' (1979, 15).[31]

Given this context, Aitken's argument that the reformism of the Documentary Movement was as oppositional a cinema as the left could have hoped for is unconvincing. Though the official positions of the mainstream parties may have been 'consensual', the feeling of the working class was anything but. As Klugmann says,

[t]here are in history some periods where things hardly move, which seem like plateaus, where, when you look back, having become older, it's hard to distinguish one moment from another. And there are periods of extreme change and struggle and storm. The thirties in Britain was definitely such a period. (1979, 13)

This was a time in which the labouring class would have been open to revolutionary ideas, and an oppositional cinema of the kind attempted by the workers' movement was surely the right one. The workers' movement knew this to be the case, and adopted a much more explicit, politically oppositional stance than those in the Documentary Movement. As we have seen, this opposition

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[30] See also Branson and Heinnemann (1971, 1).

[31] Indeed, the similarities with the current crisis illustrate Klugmann's argument that it is during times of capitalist crises that the contradictions within capitalism can be most clearly seen. For example, while the working class is enduring the worst squeeze in real wages since the 1920s (Treanor, 2008) chief executive pay has increased by 49% (Curtis, 2011). In this context, then, it is hardly surprising that Klugmann's opening sentence on trade union struggle in the 1930s – that 'the period started ... with the great struggle against the cuts' (21) – could just as easily describe the 2010s.

consistently demonstrated a high level of (albeit often vulgar) class-consciousness, with critics like Bond and Benn frequently citing the working class as central to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a more just and democratic society, and the cinema as a tool to be used for those revolutionary purposes.[32]

The Decline of Class Politics in Post-war Britain

By the 1990s, Britain's political and ideological landscape presented a very different view. Clearly the intervening decades saw countless twists and turns too numerous to recount here. Nevertheless, it is important to paint, in broad strokes at least, some of the crucial developments and defeats leading to the conjuncture in which Undercurrents launched its newsreel.

The Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 saw yet another[33] steep decline in the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) membership. No longer able to remain in the Party following such a flagrant act of oppression, thousands of those who had remained in the CPGB despite Stalin's rule left following the invasion, and the Party's membership decreased in the thousands. In Britain, Stuart Hall (1992) identified this moment as the birth of the 'New Left',[34] a period of independent left-wing activity outside of the tradition of party politics and class struggle, the first cause of which was the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND). Emphasis on class struggle was further marginalised as struggles centred on race, gender and sexual oppression gained currency. The Civil Rights movement

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[32] For instance, Bond's understanding of the cinema as an instrument of class rule is clear: '[t]he cinema today is a weapon in the class struggle. So far this weapon has been the exclusive property of the capitalists. We cannot hope to wrest it completely from their hands until relations in society have been changed, but we can and must fight capitalist influences in the cinema by exposing, in a Marxist manner, how it is used as an ideological force to dope the workers' (141). Bond was also critical of another film critic, Henry Carter, for using 'mystic and spiritual phraseology' in his book, *The New Spirit in the Cinema*, complaining that such language was 'basically contradictory to a Marxist viewpoint' (1931, 141). However, Carter was also concerned to develop a political cinema for the working class, himself bemoaning the absence of 'insurrectionary groups within the movement to breed fresh ideas [and] no attempt to appeal to the workers' (Carter, 1930, 136). Elsewhere, Benn also argued that 'the cinema is a propagandist organ, a weapon of class war. Class war is expressed through politics and political supremacy is maintained through the cinema' (Benn, 1931, 138).

[33] The CPGB had adopted a 'Class Against Class Policy' after WWI, which was intended to antagonise class struggle and speed what was felt to be the inevitable overthrow of capitalism in its 'Third Period' (Kozlov, 1989). Despite the aforementioned suitability of revolutionary politics in the thirties, not everyone was ready for the militant rhetoric of such a policy or the way in which it attacked the Labour Party as much as the Tories. As a result it backfired, alienating many workers potentially amenable to revolutionary politics, and was abandoned in 1933 in favour of the 'United Front' approach required to fight fascism. According to Klugmann, as a result of the policy membership of the Communist Party in France in this period 'fell from over 80,000 in 1925 to 28,000 in 1933, [and] in Britain from 12,500 in January 1927 to about 2,500 in 1930-1' (1977, 23-4).

[34] See also Hogenkamp (2000, 52-3) and Hall and Birchall (2006, 2-3).

in America fed into anti-racism groups in Britain, and second wave feminism, LGBT and other political struggles gained prominence.

These struggles helped to dispense with the vulgar, deterministic conceptions of class that had characterised the orthodox Marxism of the WFM, and contributed to a much more complex theorisation of the subject under capital, one which was sensitive to the multiple factors of identity and the variety of ways in which these intersect with and inflect social and economic structures. On the other hand, as Eric Hobsbawm has argued, the shift away from narrow and anachronistic conceptions of class also gave rise to manifestations of 'identity politics' which, in isolating other facets of identity (such as sexuality or race), threatened to displace the notion of class altogether (1996). This kind of 'sectional identity politics' not only runs counter to the inclusive project of the left, it also replaces one form of determinism with another, thus recreating the problem it was trying to address in the first instance (Hobsbawm, 1996). This is not to conflate these criticisms with any particular aspect of the British radical left in the 1990s – whether aligned with traditions of Marxism, anarchism or direct action more broadly – but rather to note that this is the ideological context in which they were trying to operate. However, following the miners' strike of 1984-5 and the Wapping Dispute from 1986, the trade unions in Britain lost much of the political power that had enabled the working class to resist capitalist incursions into its quality of life in the 1970s. With union power smashed and the ideological terrain fractured, combined with the lack of workplace struggles in the 1990s,[35] direct action became an increasingly attractive mode of resistance.

One of the first major struggles after the defeat of the Miners' Strike was the resistance to the poll tax. A fixed-rate tax for each adult member of the population that paid no heed to disparities in income placed the burden of tax squarely on the poorest sectors of the population. Such a flagrantly unfair taxation scheme provoked widespread resistance, including the non-payment campaign set-up in Scotland and the poll-tax riot in London on 31st March 1990 (see Chapter Three for Despite TV/Spectacle and its film *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1990)). These tactics forced the Conservative

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[35] The number of strike days during each period is indicative of this loss of union power: 666,000 during the 1990s, down from 7.2 million in the 1980s and 12.9 million in the 1970s (Thomas, 2011, 14).

government to abolish their proposals and played a key part in Margaret Thatcher's downfall.[36] Thus, as George MacKay has argued, 'the anti-poll tax movement [was] a clear and inspiring successful precedent for further direct action against government policy in the context of road-building from 1992 onwards' (1998, 6).

This preference for direct action continued apace into the 1990s, and in 1996 a Reclaim the Streets (RTS) leaflet proclaimed that

> Direct action is not just a tactic, it is individuals asserting their ability to control their own lives and to participate in social life without the need for mediation or control by bureaucrats or professional politicians. Direct action encompasses a whole range of activities, from organising co-ops to engaging in resistance to authority. Direct action places moral commitment above positive law. Direct action is not a last resort when other methods have failed, but the preferred way of doing things. (cited in Menchetti, 2005)[37]

This is not to deny the ideological diversity of the radical left in the 1990s or to imply that the direct action movement was always explicitly anarchist.[38] Nevertheless, direct action was especially prominent in this period and is one of the primary links between the 1990s' protest scene and anarchism. As George Woodcock has argued, among the many different doctrines of anarchist philosophy there exist certain 'unifying principles', one of which is direct action (1977, 16). According to Woodcock, for instance, '[t]he anarchist view of social organisation is ... summed up in the phrase *direct action*' (Woodcock's emphasis, 1977, 26-7).[39] However, class struggle is also a

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[36] See Gibson (1994), Butler et al (1994), Burns (1992) and Newsinger (1992).

[37] For an analysis of this ethos in the British direct action movement since then see Doherty et al (2003).

[38] Of course not everyone involved in the 1990s direct action movement were anarchists. On the contrary, many of those involved in the campaigns of the 1990s would likely reject any labelling of their politics or practices as anything, anarchism included. Nevertheless, the rejection of the label does not mean anarchism was not the closest reference point. Indeed, a number of groups, including RTS, organised themselves non-hierarchically, placed emphasis on direct action in small groups with no formal structure or membership, and emphasised 'temporary liberation' in the tradition of Temporary Autonomous Zones advocated by anarchist author Hakim Bey (1991).

[39] See also Emma Goldman, who concludes her essay, 'Anarchism: What It Really Stands For' (1910) with: '[d]irect action against the authority in the shop, direct action against the authority of the law, direct action against the invasive, meddlesome authority of our moral code, is the logical, consistent method of [a]narchism' (66).

founding principle of anarchist philosophy. Peter Kropotkin, for instance, cited the abolition of 'the

exploitation of Labour by Capital' as central to anarchism (cited in Infoshop, 1995), arguing that 'the

only guarantee not to be robbed of the fruits of your labour is to possess the instruments of labour'

(1892, 145). This remains the case in more contemporary anarchist theory, for which

> any attempt to understand anarchism without reference to class struggle would be akin to
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> studying the life of a shark without reference to its teeth. Class struggle is a vital component
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> of anarchism and any attempt to separate them denies not only the rich history and roots of
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> anarchism but also leaves it useless and hollow. (Libcom, 2010)

However, in spite of these emphases one finds that, while anarchism is continually cited in the context

of direct action in the 1990s, class struggle is barely mentioned, largely for the reasons outlined

above. Thus, as McKay has noted, while its 'focus on direct action' is one of the key ways in which

'its connections with anarchism can be traced' (14), 'a rhetoric of class awareness and politics has

been pretty largely absent' from the radical political scene of the 1990s (1998, 46).

Critiques of Undercurrents within the direct-action movement at this time thus emerged from

a one-sided sort of anarchism which advocated direct action against capitalism but without any notion

of the antagonistic social relations on which that system is based. Thus lacking in the component parts

required for a sophisticated critique of 20th-century capitalism, this kind of anarchism was incapable

of dealing with any class contradictions within the direct action movement itself. This is most evident

in criticisms regarding Undercurrents' relationship with the mainstream media and practices which

were deemed compromisingly close to those of the mainstream. Most clearly articulated in an article

in the environmental activists' journal *Do or Die* (Do or Die, 1997a),[40] many of the concerns raised

were justifiable and its call for 'continuous appraisal of the methods and motivations of those

involved in activist media' is a reasonable one (6). However, its conclusion that 'activists should

begin to view [Undercurrents] very much as they do mainstream media organisations' is naive (7).

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[40] Although the article addresses video-activism and direct action as a whole, it nevertheless falsely identifies
Undercurrents as the 'one agency that specialises in the production and distribution of alternative video in the
UK' (1997a, 6), and the authors aim their criticisms squarely in Undercurrents' direction.

Such a statement demonstrates the authors' inability or unwillingness to grasp either the class composition of Undercurrents, which gave rise to many of its contradictory practices, or the fact that these contradictions were also key elements to its success. Perhaps most revealing of all, they also fail to observe that class is itself largely absent from the content of Undercurrents' newsreel. Given all the recurring themes it covered – the police, the IMF and World Bank, McLibel, climate change, hunt-sabotage, Shell's murderous activities in the Niger Delta, Gay Pride and so on – class struggle is glaringly absent. As lacking in class consciousness as the newsreel, Undercurrents' critics were unable to appreciate that structures of media ownership in class divided capitalist societies necessitates a dynamic interaction with mainstream media on the part of radical alternatives. For a variety of reasons, Undercurrents did not get those interactions right all the time, but using that as grounds for its complete rejection ignores the realities of oppositional filmmaking in capitalist contexts.[41]

'Don't Drink from the Mainstream': Undercurrents and the Mainstream Media

The mainstream media played a key role in helping Undercurrents establish itself in the first place. For its first newsreel, for example, the Undercurrents team printed five-hundred tapes and distributed twenty-thousand leaflets to no avail (Harding, 1998, 88). It was only when they received positive responses from those media institutions they had targeted for reviews that they began to receive interest. *The Guardian*, for instance, described the newsreel as 'the news you don't see on the news', *The Independent* called it 'compelling viewing' and *Time Out* described it as 'the Pathé News of the 90s' (Harding, 1998, 88). Undercurrents also received coverage on the BBC's *Late Show*, Canadian TV and MTV Europe (Harding, 1998, 88). According to O'Connor, this interest really took off when the tape was reviewed by Mariella Frostrup on *The Little Picture Show* for Carlton Television:

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[41] It is also worth noting that one of the authors of the article, Kevin Doye, left Undercurrents to work with Conscious Cinema as a result of these criticisms. O'Connor has mentioned that 'Conscious Kev' worked on *Undercurrents 8* while O'Connor was in Australia. It was during this period that Doye experienced those Undercurrents' practices with which he disagreed, and had what was apparently a very acrimonious dispute with Harding over them. Such hostility evidently did not extend to Doye's relationship with O'Connor, as Doye and his partner are the couple whose emigration-by-bike to Australia is the subject of one of Undercurrents' first online mini-series, *Bike2Oz* (2000, see Chapter Two).

We had just moved into this little office ... and there were fourteen phone lines there from the last company which were going to be cut off any day. We were sitting there watching the programme and Mariella came on, gave it a really positive review and put our phone number up at the end. Then all the phones just lit up. That fast. It was unbelievable how fast it was. We spent two hours solidly on the phone, with people wanting to buy the videos. Then they showed the programme again at 2 o'clock in the morning and again our phone lines lit up. It was insane, one of the most insane days we've had at Undercurrents. (2010, 4)

As this demonstrates, Undercurrents' strategy with regards to the mainstream media enabled it to exploit its power in their favour. Not only did Undercurrents capitalise on the widespread disaffection with the mainstream media by emphasising its criticisms of it constantly, it also used the mainstream media itself to maximise the exposure of those criticisms. The presence of ex-media professionals within Undercurrents undoubtedly played an important role in this strategy, which ultimately proved crucial to its success.

So, while Undercurrents was unequivocal in its criticisms of mainstream news media, this did not equate to a complete rejection of it. In fact, Undercurrents openly acknowledged attempting to sell footage to television news, which it argued was both a valuable source of income and a useful means of publicity for the campaigns with which it was involved. This practice, along with Undercurrents' 'hierarchical operating structure' (Do Or Die, 1997a, 5), are among the most specific criticisms cited in the *Do or Die* article. What is not taken into account, though, is that the flaws in these arrangements were both partly a result of the contradictory class position of the organisation and key to its success.

Undercurrents' sale of material to the news media proved so controversial partly because it required all video-activists with whom it worked to sign a contract waiving their rights to the footage. Without this waiver, Undercurrents argued that it could neither sell footage to contemporary news media nor include it as part of its archive for subsequent sale. Yet not only did the contract give Undercurrents the rights to the footage, it also stipulated that the video-activists with whom it worked would take part in the distribution of the newsreel and that any profits made from it were divided

70:30 in Undercurrents' favour.[42] Understandably, such commercially oriented practices were deemed at odds with a not-for-profit video-activist organisation supposedly aligned with the anti-capitalist movement. Undercurrents' hierarchical internal organisation was also counter to the non-hierarchical tendencies of the movement. As O'Connor says,

> we did have a hierarchy. We weren't anarchists. We thought that people needed responsibility, and once a person had responsibility for their project, it was with that person that the buck stopped. We weren't going to get into that, sitting around for days on end deciding how many tapes we were going to buy and all that. It just wasn't worth the effort and we didn't have the time. We didn't get our heads around consensus-based decision making; it all seemed like way too much work. So from the outside we would look like a hierarchy – we had directors of the company. (2011, 11)

Such an explicit chain of command was clearly antithetical to the horizontal preferences of the anarchist inflected direct-action movement. Indeed, the commercial values of Undercurrents' contractual arrangement and their hierarchical operating structure were evidently incongruous with the co-operative, communal principles of radical left politics and as such of course they should have been subjected to critique. However, the *Do Or Die* article lacks the degree of sophistication required to apprehend the complexity of oppositional newsreel production in capitalist contexts. Unable to appreciate the contradictory class position that lay behind some of Undercurrents' more questionable practices, it simply rejects the organisation altogether, rather than exploring the source of such contradictions or how they can be negotiated.

Undercurrents' contract, for instance, was Harding's responsibility. As O'Connor says, he had experience of working in television and thus 'he knew what they wanted' (2010, 9). So, although the contract *was* necessary to access the funding and exposure the mainstream media could provide, it also stemmed from proprietary practices in the media industry and was thus at odds with the ethos of

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[42] It has since evened out to 50:50 (O'Connor, 2010, 10).

the movement Undercurrents was trying to represent.[43] Again, then, we can see how Undercurrents'

contradictory class dynamic resulted in advantages and disadvantages which proved difficult to

reconcile. While it used a contract which espoused the values of the mainstream media, the

motivations behind that practice stemmed from oppositional intent. Indeed, Undercurrents was aware

of the advantages and pitfalls of selling footage to the media, and thus viewed it as a tactic, one

method among many that would be suitable at some moments in some struggles and unsuitable in

others: as Harding says, 'working with television is only one option, a single powerful string that

should be used wisely in a multi-strand video campaign' (1998, 93).

Similarly, the presence of middle class professionals within Undercurrents also undoubtedly

fed into the hierarchical structure of the organisation. Flawed though this was, it evidently made for

an efficient production model and a competent training process. Lumping Undercurrents in with the

mainstream media on these grounds is thus simplistic, and ignores the difficulties involved in

sustaining oppositional newsreel production. Funding, for instance, is arguably the single biggest

impediment to oppositional newsreel production, yet the article argues that all the money

Undercurrents made from video-activism should have gone back into 'the campaign that produced the

images in the first place' (7). That this would have bankrupted a newsreel which served multiple

campaigns simultaneously goes unnoticed in Do Or Die's simplistic equation of Undercurrents with

the mainstream media. So, while some of Undercurrents' strategic practices were grounds for

criticism, dismissing the first oppositional newsreel to operate sustainably on a national (and

international) level was counter-productive – indeed, the article did a lot of damage to Undercurrents'

reputation and O'Connor cites its publication as marking the beginning of the end for the newsreel

(2010, 10). As we have seen, Undercurrents' strategic engagement with the mainstream media was a

fundamental part of its wider strategy, and that strategy was crucial to its success. Though mediated

and supported by considerable material resources and class advantages, without this strategy

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[43] Of course, there is also little doubt that Harding and Hartzell were committed to the causes they were trying to support. As Harding has said elsewhere, 'as a TV director I would ask myself, "what shall get me airtime on National TV?" With Undercurrents I asked: "what method of distribution will have the most impact for this campaign?"' (Harding, 2005, 233).

Undercurrents would never have been able to capitalise on the constellation of contexts that made its newsreel a viable project in the first place.

Conclusion

This chapter has charted the video-activist landscape of Britain in the 1990s. Contrary to most accounts of video-activism in this period, we have seen how Undercurrents was not the only active video-activist organisation. Although Despite TV and Conscious Cinema are less recognised, their contribution to British video-activism was considerable (as was their contribution to oppositional feature documentary, as we will see in Chapters Three and Four). Indeed, although Undercurrents was certainly the most dominant organisation, its place in British video-activist culture can only be properly understood in relation to these other organisations. Despite TV pioneered the video-magazine format that Undercurrents later adopted, for instance, and demonstrated the possibility of using non-hierarchical modes of organisation for newsreel production as well as the potential financial drawbacks. Conscious Cinema's contribution, meanwhile, can be seen not only in the work it produced but also in its wider contribution to video-activist culture, in the form of the series of gatherings they hosted at Zoe Young's family estate, for example. Furthermore, that Conscious Cinema was at pains to distinguish itself from Undercurrents is also telling of how the strategies and tactics Undercurrents' deployed to make its newsreel such a success were not always approved of by the communities it purported to represent.

As I have argued, Undercurrents' strategic approach to its newsreel was a crucial part of its success and one of the key reasons why Undercurrents came to dominate the video-activist environment of the 1990s so completely. Of course, the socio-political, communicational and technological contexts that formed the background to its newsreel are important, but situating these factors in a cause-effect relation is too easy. Undercurrents' newsreel cannot be explained simply as the inevitable result of a particular set of circumstances. Camcorder technology was a vital part of Undercurrents' existence, of example, but it is not camcorder technology *per se* so much as Undercurrents' strategic exploitation of its capabilities that led to its success – along with its efforts to

create a decentralised network of production, distribution and exhibition, and the development of a training model to support and expand that network. Indeed, that many of Undercurrents' strategies were prefigured in the WFM is indicative of their suitability for newsreel production. Albeit from slightly different ideological perspectives, both groups were heavily critical of the mainstream newsreels, sought to develop oppositional film networks and exploit the available technology to decentralise their structure as far as possible.

Undercurrents also had access to material benefits which contributed to their success, including both a large grant enabling access to high-quality equipment and office space, and the significant but less tangible advantages derived from the presence of middle class professionals in the organisation. While this latter characteristic applied both to Undercurrents and the WFM, it proved both a blessing and a curse for Undercurrents. As we have seen, Undercurrents' approach to the mainstream media was heavily influenced by Harding and Hartzell's professional experience and formed a key part of its strategy. Not only was the sale of footage to television a valuable income stream, but the mainstream media also helped to launch Undercurrents in the first place, providing the exposure it required to establish itself. The experience and perspectives within the organisation also fed into Undercurrents' structure and decision-making processes. While these factors were arguably key to Undercurrents' success, they also resulted in intense criticism from sections of the movement from which it had emerged.

While many of these criticisms were justified, they were also limited by their ideological blind-spots. Returning again to a comparison with the WFM, we have seen how the ideological trajectory of the British radical left since the 1930s resulted in a shift from a predominantly Marxist orientation to a form of anarchism in which class struggle was largely effaced. Lacking an analysis of capitalism as a system structured along class lines, criticisms of Undercurrents' contradictory practices could neither grasp the source of those contradictions nor appreciate that oppositional filmmaking in a capitalist society is bound to be fraught with contradictions.

Furthermore, such criticisms were also unable to express what should have been self-evident from both anarchist and Marxist perspectives on Undercurrents: that the newsreel itself was also largely devoid of any notion of class struggle. Rather than assess this or any other of Undercurrents'

contradictory practices and explore how they could be overcome, criticisms of the organisation concluded it was effectively synonymous with mainstream media organisations and should be treated as such. Fortunately, the end of Undercurrents the newsreel was not the end of Undercurrents the organisation. In Chapter Two, we will explore their more recent activities as well as those of a range of other more contemporary video-activist organisations, some of whom are decidedly more class conscious.

2   Video-Activism in the 2000s: The Contemporary Landscape

Introduction

This chapter explores the contemporary landscape of video-activism in Britain, focusing roughly from 2000 to the time of writing in 2013. Given the extent of the technological and socio-political changes that have taken place over the last fifteen years or so, this landscape is very different to that of the 1990s. While there is obviously not the space for a comprehensive assessment of these changes and their impact on contemporary oppositional filmmaking, it cannot be understood without them. The first of this chapter's two sections thus begins with an overview of the significance of digital technologies and the internet for radical filmmakers, outlining some of the opportunities and challenges that have arisen from this technological transformation. I then discuss the social and political developments that have accompanied this transformation. From the alter(anti)-globalisation[1] movement and the so-called 'war on terror' to movements against climate change and, most recently, austerity, these have influenced and inspired Britain's contemporary video-activist community in myriad ways.

Of course, separating out the social and the political from the technological in this way masks the reality of their interconnectedness.[2] In section two I explore the ways in which these factors converge in the five most established oppositional video-activist organisations in Britain: Undercurrents, SchMOVIES, visionOntv, Reel News and Camcorder Guerrillas. While each of these organisations is aligned with the radical left, their social, economic and political strategies differ significantly, along with their respective engagements with contemporary technologies. An assessment of each group therefore not only gives an impression of Britain's contemporary

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[1] The advantages and drawbacks of the various names for this movement (other prefixes include 'anti-capitalist' as well as 'global democracy' and 'global justice') have been extensively discussed elsewhere (see Hosseini (2009 and 2010), Chomsky (2005), Graeber (2002 and 2009) and the brief summary in Stammer and Eschle (2005, 55-8)). Compared to 'anti-globalisation', 'alter-globalisation' more accurately indicates that the movement's target is global capitalism, rather than globalisation *per se* (Callinicos, 2001). 'Alter-globalisation' also allows for the distinction between the internationalist left and the nationalist right, both of whom are opposed to capitalist globalisation. Some key texts on the global anti-capitalist movement include Mertes (2004), McQuiston (2004), Kingsnorth (2003), Notes From Nowhere (2003), Roddick (2001) and Klein (2000).
[2] See Winston (1996, 1-9). For a version of this argument in relation to gender, sexuality and class, see Butler (1990, 19).

oppositional video-activist culture, but shows that culture to be extremely diverse, composed of multiple approaches. However, contemporary British video-activism consists of many more individuals and organisations than just these five groups, despite their long-standing and radical status. Therefore, although my focus is on these five, I first map the field as a whole, dividing it into three groups: video-activist NGOs, access organisations, and aggregators of oppositional media. Just as contemporary oppositional filmmakers cannot be understood outside of their historical context, so the radical video-activists also cannot be understood outside of this broader culture of which they are a part.

Section One: Technological and Socio-Political Contexts

Technological Context

Digital technologies and the internet have fundamentally transformed the ways in which information, knowledge and culture are produced and shared in the 21st century. Unsurprisingly, the impact of this transformation on oppositional filmmaking, along with almost every other form of cultural production, is considerable. The reproducibility of digital information, for example, combined with the availability of digital cameras as a means of producing it and the development of the internet as a means of distributing it, has resulted in an explosion of video-activism since the 1990s.

Indeed, such is the impact of this transformation that Manuel Castells has described it as a 'technological revolution' (2000, 1), in which information has become 'the new material, technological basis of economic activity and social organisation' (14). However, not everyone agrees on the precise nature of the change, the moment of its occurrence or what it should be called. While Castells locates this shift to 'informationalism' at the end the 20th century (2000, 14), Yochai Benkler argues that the development of economies centered on information has been taking place 'for more than a century' (2006, 3). For Benkler, the developments of the last twenty years merely constitute a new stage in the information economy that he calls 'the networked information economy'. Moreover, Castells argues the shift to informational societies has led to increased fragmentation and individualism (2000, 22), while Benkler suggests the organisational practises of networked

information economies has enhanced community cohesion (2006, 271). Irrespective of these arguments, however, it is generally agreed that this new technological paradigm has led to a new stage in the development of capitalism.

Such dramatic changes in the forces of production have entailed significant shifts in capitalist social relations. One the one hand, for example, a globally networked information economy has increased the reach and flexibility of capital and its ability to exploit a global labour market. As a result, the power of the labour movement has decreased, with short-term and zero-hour contracts increasingly the norm, union membership declining (Milne, 2012) and the workforce becoming increasingly insecure (Standing, 2011). On the other hand, the ability to produce, copy and share information at no marginal cost to the user[3] has led to new kinds of relations of production, known as 'peer-production'.[4] These relations of peer-production are based on principles of cooperation rather than competition, and of sharing resources communally rather than competing for them in the marketplace. Consequently, while the products of peer-production are not necessarily free from exploitation, neither are they dependent on large amounts of capital or wage labour to produce.

Furthermore, peer-production is capable of a scale and quality of production that can, under certain conditions, surpass capitalist relations of production. To pick one of the most well-known examples, before it was outlawed the music file-sharing site, Napster (1999-01), constituted the biggest library of human creativity in the world, and was built for free in six months by a network of twenty-five million users cooperating with one another.[5] Clearly, proprietary relations of production struggle to compete with collaboration on this scale. As Benkler argues, '[t]he network components owned by any single music delivery service cannot match the collective storage and retrieval capabilities of the universe of users' hard drives and network connections' (2006, 86). Of course, with digital technology this universe of hard drives and network connections can be used to share any kind of information, not just music. So, one of the consequences of digitalization is that information is no

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[3] Of course, this is not taking into account the significant environmental costs of, for instance, producing the energy required to power networked information economies. See, for example, Taffel (2011).

[4] I stress that these are only new kinds of such relations, since production has arguably been organised according to those principles for hundreds of thousands of years (Harman, 2008, 24).

[5] For more information on Napster, see Menn (2003), Wayne (2003, 54-9), Alderman (2001) and Merriden (2001).

longer a scarce resource, which therefore poses a direct threat to all industries previously dependent upon their ability to sell access to that information. As Mike Wayne argues, 'the conversion of resources to binary digits is a profound challenge to the whole concept of scarcity on which the capitalist political economy depends' (2003, 47). Control over the production, reproduction and distribution of digital information has thus become a major site of struggle in the globalised network economy of twenty-first-century capitalism.

As one of the primary means through which control over information is exerted, copyright is a key front in this struggle. Typically used by large, multi-media corporations to enforce their private ownership of information, copyright is increasingly asserted by oppositional filmmakers who wish to ensure more ethical uses of digital information. This use of copyright is known as 'copyleft', and was developed in the early 1980s by the American computer programmer, Richard Stallman. Stallman became disillusioned with the software industry when the American communications corporation, AT+T, commercialized Unix, one of the first computer operating systems in history. Prior to its commercialisation, Unix (along with most other software at that time) had been distributed with the source-code freely available, which allowed anyone to modify and make improvements to the software. When the system was commercialised, AT+T switched to a closed-source business model which denied its users the ability to modify and improve the system, and which therefore destroyed the 'free exchanges of source code that had nurtured so much of the system's early vitality' (Raymond, 2004). Stallman found this move intolerable and pioneered the free software movement in response, declaring its aim to peer-produce a body of non-proprietary software that would be freely available to everyone, and which anyone would be free to copy, modify and distribute (Stallman, 1983). In order to ensure that the products of the free software movement remained free,[6] Stallman wrote the first copyleft license, the GNU General Public License (GNU/GPL), in 1983.[7] Since then a

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[6] The 'free' in 'free software' does not refer to price, but to freedom. Or, as Stallman is fond of saying, '"free" as in "free speech" not as in "free beer"' (Stallman, 2007d). For more on this distinction, see Stallman (1996).
[7] 'GNU' is a recursive acronym which stands for 'GNU Not Unix', and which initially referred to the GNU Project, the name given to movement's first goal of creating a free operating system. This goal was achieved in the early 1990s with the release of the Linux kernel as the final component in the operating system. An initiative of the Finnish computer scientist Linus Torvalds, the Linux kernel was developed outside of the GNU Project, but used code from other GNU licensed software. As such the GNU Project should be considered its principal developer, a role which is denied when GNU is dropped from the title (divorcing the system from its free

variety of other copyleft licenses have been developed, both by the Free Software Foundation (established by Stallman in 1985 to support the movement) and other organisations, such as Creative Commons.[8] Based on principles of equality and cooperation, the politics of the free software movement are well-matched to those of the radical left, and as a result the overwhelming majority of contemporary oppositional filmmaking is released under a copyleft license (without exception, all the radical video-activist groups discussed below copyleft their work). Furthermore, recognising debates about intellectual property as 'the great political and legal issue of our time' (Moglen, 1999), many oppositional documentary filmmakers have produced films on this subject.[9]

However, for all the advantages of digital technology and the reproducibility of information, this technological context has created new problems for video-activists. Perhaps chief among these is finding ways to make video-activism financially sustainable. Just as file-sharing is eroding the profit margins of large multi-media corporations, a culture in which audio-visual products can be copied and shared for free also makes it harder for oppositional filmmakers to earn a living from their work. As we will see, contemporary video-activists are attempting a range of financial strategies in their efforts to remain sustainable in this context. Underpinning all these strategies is the need to find audiences for their work. While file-sharing and online platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo have vastly increased the potential audiences for oppositional filmmaking (and created a vast archive of footage for filmmakers), in practice this has resulted in so many sources competing for attention that it has become difficult both for filmmakers to distinguish themselves and for audiences to locate filmmakers whose work interests them. Of course, these difficulties have political as much as financial implications. For instance, the potential use of film as a 'detonator' of debate (Solanas and Getino, 1969, 283) – let alone action – is also complicated with audiences dispersed across the globe and

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software lineage). For this reason Stallman insists on referring to the system as 'GNU plus Linux' or 'GNU slash Linux' (Stallman, 2007a and 2007b).

[8] A non-profit organisation founded by Lawrence Lessig and others in 2001, Creative Commons is a collection of licenses rather than a single entity, with each license permitting different degrees of freedom. It is therefore important to specify under which license a work is released when discussing that work, especially since some (the Non-Commercial and No-Derivatives options) designate a work non-free according to the *Definition of Free Cultural Works* (Möller, 2006). Because of these non-free options, Richard Stallman has denounced Creative Commons, arguing that since people refer to Creative Commons as a single unit it is impossible to support just part of it (Stallman, 2005)

[9] Probably the best known British film is *Steal This Film* (Jamie King, 2006) (see Chapter 4). Overseas films include *The Pirate Bay: Away from the Keyboard* (forthcoming), *Coalition of the Willing* (2010), *RIP: A Remix Manifesto* (Gaylor, 2009) and *Good Copy, Bad Copy* (Johnsen, Christensen and Moltke, 2007).

frequently watching computer screens alone rather than cinema screens in public. As we will see, negotiating these problems is one of the key concerns for contemporary video-activists.

Socio-political Context

The technological and economic development of the globalised network economy has been accompanied by similarly dramatic socio-political developments that have transformed the context of video-activism in the 2000s. These include the emergence of the alter-globalisation movement at the end of the 1990s, as well as major events such as 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the election of a variety of left-wing leaders in Latin America, the increasing irrefutability of impending climate catastrophe and world-wide recession. Again, a comprehensive account of such events is obviously beyond my remit, but British video-activism since 2000 also cannot be understood outside of this context, and an outline of their significance is necessary.

By the end of the 1990s, the struggles of the British direct action community had merged with the international alter-globalisation movement and aligned itself with the latter's explicit position against capitalism and for global justice and equality.[10] Characterised by a series of large, anti-summit direct action protests around the world, this period saw many British activist groups develop a much more conscious anti-capitalist framework (Do Or Die, 1999). However, although this made explicit the many connections between struggles which had previously been more distinct, it would be wrong to characterise the British protest scene prior to the alter-globalisation movement as one motivated by single-issue politics or limited to local campaigns. Campaigns against road-building, live-exports or fox-hunting foreground specific concerns, yet such specificity does not necessarily exclude awareness of the wider context of these concerns or prevent involvement in other, related campaigns. Furthermore, there is a more fundamental problem with the casual dismissal of individual campaigns as 'single-issue'. As McKay argues, 'the "single issue" of No More Roads includes topics like rural

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[10] As set out in the hallmarks of Peoples' Global Action (PGA, 2001), the network established to help co-ordinate the movement in 1998.

landscape, housing, the challenge to government and big business, the environment, public health,

personal political strategy, and social reformation – not bad for a single issue' (1998, 38).[11]

However, while we should be careful not to label early 1990s protest as naively local or

limited in scope, it is true that a number of those activist threads developed a much more explicit

recognition of the globally interlinked nature of the struggles. By the end of the 1990s many of those

involved in the direct action campaigns of a few years previously were taking part in globally co-

ordinated mass protests which specifically targeted capitalism and some of its key global institutions,

especially the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation

(WTO). Again, these had precursors of their own (demonstrations against meetings of the World

Bank, IMF and the WTO occurred in 1988 and 1994 in Berlin and Madrid respectively, for example),

but it was the global Carnival Against Capitalism on June 18th, 1999, which marked the beginning of

this new wave of anti-capitalist resistance in Britain (actions also took place in forty-three other

countries around the world (Ainger, 1999)).[12] J18, as it was known, was followed by the N30

(November 30th) protest in Seattle, when five hundred thousand activists successfully shut down four

days of scheduled WTO meetings, despite extraordinarily high levels of police brutality and the state

declaration of martial law. N30 was followed by A16 (April 16th, 2000) in Washington, Mayday

protests in London in 2000, anti-summit protests in Prague, Nice and Quebec later that year, and in

Davos and Genoa in 2001.[13] The latter marked the most extreme reaction from the state, with one

protestor, Carlo Giuliani, shot in the head and killed by police. As we will see, the alter-globalisation

movement had significant consequences for British video-activists, who not only attempted to

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[11] For a concise version of this argument in the activist press, see 'Single Issue Nonsense' in *SchNEWs* (1996a).
[12] J18 was certainly felt to be a turning point in the UK, though other authors locate beginnings elsewhere, depending on their global perspective. Hilary Wainwright, for instance, argues that the contemporary movement began in 1999 outside the WTO in Seattle (2003, 181). Seattle was a watershed in many ways, not least because it took place in the US and because it elicited such high levels of state repression. However, it is worth bearing in mind that so-called beginnings are also always part of the longer historical processes they threaten to efface. Indeed, this is one of the primary reasons Paul Mason wrote his history of global labour struggles, because 'the anti-globalisation movement is not in any shape to supply the narratives [of the past] – its oldest legend tells of a day in Seattle in November 1999' (2009, xi).
[13] For films documenting this movement see *Revolting in Prague* and *Globalisation and the Media* on *Undercurrents 10¾* (2002). Beyond the remit of this thesis but of relevance to this issue is the DVD collection by US based ex-workers' collective CrimeThinc entitled *CrimeThinc: Guerrilla Film Series Vol. 1* (2005). This includes five short films by Canadian video collective SubMedia and the US-based ThinkTank, as well as three feature documentaries, two of which look at alter-globalisation protests: *Breaking the Spell: Anarchists, Eugene and the WTO* (1999), about the Seattle WTO protests; and *The Miami Model* (2003), about the protests against the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas).

document the movement but also often aligned themselves with and were influenced by its political principles and organisational practices.

Giuliani's killing in July, followed by the bombing of the World Trade Centre in September, shifted the current of resistance in the alter-globalisation movement.[14] With President Bush's abstract declaration of war on 'terror', the stage was set for the interminably violent expansion of neoliberal corporate interests under the guise of spreading peace and democracy. Less than a month after the 9/11 attacks, the UK accompanied the US invasion of Afghanistan on October 7th. Two years later the same coalition illegally[15] invaded Iraq on the bogus[16] evidence that Saddam Hussein possessed nuclear weapons, despite the fact that plans to invade the latter were allegedly laid just two weeks after 9/11.[17] The repeated association of Saddam Hussein with 9/11 and Al Quaida, together with the UK government's well-documented exaggeration of Saddam's nuclear threat, helped justify the invasion of Iraq despite the massive objection of the public, both in the UK and around the world. Indeed, the anti-war demonstrations of 2003 were the largest protests in history. Estimates range from between one to two million people in the UK demonstrations, while the three million strong march in Rome is recorded in the Guinness Book of Records as the biggest anti-war demonstration ever. The French political scientist Dominique Reynie, meanwhile, has estimated that 36 million people took part in the demonstrations worldwide (cited in Callinicos, 2005). Despite the scale of these protests, however, the video-activist response in Britain was limited. Although there are various short films available, these are disparate and uncoordinated and consequently there is no recognised body of anti-war video-activism. In part, as I will show, this was due to the changing technological context of the early 2000s. With VHS fast becoming obsolete and web video not quite viable, there was no reliable distribution platform for video-activism and the few attempts at newsreel production were unsuccessful. As a result, most attempts to resist the war by oppositional filmmakers came from the

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[14] Some have identified Guiliani's death with the death of the alter-globalisation movement itself. See, for instance 'Genoa Ten Years On' (Freedom, 2011). Although summit protests have continued since, activists are now questioning the wisdom of mounting large-scale demonstrations at such events, which necessarily take place at a time and location chosen by an extensively prepared and militarized state power. See, for example, the public call-out for the G8 summit in France, 2011 (G8 Mobilisation Network, 2011).
[15] See MacAskill and Borger (2004).
[16] See Hooper (2005) and Lobe (2004).
[17] See Borger (2006) and Marlowe (2011).

feature filmmaking community, with works by John Pilger, Platform Films and Julia Guest (see Chapter 4).

On a more positive note, since the turn of the millennium the radical left in Britain and around the world has been inspired by the rise to power of a variety of left-wing leaders in Latin America, beginning with the election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998. Since then, a range of popular left-wing movements and electoral victories have been identified as part of number of broader 'left turns' across the continent as a whole (Cameron and Hershberg, 2010).[18] Left-wing leaders elected in Latin America since Chávez include, for example, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil (2002), Néstor Kirchner and his widow Cristina Kirchner in Argentina (2003 and 2007 respectively), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2005) and José Mujica in Uruguay (2008).[19]

That these electoral victories can also be seen as symptomatic of the variety of widespread and diverse grassroots or insurgent movements in the region, such as the Brazilian Movimento de Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra's (MST, Landless Workers' Movement), or the Mexican Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), demonstrates the popular foundations of the desire for change as well as its variegated nature. Indeed, it is these grassroots movements (beginning most notably with the Zapatista rebellion in 1994), that have arguably inspired the most international solidarity, along with the subsequent attempts to develop forms of popular democracy adequate to them, such as People's Global Action (PGA, 1998-) or the World Social Forum (WSF, 2001-).[20]

That said, one should be careful not to 'over-romanticise' this so-called 'pink wave' and present it as if, in Geraldine Lievesley and Steve Ludlum's words, 'the whole continent were marching leftwards in close order' (2009, 3). The governments of Mexico and Colombia remain violently authoritarian and committed to neoliberalism, for example, and in Paraguay in 2012 the right-wing Federico Franco replaced the left-leaning President, Fernando Lugo, in what has been

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[18] For accounts of the rise of the radical left in Latin America see Cameron and Hershberg (2010), Lievesley and Ludlum (2009), Green (2006), Skidmore (2005), Chavez and Goldfrank (2004) and Harris (1992).

[19] For a list of left-wing election winners from 1998 to 2008, see Lievesley and Ludlum (2009, 4).

[20] I discuss PGA below in the section on visionOntv (which has adopted its Hallmarks as their guiding principles). The WSF was founded to demonstrate alternatives the kinds of policies espoused at the World Economic Forum, in line with the WSF's motto: 'Another World is Possible'. It should also be noted that these attempts have also been subject to criticism for allowing the inclusion of right wing elements or for replacing grassroots movements with NGOs. For example, Firoze Manji described the 2007 WSF in Nairobi, Kenya, as 'more a World NGO Forum than an anti-capitalist mobilisation, lightly peppered with social activists and grassroots movements' (2007).

widely acknowledged as a military coup (Kozloff, 2012).[21] Nevertheless, as Lievesley and Ludlum argue, the fact remains that 'for the left, recent developments represent the most inspiring changes anywhere in the world' (2009, 1). As we will see, the influence these developments on British video-activists have been considerable.

The environmental movement has also experienced a groundswell in popularity and visibility in the first decade of this century, as concerns about anthropogenic climate change become ever harder to refute.[22] 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 has largely maintained the traditions of direct action and broadly anarchist modes of organising that characterised the movement in the 1990s. Of the groups that constitute the movement, Climate Camp has perhaps been the most prominent.[23] The political and organisational continuity between Climate Camp and earlier groups in the 1990s is one reason for the continued alignment of video-activist groups like Undercurrents and visionOntv with the radical environmentalist movement, in the form of projects like Climate Camp TV (see below).

In addition to the alter-globalisation, anti-war and environmentalist movements, one of the most recent developments in the socio-economic and political context of contemporary video-activism is the resistance to austerity. The gigantic bailout packages[24] with which governments attempted to stabilise the global banking system has resulted in the imposition of extreme austerity budgets on populations around the world. In the UK, the Conservative-led coalition government announced its

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[21] For a left-wing perspective on right-wing politics in Latin America, see Domínguez (2011).

[22] There are now very few scientists who express any doubt as to whether human activity has contributed significantly to the overall increase in global temperatures in recent decades, and that this rise is principally a result of our burning green-house gases. No scientific body of any national or international standing disagrees with this view, the controversy being much more pronounced in the mainstream media than in the scientific community (see Boykoff and Boykoff (2004), Brigham-Grette (2006), Oreskes and Conway (2010), or every single Assessment and Supplementary Report ever published by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 1990, 1992, 1995, 2001 and 2007). The IPCC was endorsed in 2001, at the initiative of the Royal Society, by a group of sixteen national academies of science, as 'the most reliable source of information on climate change and its causes' (Royal Society, 2001).

[23] Other groups include Rising Tide, Plane Stupid, Grow Heathrow, Climate Rush and the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition.

[24] According to the National Audit Office, the official cost of the bank bailout in the UK is £850 billion (Grice, 2009). In the US, the first ever Government Accountability Office (GAO) audit of the Federal Reserve, published in July 2011, revealed an *undeclared* 16 trillion dollar bailout to banking institutions around the world (GAO, 2011). This is in addition to the 11.6 trillion of total stimulus packages as estimated by business and economics analysts Bloomberg in 2009 (Pittman and Ivry, 2009).

austerity programme in the 2010 budget, in which it outlined £6.2 billion of spending cuts (BBC, 2010). One of the first cuts to be implemented was also one of the harshest, with Higher Education teaching budgets cut by 80%, humanities teaching budgets cut by 100% and tuition fees tripled to £9000 per year (Mulholland, 2010). The student movement of late 2010 was thus one of the first high-profile struggles against the cuts to which the video-activist community responded. Much of the video-activism produced by the movement was aggregated by visionOntv, for instance, and Reel News released a special issue of their newsreel early the next year: '*Tory Scum, Here We Come':* *Students Lead the Resistance* (2011).

However, while unprecedented numbers of campus occupations and spectacular acts of direct action[25] accorded the student movement much publicity, this was just one struggle among many in the widespread resistance to the multiple targets of austerity. Across the country groups have emerged to defend the National Health Service (NHS), public libraries and swimming pools, and to resist cuts to the Disability Living Allowance (DLA), housing benefit and public-sector pensions. Nevertheless, while supporting the anti-cuts struggle has become a key concern for oppositional video-activists, assessing their contribution to that struggle must remain a task for the future. First it is necessary to account for those groups which constitute the radical end of the video-activist spectrum.

Section Two: Radical Video-Activists

Mapping the Field

As mentioned earlier, of the multitude of individuals, groups and organisations producing video-activism, there are in fact only five established video-activist groups in Britain aligned with the radical left: Undercurrents, SchMOVIES, visionOntv, Reel News and Camcorder Guerrillas. The majority of the rest of this chapter explores these organisations in more detail, unearthing their politics, funding strategies, organisational structures and relations both to one another as well as to earlier cultures of oppositional British filmmaking. However, such an exploration can only take place within the context of the dramatically expanded video-activist landscape of which these radical groups

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[25] Including, perhaps most dramatically, the students smashing their way into the Conservative Party's London HQ on November 10th 2010.

are a part. I therefore want to begin with a wider perspective, discussing the field of video-activist

production as a whole before zooming in to focus on those more radical groups. Aside from the latter,

the video-activist landscape can be divided into three other broad categories: video-activist NGOs;

access organisations and aggregators of oppositional media. These categories are neither mutually

exclusive nor completely rigid. For instance, different groups will combine different aspects of them

in different ways, and different aspects of the same organisation can often be located in more than one

category. Nevertheless, such categories are useful markers with which to begin mapping the field and

understanding the role of the more radical groups within it.

Video-activist NGOs

With their international scope and greater financial resources, video-activist NGOs constitute the

largest organisations in the field. Two of the most prominent of these in Britain are One World Media

(OWM) and OneWorld TV (OWTV). As their names suggest, the history of these now distinct groups

is intertwined. OWM was founded in 1986 as the One World Broadcasting Trust (OWBT), only

becoming One World Media in 2009. Set-up by a group of media executives from the BBC and the

broadcast media regulator at that time, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA),[26] OWBT was

established to 'stimulate a greater range of television and radio programmes about the developing

world' (OWM, 2012a). Since then they have diversified and expanded, and now fund a variety of

video-activist initiatives, albeit still oriented predominantly towards first- or minority-world

filmmakers covering humanitarian issues in the third or majority-world.[27]

OWTV emerged from OneWorld.net, an organisation founded in 1994 by two of OWBT's

directors, Anuradha Vittachi and Peter Armstrong.[28] OneWorld.net was originally developed within

OWBT as the world's first online 'civil society portal' (OneWorld Group, 2012a), an online hub for

the sort of media coverage OWM supports. In 1995 OneWorld.net separated from OWBT to become

the independent organisation OneWorld UK, which is now part of OneWorld Group, a global

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[26] The IBA was succeeded by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) in 1991 and Ofcom in 2003.
[27] OWM also looms large on the feature documentary industry, hosting sessions at Sheffield International Documentary Film Festival and listing Channel 4's BRITDOC Foundation (see Chapter Four) as one of its many partners.
[28] Father of feature documentary filmmaker, Franny Armstrong, discussed in Chapter Three.

conglomerate primarily located in Britain and the US (but with bases around the world) which focuses on media for social, economic and political change. Part of OneWorld Group, OWTV was set-up by Armstrong in 2001 as an international video-activist portal to showcase 'brief, raw, attention-grabbing, [and] up-to-date' documentary by both amateur and professional filmmakers (Plunkett, 2002).

With their considerable resources and focus on using video for social change, video-activist NGOs like OWTV and OWM constitute a significant presence in British video-activism. However, with their existence dependent on the continued financial support of the government – which is the principle funder of both, in the form of the Department for International Development (DfID) – video-activist NGOs rarely stage the kind of radical critique one finds in the work of more oppositional video-activist groups. Their emphasis tends to be on "objectivity" and human rights rather than anti-capitalism or class struggle, for instance,[29] while OWM's 2011 awards ceremony featured Conservative MP and former oil trader turned minister of state for DfID, Alan Duncan, as the keynote speaker (OWM, 2012c).[30]

Access Organisations

Because they focus on expanding access to production rather than the content of what is produced, access organisations also tend to produce less explicitly political video-activism. However, while this arguably excludes these organisations from the video-activist spectrum, equipping disadvantaged groups with the skills and experience to represent themselves is nevertheless a fundamentally radical act. As such, one often finds not only that access organisations aspire to social goals amenable to the radical left, but that they also have close working relationships with other, more explicitly oppositional video-activist organisations. Spill Media, for instance, is a social enterprise production company based in Swansea which combines more lucrative marketing and promotional work with

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[29] OWM declare their allegiance to objectivity and their mission to 'promote global dialogue, tolerance and understanding' (OWM, 2012b), while Armstrong's stated intention for OWTV is 'to harness the democratic potential of the internet to promote sustainable development and human rights' (Plunkett, 2002).
[30] OneWorldGroup fair slightly better in this respect, insisting on their ethical screening process for potential associates, although they still include Vodafone – one of the principle corporations involved in UK tax avoidance activities and responsible for shutting down Egypt's internet during its 2011 revolution – among their corporate partners (see Syal (2011), Shenker (2011) and OneWorld Group (2012b)).

community training and outreach initiatives in order to fulfil its 'social aims': to 'increase people's

confidence and self-worth, reduce isolation and help people develop creatively' (Spill Media, 2012a).

These 'social aims' have resulted in its collaboration with Undercurrents on Swansea Telly, for

instance, a 'digital inclusion project' teaching 'all aspects of media production' to older people, the

recently unemployed and social housing tenants (Spill Media, 2012b).

Other access organisations, such as WORLDbytes: School of Citizen TV (based in London),

Hi8us (in London and the Midlands), or the Oxford-based InsightShare, produce more explicitly

political work closer to the oppositional values of video-activism. WORLDbytes, for instance, is an

'online Citizen TV channel' whose slogan ('Don't shout at the telly – change the message on it!'

(WORLDbytes, 2010)) is comparable to the well-known Indymedia phrase, 'don't hate the media, be

the media' (cited in Fountain, 2007, 40). Insightshare, a 'participatory video' organisation that works

predominantly in 'developing' countries, also produces access video with more overtly political

content, often around themes of climate change and sustainability (InsightShare, 2012a). Founded by

Nick and Chris Lunch in 1999, InsightShare also has roots in 1990s video-activist culture and

maintains close working relationships with other contemporary British video-activists. Nick Lunch

regularly attended weekends at the Lacket, Zoe Young's series of gatherings for oppositional

filmmakers around the turn of the decade (Young, 2011, 5), for instance, and was in touch with

Undercurrents when the latter organisation was still based in Oxford (Campbell, 2011, 15). More

recently, in June 2012 InsightShare, along with Mick Fuzz and other participants from the

Transmission network (see below), were among twelve organisations from around the world to attend

the 'video4change Retreat and Sprint' gathering co-hosted by EngageMedia, a video-activist

collective based in Australia and Indonesia (but with connections to British video-activist culture via

Undercurrents),[31] and WITNESS, the international video-activist NGO based in the US (Cinco,

2012).[32]

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[31] Anna Helm of Engage Media worked with Undercurrents in the late 1990s and during that time got to know
Fuzz, Young and others in Britain's video-activist culture (Young, 2011, 6).
[32] InsightShare are also connected to the British feature documentary community, having trained Chris Atkins
(director of *Taking Liberties* (2007), discussed in Chapter 4) as a teenager and drawing on his skills in
contemporary InsightShare projects (InsightShare, 2012b).

Aggregators of Oppositional Media

Mick Fuzz and the Transmission network are two aspects of the video-activist field composed of aggregators of oppositional media. Fuzz runs Clearer Channel, an aggregation site based in Manchester,[33] while Transmission is an international network that was explicitly developed to address the need for online video aggregation (Young, 2010, 6). With vast numbers of individuals and groups producing video-activism, oppositional media aggregators form a key part of the contemporary video-activist landscape. Dedicated to collecting and ordering video-activism online, these sites are important sources of a whole range of oppositional media, in which video is often featured alongside other sections devoted to text, photography, radio, events, links to other groups and so on. While Indymedia[34] is perhaps the best known, other key oppositional media aggregators in Britain include BeTheMedia,[35] and Permanent Culture Now.[36] Political organisations also often function as video-aggregators, either with a video tab as part of their main website or by linking to their own channels on YouTube.[37]

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[33] Fuzz is an old-hand in British video-activism and oppositional media, having worked with Undercurrents and Conscious Cinema in the latter half of the 1990s. Originally founded as a video distribution project in 2004 in preparation for the 2005 G8 summit (Fuzz, 2012), Clearer Channel has since then developed into a hub for Fuzz's other work as consultant, trainer, web technician and resource author for free software projects.

[34] Indymedia is an international network of oppositional media organisations known as Independent Media Centres (IMCs). Since launching to provide coverage of the anti-summit protest in Seattle in Autumn 1999, the network of IMCs has expanded rapidly and there are now IMCs in 51 countries (Halleck, 2005, 3), although most of these are concentrated in the US and Europe (Atton, 2007, 74). The first IMC in the UK was created for Mayday 2001. Known as Indymedia UK and based in London, its technical title 'IMC United Kingdom' became 'IMC United Kollektives' in 2003 to reflect that the British IMC network by then consisted of a number of local groups (Indymedia, 2004a). Of the eight active regional IMCs in Britain (Bristol, Birmingham, Northern, London, Nottinghamshire, Oxford, Scotland and Sheffield), only London, Bristol and Northern IMCs have dedicated video tabs. There is a wealth of scholarly writing on Indymedia. For more information, see Lievrouw (2011, 119-48), Salter (2009), Atton (2008, 38-40, 99-100 and 2004, 25-60), Allan (2006, 121-42), Pickard (2006a and 2006b), Bruns (2005, 81-113), Coyer (2005), Morris (2004), Meikle (2002, 88-92) and Platon and Deuze (2003).

[35] BeTheMedia was launched in 2011 as a result of a split in Indymedia UK (SchNEWS, 2011).

[36] Permanent Culture Now is closer to Clearer Channel than Indymedia or BeTheMedia in the sense that it is an online repository and archive rather than an aggregator of news. While the array of topics on the site is diverse – ranging from the decline and regeneration of Detroit to guides on one-pot cooking and essays on Multiculturalism, Semiotics and anarcho-punk – these are organised according to their relevance to permaculture, the founding principle of Permanent Culture Now and the philosophy around which the site is structured. Like Clearer Channel, the site organised into key strands, from co-operatives and the Commons to activism, self-reliance and transition, and aggregates its range of content according to those topics. Therefore, although Permanent Culture Now is structured around a very specific principle, the themes that principle encompasses allow for broad perspectives on a wide range of topics. As a result, in addition to content produced by its curators, Michael Thomas and Stephen Jones, Permanent Culture Now has become a considerable resource for the radical left in which video-activism is also prominent.

[37] For instance, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Socialist Party (SP) and left libertarian communist group, The Commune, all have designated YouTube channels hosting videos relevant to their work. The SP, The

Indeed, many video-activist organisations make extensive use of YouTube, yet this is less because of its aggregation capabilities than its advertising potential. With sixty hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute (Oreskovic, 2012), finding ways to make video-activism stand out from the range of other content of the site is difficult. Thus, video-activists' use of YouTube (and other corporate media sites like Twitter or Facebook) is mainly as a means of advertising their main site, or as an easy means of hosting videos which can then be embedded elsewhere.[38] However, there have also been attempts to develop alternatives which, like YouTube, aggregate video exclusively but which are more suited to the political interests of video-activism (such as visionOntv, see below).

At present the most significant tool used by British video-activists to aggregate video is Miro Community. Developed in the US by the Participatory Culture Foundation (PCF) and launched in 2010, Miro Community is a template video-aggregation website (licensed under the GNU/AGPL)[39] that allows its users to collect video from elsewhere on the web and curate it to suit their interests. While this means the project is suitable for a wide range of uses, the values of the PCF are especially suited to those of the radical left. For example, its flagship project, Miro (formerly known as Democracy Player), is a free software downloader and player licensed under the GNU/GPL in accordance with the Foundation's agenda to 'enable and support independent, non-corporate creativity and political engagement' (Granneman, 2010, 232). Given these political values it is unsurprising that the project has been quickly adopted by video-activists in Britain.

This adoption is even less surprising considering that the development of online video aggregation tools was something the British video-activist community was interested in for some time prior to the launch of Miro Community. In 2006, for instance, Transmission was set-up as a global network of video-activists and programmers interested in 'developing an online video distribution tool

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Commune and Counterfire also embed YouTube videos uploaded by various sources on their own sites under designated video tabs. Arguably a result of a '"luddite" tendency amongst the anarchist media' (Atton, 2002, 6), anarchist groups are much less likely to use video. *Libcom*, the libertarian communist resource and archive, contains news and analysis of workers' struggles as well as over 10,000 pamphlets, articles and books but no video. Similarly, the Anarchist Federation (A-Fed) and the Solidarity Federation (SolFed) have no video tabs on their sites, though a few branches have created YouTube channels. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) has a designated space for video on their site, IWWTV, but this is a meagre affair with only a handful of videos at the time of writing.

[38] For a discussion of YouTube's failings with regards to political film see Juhasz (2008). Book-length studies of YouTube include Strangelove (2010), Snickers and Vonderau (2009) and Burgess and Green (2009).

[39] The Affero General Public License is a variation of the GNU/GPL, and was developed in 2007 to close potential loopholes allowing for copyleft practises to be evaded.

for social justice and media democracy' (Transmission, 2012). Initiated by EngageMedia, Transmission also included video-activists and organisations such as Mick Fuzz, visionOntv, Zoe Young (of Conscious Cinema) and *Mute* (a London-based magazine on radical culture and politics).

While the Transmission network is ongoing (Fuzz, 2012),[40] its plans to develop video aggregation tools had not come to fruition by the time the PCF announced the Miro Community project in 2008 (as Miro Local TV). As a result, Miro Community was quickly adopted by a number of video-activist groups in Britain after an initial trial across five US cities. For instance, international beta testing began in July 2010[41] and by December that year Clearer Channel had already developed a Miro Community template. Each of the channels on visionOntv also use the Miro Community template (see below), as does the Merseyside Street Reporters Network (which visionOntv helped to establish), access projects such as Swansea Telly and aggregators like the Bristol Community Channel (set-up by iContact in 2011).

Irrespective of the platforms with which contemporary video-activist groups choose to distribute their work, the network of connections that exists across the field as a whole demonstrates the importance of considering radical video-activist groups in the broader context of which they are a part. Far from operating in isolation from one another, video-activist NGOs, access organisations, oppositional media aggregators and radical video-activists are interconnected in myriad ways. As we have seen, contemporary collaborations span these categories, perpetuating relationships that often stretch far back into previous cultures of radical film history, not only in Britain but further afield. That said, despite their fluidity these categories remain helpful topological markers for navigating the video-activist field, as we will see from the exploration of the five most radical video-activist groups that constitute my focus for the rest of this chapter.

Undercurrents

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[40] The network itself was never intended to be a singular entity undertaking projects of its own. As such, although Transmission's website is technically dormant at present, the ongoing projects of its participants – some of which, like Indymedia, are networks in themselves – sustain Transmission's potential to facilitate collaborations in the future.

[41] From personal correspondence with the PCF. Beta testing is a stage in software development prior to its final release, though many free software projects observe perpetual beta, allowing the software to be constantly improved and updated throughout its lifetime.

Undercurrents is a suitable starting point not only because of its historical importance in British video-activist culture, but also because in many ways it has, like OWM and OWTV, also tempered the degree of radicalism in its work in order to attract the funding it depends upon to exist. However, Undercurrents has also managed to maintain a radical strand to its activities. Indeed, despite undergoing a series of significant changes since its newsreel period, Undercurrents remains one of the key organisations in British video-activism. However, it is now quite different from its original incarnation. Paul O'Connor is the only founding member left at Undercurrents,[42] for instance, which now consists of only two other full-time members: ex-Film Studies lecturer Helen Isles, who joined the organisation in 1997, and accountant-turned-filmmaker, Dee Murphy, who joined in 2012.

In addition to these personnel developments, Undercurrents has also undergone geographic and structural changes. After moving from London to Oxford in 1995, Undercurrents is now based in Swansea, where it moved in 2000. Since moving to Swansea the structure of the organisation has also shifted from a not-for-profit company to a registered charity. The decision to switch to charitable status was, like many of the changes at Undercurrents since the 1990s, motivated by financial concerns. As O'Connor says, '[i]t's a lot easier to get funding for charities' (2010, 7). Indeed, shaping the organisation to attract potential funders has proved critical to Undercurrents' survival since the end of the newsreel period. According to O'Connor, Undercurrents 'can raise funds through the charity and do training projects ... so long as we put it in the right language. That's what we've learnt: how to put radical activism into language that suits funders' (2010, 7).

Although he claims this has not affected the degree of radicalism in their work, since the end of the 1990s Undercurrents has adopted a bilateral approach to its video-activism in which its more radical work is subsidised by commissions for more commercial activities and for its work as an access organisation. Rarely is this dual practice so clearly defined, however. As we will see, Undercurrents' political perspectives are not effaced altogether from their commercial activities, but are instead present as part of the background to or context of the films, implicit rather than explicit.

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[42] Of the other three founding members (Thomas Harding, Jamie Hartzell and Zoe Broughton) only Broughton still works as an independent filmmaker. Hartzell works in property management, letting properties to ethical businesses. Harding married Deborah Cackler, who also worked in distribution for Undercurrents in the 1990s, and they emigrated to the US in the mid-2000s, where they run their own business.

The distinction between commercial and oppositional activities is also blurred by the fact that Undercurrents' more overtly political projects consistently include attempts to make oppositional video-activism financially sustainable in shifting technological contexts. Nevertheless, this bilateral structure does broadly characterise Undercurrents' contemporary formation. In what follows, I explore these commercial activities before looking at the variety of more oppositional projects they have allowed Undercurrents to pursue.

Undercurrents' access work constitutes a key aspect of its attempt to maintain financial stability, and has seen the organisation develop 'a host of community media projects' (O'Connor, 2011).[43] As well as Swansea Telly, these have included ongoing citizen journalist training workshops, the Broad Horizons training project for women filmmakers (which led to a DVD release in 2006) and educational programmes for disadvantaged young people. As with other access organisations, the nature of this work – in which the focus is on imparting skills rather than producing oppositional content – often results in much less overtly political films than those Undercurrents produced in the 1990s.

In addition to its access work, Undercurrents has produced several commissioned films which also adopt a less outspoken approach to political issues than its earlier work. Many of these were originally released as online mini-series, consisting of five-minute episodes subsequently edited together as feature films and sold on DVD. Undercurrents developed this format with *Bike2Oz* (2000), which documented a couple's emigration to Australia by bicycle. The first web series they produced commercially, however, was *Living in the Future: Ecovillage Pioneers* (2006). Originally commissioned by the Community Channel, *Living in the Future* is an ongoing series of five-minute

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[43] Expanding into more access oriented projects was an approach also taken by Harding and Cackler after they left Undercurrents just before the end of its newsreel period. Founded in 1998, the Oxford Channel was a Restrictive Service License (RSL) television channel intended to serve local, community based news and entertainment to the population of Oxford. However, after only a year the channel ran into financial difficulties and was sold to a private media company, Milestone Group, who brought in their own staff and sacked everyone involved with setting up the project. Launched in 1998, RSLs are issued by Ofcom and permit local organisations to broadcast to a limited catchment area. Throughout the 2000s RSLs were issued across the country, but by the end of that decade most had ceased broadcasting. As Roddy Mansfield (2000) argues (and as the Oxford Channel exemplifies), this was largely a result of RSLs being forced to compete with multinational media conglomerates, despite the fact that providing local television services necessarily involves serving minority audiences. However, new legislation promising more 'market incentives' for local television licenses was passed in 2012. The first round of bidding for these licenses ended in August that year and the services they provide aim to be on air by the end of 2013 (DCMS, 2012).

films exploring attempts to develop a low-impact 'ecovillage' in the Welsh countryside.[44] This was followed by *A-Z of Bushcraft* (2009), about outdoor survival skills, and two other series produced in collaboration with Tantrwm (another video production company based in Wales): the *A-Z of Climbing* (2009) and the *A-Z of Climate Change* (2009). In the same year Undercurrents also produced another mini-series independently, called *On the Push: A Surfer's Guide to Climate Change* (2009). As many of their titles suggest, while these projects are often broadly aligned with Undercurrents' original environmentalist ethos, the explicitly oppositional stance of the newsreel has been discarded in favour of a more subtle approach designed to appeal to a wider audience base.

For instance, *Bike2Oz* includes some radical politics by virtue of the political orientation of the cyclists.[45] As well the environmentalist politics which motivated them to cycle rather than fly in the first place, some of their commentary on the trip is also from a broadly leftwing perspective. Ultimately though, the political aspect is secondary to the adventure and excitement of their journey. Similarly, *Living in the Future* begins with a brief history of the 1750 Enclosures Act and the displacement of working people from common land, but any explicitly political perspective is quickly effaced in favour of the practical aspects of low-impact living and the efforts of the group to obtain planning permission. While the *A-Z of Climate Change* includes introductory episodes on direct action and the limitations of voting, the environmentalist sentiment in the series on climbing and bushcraft is fleeting. *On the Push* was partly produced as an access project in which local teenagers participated in workshops on filmmaking and climate change. Although the film acknowledges climate change as a man-made problem, it falls far short of the more radical critique one would expect of oppositional filmmaking, such as identifying capitalism's drive for profit and growth as one of the primary forces preventing an adequate engagement with the problem.

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[44] In many ways this is a continuation of the practice Undercurrents developed in the 1990s of selling footage to television. Although the Community Channel is undoubtedly a progressive initiative – dedicated to broadcasting locally produced content addressing the concerns of local communities – it is also majority funded by the Cabinet Office and includes Warner Bros., BSkyB, News International and the Daily Mail and General Trust (DMGT) conglomerate as its corporate partners. While these are hardly the most radical of associates, a funding stream provided by the more progressive initiatives of reactionary media corporations is still arguably a valuable source of income.

[45] The male half of the couple is Kevin Doye, author of the *Do or Die* article that criticised Undercurrents so heavily in 1997 (Do Or Die, 1997a).

So although Undercurrents' commercial activities often circulate around political issues, the films themselves tend to avoid addressing those issues directly. Of course, this is understandable given that these films are intended to provide Undercurrents with the income it requires to survive. Making money from independent filmmaking in an era of online video is hard enough without outspoken political arguments further reducing one's chances of reaching a paying audience. As O'Connor says:

> Trying to find ways of getting the money in to make the videos is really tricky. You go down the advertising route, which we do with YouTube, which is interesting and brings in money, but you've got advertising all over the videos. We tried sponsors: getting a few companies to sponsor a particular video series or something, and that's worked to a limited degree. But we're in this digital age now and you just can't charge for online video. It just doesn't work. (2011, 5)

Indeed, so competitive is the online marketplace that Undercurrents has, like other progressive artists (such as Radiohead, for example, or the science-fiction writer and free software activist Cory Doctorow), made much of its work available online for free and given audiences the chance to decide for themselves what to pay for it – a practice known as 'participative pricing' (Kim, Natter and Spann, 2009). For instance, the mini-series of *Living in the Future*, *A-Z of Bushcraft* and *On the Push* are all available for free online at the same time as they are available to purchase from Undercurrents' website. According to O'Connor, this strategy is proving financially sustainable:

> By putting the series online for free we're basically saying: 'if you like this series, buy the DVD'. And that keeps us in the frame. Like the *Bushcraft* series. That sold a thousand videos. And we put it out there saying: 'if you like what you see on this show, pay what you like for the DVD'. So you think 'well, okay, that's kept us going to make the next one'. (2011, 5)

The absence of any overt political statements in these films is no doubt an important part of their commercial success, but it is the financial stability provided by these commercial activities that has enabled Undercurrents to pursue other, more explicitly oppositional projects. Indeed, Undercurrents has been producing radical video-activism alongside its more commercial work since the end of the newsreel in 1999, resulting in more than a decade of oppositional filmmaking which would not exist were it not for this strategic financial approach.

Undercurrents' first oppositional project after the final edition of the newsreel (April 1999) was a collaboration with Bristol's iContact Video. Released in July that year, *J18: The Story the Media Ignored* is a celebration of the June 18th Carnival Against Capitalism in London and the efforts of oppositional media activists to combat the misrepresentation of the protest in the mainstream media. The overt articulation of political arguments in this film is in stark contrast to Undercurrents' more commercial ventures. Beginning with the satirical, Hollywood-style trailer made to publicise the event, *J18* consists mostly of a montage of footage of the event, spliced with anti-capitalist quotations[46] and vox pops of those involved (from Samba musicians and Meat is Murder campaigners to masked black bloc activists and nervous looking bankers) all cut to an upbeat musical overlay. While the film maintains the humorous, tongue-in-cheek tone of the newsreel, perhaps the most explicit demonstration of its radical perspective is its celebratory portrayal of property destruction – as upbeat folk music plays over footage of a badly damaged McDonald's store – and condemnatory representation of armed riot police attacking crowds of peaceful, unarmed protestors.[47]

J18 is also indicative of the shifting technological context in which it was made, however. A thirty minute video released on VHS, the film also includes footage of the event being streamed live on a computer screen, capturing one of the first times the internet was used to broadcast protest online. This technological context saw Undercurrents enter a period of uncertainty. With web video

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[46] For example: 'Cap'italism *n. A system by which the few profit from the exploitation of the many'* and 'the wealth of just 447 billionaires exceeds the annual income of half the world's population'.

[47] The film also features a notable instance of sousveillance (or inverse surveillance), as a police officer not wearing identification numbers on his collar refuses the camerapersons requests that he identify himself by pretending he cannot hear the obviously audible questions.

on the horizon, VHS was evidently soon to be defunct, but this process took a number of years to play

out, leaving video-activism in a period of flux. As O'Connor says,

> Indymedia was out there and things were going online and you were thinking 'great, we're
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> going to have videos on the web'. That's partly why we stopped doing the cassettes, because
>
> we realised that 'right, all the videos are going to go online, this is the future'. [But] video on
>
> the web didn't take off for another four, five years. YouTube was 2005. So we were in this
>
> doldrums for a couple of years not really knowing what our distribution model was. (2011, 5)

One of Undercurrents' first responses to this context was to attempt to develop the online TV studio,

Pirate TV. Little evidence remains of this ambitious and experimental project, a two-hour weekly

webcast showing an eclectic mix of video-activism and dance music produced in association with the

record label, Ninja Tune. Despite running for nearly a year, Pirate TV was eventually abandoned

because of low audience numbers. Streaming online was still an innovative and ambitious use of the

internet at that time, and although it was a valuable learning experience for those involved its most

immediate lesson was that web video was not yet viable. As Hamish Campbell (working with

Undercurrents at that time) says, 'it was great fun so we kept doing it. But its social impact was zero

... it showed us the pointlessness of doing internet video' (2011, 2).

Realising that online video was not yet feasible, the first years of the 2000s saw

Undercurrents move offline and begin distributing video-activism on CD-ROM. Ruff Cutz, as this

next project was called, ran for the two or three years until web video became a more practical

possibility.[48] Indeed, the low cost and highly reproducible nature of CD-ROM saw it become the

format of choice for oppositional media activists in Britain (Campbell, 2011, 3) and around the world

(Lovink and Schneider, 2003, 1). Whilst experimenting with online video and CD-ROM, however,

Undercurrents also continued with VHS productions, releasing *Undercurrents 10 ¾* in 2002 in

another collaboration with iContact.

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[48] Although not cited as part of the Ruff Cutz series, Undercurrents also released *Informed Dissent*, their
interview with Noam Chomsky, on CD-ROM in 2002.

The title of the video is revealing of how Undercurrents, caught between shifting technological and political contexts, were unsure of how to proceed. According to O'Connor,

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 ... So we thought 'that's it, we're not doing anymore videos until we've worked out what we're doing, how we're going to survive, all that kind of thing'. (2011, 6)

However, this left *Globalisation and the Media* (2002) – O'Connor's recently finished film about that shifting technological context and its ramifications for oppositional media – without a distribution platform. Undercurrents had also yet to release an older collaborative film on the anti-summit protest in the Czech Republic, *Revolting in Prague: IMF Protests 2000* (2000).[49] O'Connor therefore agreed when Ben Edwards from iContact (one of the groups involved in the latter project),[50] suggested they release *Globalisation and the Media* and *Revolting in Prague* with two other short films as another compilation. Rather than resurrect the original newsreel, however, they decided to release the tape as *10 and ¾* rather than *Undercurrents 11* (O'Connor, 2010, 5-6). As with its title, the content of the tape is also indicative of the uncertainty surrounding its production context. While the two short films – consisting of comedian Mark Thomas ridiculing the police in 'Mark Thomas and the Met' and various amusing anti-GM actions in 'Stop the Crop' – are much closer to the newsreel's blend of playfulness and militancy, the longer films are much more serious and conventional in their rhetoric and formal characteristics. Given the context of tape's production, such incongruity is apt.

Although it was reluctant to resurrect the original newsreel, Undercurrents attempted two other newsreel projects in the first half of the decade. The first was based on a project by the US-

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[49] Strictly speaking, these longer works should be discussed in Chapter 4, which explores oppositional feature documentary since 2000. However, given the blurred boundary between video-activism and feature documentary in this instance, and since Undercurrents is predominantly a video-activist organisation, I discuss them here.

[50] Which also included Mick Fuzz (who would go on to found Clearer Channel), Zoe Young (Conscious Cinema), Anna Helme (who went on to found Engage Media in Indonesia), Hamish Campbell (credited as Pirate TV) and Ninja Tune (credited with the soundtrack).

based satellite TV channel, Free Speech TV, which broadcast a weekly compilation of video-activism as the *Indymedia Newsreal*.[51] Inspired by the US project but wary of the burnout that contributed to the decline of its first newsreel, in 2002 Undercurrents launched the *Indymedia European Newsreel* by hosting a European Video-activist Gathering at which it was agreed that responsibility for editing the newsreel would be passed from group to group (Undercurrents, 2012). Despite these efforts and a £1000 donation from Free Speech TV, only one issue was produced (under Undercurrents' aegis). According to Campbell, subsequent attempts suffered from low production values and ideological infighting among the groups, and never materialised (2011, 3).

Two years later, Undercurrents again attempted newsreel production, this time with the *Undercurrents News Network* (*UNN*, 2004). Once more however, although it was intended to be distributed regularly on DVD, only one issue was released before the project was abandoned. Although there was a wealth of video-activism (and feature documentary) being produced at this time,[52] Undercurrents did not have the resources to sustain the project. Like the original Undercurrents newsreel, *UNN* features a variety of content from around the world, from university occupations in America and Australian activists breaking refugees out of detention centres to radical music videos, satirical remixes, animations as well as commentary by Mark Thomas and Tony Benn. However, with Harding and Hartzell gone and Campbell and Hering focusing on the Ruff Cutz project (though Campbell did undertake the design work for *UNN*), O'Connor and Broughton were the only members able to work on the project anything like full-time and as a result *UNN* took three months to produce. Combined with a technological context in which web video was looking increasingly viable, the potential life-span of a regular DVD newsreel must have seemed short indeed, and another issue was not attempted.

As well as its (somewhat limited) attempts at newsreel production, from 2000 to 2008 Undercurrents also hosted the Beyond TV film festival, a celebration of video-activism and oppositional feature documentary from the UK and around the world. As well as screening a variety

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[51] *Indymedia Newsreal* is an ongoing project in the US where it continues to be broadcast by Free Speech TV every Thursday.
[52] *UNN* also includes trailers for feature films like *The Coconut Revolution* (2000), *Non-Violence for a Change* (2001) and *Evolving Minds* (2003) (see Chapter Four).

of films, the festival hosted a number of networking events and workshops for radical filmmakers on all aspects oppositional filmmaking, from funding and distribution to editing and democratic production processes. However, problems finding a venue for the event resulted in Undercurrents taking a break from organising the festival after 2008 (O'Connor, 2011, 17), and Beyond TV has not taken place since. Nevertheless, for the eight years in which it did run, Beyond TV was undoubtedly an important platform for oppositional filmmaking and played a significant role in maintaining and developing radical film culture.

The variety of video-activist projects Undercurrents has developed since 2000 is testament to its bilateral business model, whereby its more commercial activities effectively subsidise its more overtly political work. While the former are less outspoken than Undercurrents' radical work in the 1990s, they continue to address themes of environmental justice and sustainability. Undercurrents' more recent commercial activities include short films about the Olympics with local disadvantaged young people and film educational projects with the Welsh Arts Council, as well as feature films on eco-housing initiatives, with *Ben Law's Roundwood Timber Framing* (2010), and new films on the eco-village series. Since *UNN*, meanwhile, Undercurrents' more explicitly oppositional activities have been in conjunction with visionOntv, an organisation which Undercurrents co-founded with Hamish Campbell and Richard Hering in 2008. Before looking at that project in more detail, I first want to explore *SchMOVIES*, the radical video-activist organisation in Brighton who stepped into the gap left by Conscious Cinema, Undercurrents closest contemporaries in the 1990s.

SchMOVIES

SchMOVIES is the video-activist 'unit' of the Brighton-based radical newsletter, SchNEWS (Light, 2008). Set-up in 2004 when activist and SchNEWS journalist Paul Light stepped into the gap left by Conscious Cinema, SchMOVIES has since produced two feature documentaries and six DVD compilations of 'over two hundred short direct-action/campaign films' (Light, 2008), ranking it among the most prolific oppositional filmmaking groups in Britain. Unlike other contemporary radical video-activist groups, however, SchMOVIES is a one-person operation which Light runs in his spare time when not working for his film production company, Bite Size Movies (BSM). While this limits

SchMOVIES' output to roughly one compilation of video activism per year,[53] SchMOVIES reduced production rate also means it requires fewer resources to run, enabling Light to donate any money made by SchMOVIES' films to the primary project: the publication of SchNEWS. Uniquely among contemporary video-activist groups, SchMOVIES is thus a practically self-sufficient video-activist subsidiary which exists to support to another radical media project.

Of course, one of the reasons SchMOVIES is a little drain on resources is because it can draw on the infrastructure of BSM. As we have seen, supporting video-activism with more commercial activities is similar to Undercurrents' contemporary strategy. Like the relationship between Undercurrents' commercial activities and its more radical video-activism, BSM's films also lack the outspoken radicalism of SchMOVIES, albeit without losing focus on issues relevant to the political left. However, while in this respect BSM operates very much like the commercial side of Undercurrents, Light's separation of the two practices into distinct companies derives from SchMOVIES' much closer connection to SchNEWS and Conscious Cinema in the 1990s, for which media activism was (and, in the case of SchNEWS, still is) a strictly voluntary and unpaid activity. In this way, SchMOVIES' roots also lie in the video-activist culture of the 1990s and many aspects of its contemporary practice result from that lineage. Appreciating SchMOVIES' role in contemporary video-activism thus requires a more detailed understanding of Light's political development among Brighton's anarchist groups at that time.

Originally from Poole, Light's political orientation was forged in the context of the Poll Tax, the anti-roads protests and the Criminal Justice Bill (CJB). It was the CJB that really 'galvanised' his politics (Light, 2012, 1), however, and his participation in this struggle saw Light to move to Brighton to join the Justice? campaign. As we saw in Chapter One, the two oppositional media projects aligned with the Justice? campaign were Conscious Cinema and SchNEWS. As well as organising actions like the squatters' estate agents, SchLETS (SchNEWS, 1996c), Light began writing for SchNEWS and, unsurprisingly given that SchNEWS and Conscious Cinema were produced from adjacent offices,[54] the two organisations began working together. Continuing a tradition that began even before the

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[53] These are *SchMOVIES DVD Collection* (2005), *V For Video-activist* (2006), *Take Three* (2007), *Uncertified* (2008) and *Raiders of the Lost Archive, Vol. 1* and *2* (2008-2011).
[54] The rent for which was paid for by the Brighton-based band, The Levellers (McCormick, 1998).

printed version of SchNEWS (SchNEWS, 1995), 'SchLIVE' performances of the newsletter were organised in various pubs and social centres in Brighton and the surrounding area (SchNEWS, 1995), and these shows were punctuated with Conscious Cinema screenings.

Conscious Cinema's approach to video-activism provided the model which Light would later adopt for SchMOVIES. In order to mark the newsletter's tenth anniversary in 2004, SchNEWS organised a celebratory tour[55] of the UK's activist scene as well as the publication of a book (SchNEWS, 2004a) and a film commemorating the achievements and struggles of the previous decade. Having learned the basics of filmmaking working with Conscious Cinema in the 1990s, Light was responsible for the film (which became the feature documentary, *SchNEWS at Ten: The Movie* (2005) (see Chapter Four). The making of this film led to the founding of SchMOVIES. As well as filming on the tour itself and recording the numerous actions that took place during it, Light also issued a public request for footage from the last ten years of direct action protest (see SchNEWS, 2004b). Consequently, he accumulated enough footage to begin releasing short films as well as putting together material for the feature. As he says,

> I was filming on the [SchNEWS at Ten] tour and out of that came lots of actions via the places we were going – so I was filming them, too. And when we got back I thought, 'there's loads of little films here, not just those for the tour but lots of individual ones as well. Why aren't we putting these out?' So that's how it started really, I just ended up travelling round with a camera and filming and putting the films together, [but] we nicked the blueprint from Conscious Cinema – short-ish, direct action, campaign-based films. (Light, 2012, 2-3)

SchMOVIES is thus the direct descendant of Conscious Cinema.[56] As we saw in Chapter One, the relationship between Conscious Cinema and Undercurrents was somewhat strained at times, with

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[55] This was in fact the second SchNEWS tour, the first having taken place in 1996. For more details, see Indymedia (2004b).

[56] Indeed, its close relationship to 1990s video-activist culture is evident not only from the archival footage of Conscious Cinema screenings in *SchNEWS at Ten* but also from the manifest presence of Undercurrents' archive in the film (viewers familiar with Undercurrents' work will recognise many clips from their newsreels). Despite an occasionally tense relationship in the 1990s, Undercurrents, SchNEWS and SchMOVIES have

Undercurrents perceived as 'the McDonalds of activist video' (Young, 2011, 2). Although their relationship was amicable for the most part (and remains so today), Conscious Cinema differentiated itself from Undercurrents' more professional orientation by its alignment with the dominant anarchist ideology of the time. As argued in Chapter One, this particular strand of anarchism foregrounded direct action over and above other aspects of anarchist thought, a tendency described in the moniker 'do-it-yourself' or 'DiY culture' (McKay, 1998). Thus, while SchMOVIES is distinct from Conscious Cinema in a number of ways, the influence of the earlier group and the ideology of DiY culture remain central to SchMOVIES' contemporary practice.

That Light runs SchMOVIES singlehandedly when not working in his professional capacity at BSM is one of the primary differences between SchMOVIES and Conscious Cinema. As with Undercurrents' commercial projects, while BSM's work avoids articulating explicitly political arguments, its films often have much in common with the community-oriented, environmentalist politics of the left. Described as a 'community and campaign-based' production company (BSM, 2012a), since 2008 BSM has produced a number of short films promoting, for example, community allotment or recycling projects, and in 2009 produced a series on 'green issues and services in the Sussex area' (BSM, 2012b). It has also produced films for Brighton Council's community engagement programme and for charitable groups focusing on drug and alcohol rehabilitation, family intervention support, and community health and well-being. In addition to these commissions, BSM also operates as an access organisation. As well as running a number of filmmaking courses for adults and children throughout the year and offering one-to-one tuition, for instance, BSM organise the annual Court Farm Kids Course, a weekend workshop at a local community centre teaching film skills to travellers' children and their friends and families.

In this respect SchMOVIES bears close resemblance to Undercurrents' contemporary formation, yet the clear distinction between Light's professional work and his work as an oppositional video-activist derives from his alignment with SchNEWS and Conscious Cinema in the 1990s. Although there is also the practical advantage that BSM's commercial clients will not be discouraged

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remained close. Undercurrents accompanied SchNEWS on its 2004 tour, for example, promoting the newly released *UNN* (Sheffield Indymedia, 2004), while O'Connor and Light are planning to work together on the digitisation of Undercurrents' archive (Light, 2012, 1).

by the radicalism in SchMOVIES' films, BSM and SchMOVIES are primarily kept separate so as to underscore the fact that SchMOVIES is, like Conscious Cinema before it and SchNEWS today, a definitively unpaid, voluntary pursuit. Conscious Cinema, for instance, would not charge for its videos, recording the newsreel onto second-hand VHS tapes or tapes bootlegged from London production houses (Conscious Kev cited in SchNEWS, 2004a, 43), and then sending them to activist groups for free. Similarly, SchNEWS is also unambiguous about the its approach to funding: 'SchNEWS is run on a voluntary basis – no one gets paid ... we reckon to be spending around £24,000 a year [and] rely entirely on subscriptions, benefit gigs and our readers' generosity to keep us afloat' (SchNEWS, 2012). Indeed, Light's desire to continue to run SchMOVIES according to this ethos is what gave rise to BSM in the first place. When he began to receive offers of paid employment in his capacity as SchMOVIES in 2006, Light founded BSM a year later in order to take commissions as a professional filmmaker and ensure SchMOVIES would remain a voluntary endeavour. Thus, as he says, BSM is

> kind of an offshoot really, because I was starting to get work from other sources. And I was thinking 'this isn't a SchMOVIE, they want to pay me money and I don't do SchMOVIES for money'. It's as simple as that. I don't do that for money and I have a clear divide between SchNEWS and SchMOVIES and my work, my other work. So, I could get a commission for a film from an NGO or something like that – that would be under Bite Size Movies, that's my job. SchMOVIES is video-activism which is unpaid, but obviously it's what I do, it's my passion and I think it's a good thing to do. But the two are distinct. (2012, 4)

This determination that his video-activist work should remain distinct from his commercial activities derives from a political conviction forged in the context of 1990s direct action. Although his professional work is largely what enables SchMOVIES to continue as a video-activist organisation, the desire to isolate the profit motive from activities motivated by passion and political conviction is characteristic of the anarchist oriented, do-it-yourself approach to media activism that Light inherited from SchNEWS and Conscious Cinema.

Despite the association of anarchism with non-hierarchical modes of organisation, typical of this do-it-yourself approach is a belief in the centrality of political action over how that action is organised or the kinds of social relations it engenders. This is epitomised in SchNEWS' tagline – 'a single act of defiance is worth a thousand words' (cited in McKay, 1998, 11) – which was adapted for *SchNEWS at Ten: The Movie* to read 'a single act of defiance is worth a thousand feet of film'. This privileging of action also characterises SchMOVIES' mode of production. Although Light draws on footage from other video-activists, the post-production and distribution of that material is largely his responsibility, and this haphazard, informal, DiY structure allows him to run SchMOVIES efficiently.

Indeed, with the support of BSM's infrastructure, Light is able to fund SchMOVIES primarily from a series of monthly public screenings held at Brighton's social centre, The Cowley Club.[57] With the donations from the screenings helping to fund SchMOVIES, any proceeds made from the DVDs are put towards the publication of the newsletter. In its role as a practically self-sufficient subsidiary providing financial support to SchNEWS, SchMOVIES is distinct from Conscious Cinema (as well as more contemporary video-activist organisations). However, the emphasis on public screenings as a means of stimulating political action was shared by both groups. Conscious Cinema's attitude in the 1990s, for instance, was that

> the videos would be shown in community settings – getting away from people watching
> things by themselves at home – because often you feel unable to do anything as an individual.
> We wanted people to watch 'em in group settings so they could discuss what they had seen
> and work together and take action! ('Conscious Kev' cited in SchNEWS, 2004, 43)

Likewise, Light recognises the political importance of holding screenings: 'it's that screening angle that I'm really into, there's not enough of that. You need the events to galvanise people and get people talking about stuff' ((2012, 3).

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[57] Another organisation which shares an ethos that political activism should be separate from the profit motive, The Cowley Club is also 'run entirely by volunteers – no one gets paid, and no one is making any profit' (The Cowley Club, 2012).

So, SchMOVIES is similar to Undercurrents in that it depends upon a bilateral approach to filmmaking in which more commercial activities subsidise more overtly political work. However, along with SchMOVIES' careful distinction between those two strands of activity, many of the distinctions between the two groups stem from SchMOVIES' alignment with Conscious Cinema (rather than Undercurrents) in the 1990s and the traditions of direction action and DiY culture. This political position is the reason for SchMOVIES' emphasis on using the films 'for action', and why almost all of its work is available online for free, albeit often alongside an option to pay for it 'and help keep SchNEWS free' (SchNEWS, 2013). Clearly, Light's emphasis on public screenings derives from this political perspective. Regardless of the increased availability of oppositional documentary in the digital era, the point of radical film – to have some kind of political or social impact – remains the same, and so exhibition remains of paramount importance.

visionOntv

Developed in collaboration with Undercurrents in 2008 and officially launched in 2010, visionOntv is one of the more recent developments in contemporary video-activism, although its roots are also firmly embedded in the oppositional film culture of the 1990s. Originally set-up by O'Connor and two ex-Undercurrents members, Hamish Campbell and Richard Hering, O'Connor withdrew during the lengthy funding process to focus on his work with Undercurrents (to which visionOntv nevertheless remains affiliated). Following a successful funding bid for three members of staff, Campbell and Hering hired Mark Barto, a French filmmaker and free-software activist, and together they constitute the core staff of visionOntv.

First and foremost, visionOntv is an aggregator of online video-activism. Attempting to harness the decentralised, peer-to-peer capabilities of the internet, visionOntv's overriding aim is to develop 'the widest possible distribution of video for social change' (visionOntv, 2012). By far the most technologically progressive of the radical video-activist groups, visionOntv's approach to video-activism is two-pronged. As well as aggregating video itself, it also aims to develop what it calls an 'Open Video Network' (OVN), in which visionOntv is but one node among many in a system of

interlinked aggregators. Discussing this strategy, Campbell describes visionOntv as 'an ethical aggregator. You publish on your own – we don't centralise anything. You publish on your site, your blog, your whatever. It's then aggregated onto visionOntv according to how you tag it' (2011, 10). Once the network develops and visionOntv links to other aggregation sites, its aim is that that content will then be shared across the OVN and 'appear on everybody else's sites' (2011, 10). 'So we can build this network on which you can publish once and it will appear everywhere on every site that chooses to cover that subject. We're building the tools to do that and, although it might look like we're building a portal we're not: we're building a spoke' (2011, 10). So, in contrast to the role to which Undercurrents (and the WFM before them) aspired in the 1990s, in which they would provide a hub for the rest of the video-activist community, visionOntv aims to cultivate a video-activist culture based on the network architecture of the internet, the OVN being a web of interconnected video-activist sites, with each node in the network providing access to the content aggregated by all the others.

Although developing video aggregation tools for use by other video-activist groups is akin to the already existing Miro Community, the development of a network of *interlinked* nodes is unique to visionOntv. Miro Community allows its users to develop their own sites, but those sites function as portals, isolated hubs rather than the syndicated peer-to-peer community of the OVN. visionOntv is critical of Miro Community for this reason. As Campbell says,

> Each Miro Community is a separate island on the internet. We're not building that. What we want to build is something where all the data is aggregated into one place ... Our project is based on radically decentralising media ... on the assumption that the internet is a peer-to-peer network, not a client-server network. (2011, 17)

Of course, Miro Community is already functioning as a video aggregation tool whereas visionOntv has yet to turn its plan into reality. Thus, although they are critical of it, Campbell and Hering are also

supportive of Miro Community. Indeed, the five channels[58] that constitute visionOntv are themselves built using the Miro Community template.

With the OVN some way from being realised, visionOntv is focusing on developing its own site as an exemplary node in that network. As with the other video-activist groups, this has involved establishing sustainable funding structures for the project. Following the failure of Undercurrents' *UNN* newsreel partly because of too few people working for too little (or no) money, O'Connor, Campbell and Hering decided early on to apply for funding for visionOntv rather than attempt to make the project pay for itself exclusively. visionOntv's official status as one of Undercurrents' projects was crucial in this respect because the charitable status of the latter organisation meant they were eligible for charitable funding. As Campbell explains, it is practically 'impossible' to receive funding for explicitly oppositional video-activism, 'but you can get funding for the training and community side' (Campbell, 2011, 7).

visionOntv's funding only provides a salary for three staff working three days a week, however, and since all three members work full-time on the project their income is considerably less than a living wage. As a result, visionOntv relies heavily on voluntary labour and, as with most of the other oppositional video-activist groups, operates as an access organisation in which the provision of training provides another much needed income stream. visionOntv also supplements its income with its 'Pop-up TV Studio' (VOTV, 2012d). A continuation of the Pirate TV project Campbell and Hering developed while working with Undercurrents, this is a mobile internet television studio which offers freelance media coverage to conference and other event organisers. Like most other groups, then, visionOntv derives financial stability from a range of activities, some of which are more explicitly oppositional than others. However, as with the other groups, while not all of these activities are overtly aligned with the radical left neither are they antithetical to it. In fact, unlike Undercurrents or BSM, visionOntv consistently foregrounds the oppositional politics motivating even its most neutral activities. So, while its interpretation of radicalism is somewhat broad, visionOntv has managed to

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[58] 'Plug and Play' hosts content related to technology, 'Grassroots' is dedicated to video-activism in the UK, 'Friendly Fire' to video-activism from the US, 'Global Views' to video-activism beyond the UK and US, while 'Headmix' is for 'cultural events, products and news from around the world' (VOTV, 2012b).

combine funding with a broadly oppositional outlook, motivating its claim to be one of the 'biggest funded radical media projects in Europe' (Campbell, 2011, 13).

Describing the kind of content it wishes to aggregate, for instance, visionOntv emphasises that it subscribes to 'the broadest possible definition of "alternative"' (2012c) and is keen to aggregate all film forms. Although such an inclusive approach could potentially dilute the radicalism of the content hosted on the site, this is tempered by visionOntv's own summary of the project which emphasises the radical ethos behind it. According to its website, for instance, 'oppositional television … goes against the worn-out grain of media mega-corporations, gives a voice to the unrepresented, and promotes the social change which is necessary to save the planet' (VOTV, 2012c).[59] visionOntv's training is also, like other initiatives based around extending access to the means of representation, potentially suited to a range of political perspectives. Yet the focus of visionOntv's training is nevertheless broadly aligned with the politics of the radical left. The Merseyside Street Reporters Network was set up as a result of their training, for instance, and features videos from UKUncut actions and Liverpool's Occupy movement to demonstrations and picket lines around the city.

Similarly, visionOntv's Pop-up TV Studio can potentially cover all kinds of events, but the organisations it chooses to work with share values broadly amenable to the left. Some, like the Mozilla and Digital Shoreditch Festivals, or the London Web Summit in 2011, are oriented towards digital technologies more generally, and often only potentially related to left-wing politics. Other events, such as the Transformational Media gathering, the Netroots UK conference or the Rebellious Media Conference are much more explicitly aligned with the radical left, as are the studio shows visionOntv orchestrated for TUC demonstrations, public sector strikes and the royal wedding in 2012. Indeed, one of the first projects visionOntv undertook was part of the radical environmentalist movement, with its mobile TV studio, Climate Camp TV, providing sympathetic media coverage of the Blackheath Camp for Climate Action in 2009 (Lewis, 2009).

visionOntv's radical political orientation and its particular approach to online video-activism cannot be understood outside of the political and technological changes that took place at the turn of

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[59] This is not a case of radical rhetoric disguising a liberal project. As even the most cursory glance at the site will show, the majority of the videos on the site adopt oppositional perspectives on their subjects.

the century. Working with Undercurrents in the 1990s, Campbell and Hering experienced first-hand the coalescence of Britain's direct action community into the emergent alter-globalisation movement and took part in many of the anti-summit protests at that time.[60] The influence of this political trajectory is evident in visionOntv's adoption of the Hallmarks of Peoples' Global Action (PGA) as their guiding principles. As mentioned above, PGA was founded in 1998 and became a key organising force within the alter-globalisation movement. Initially inspired by the Zapatistas call for the international coordination of activist movements (Kingsnorth, 2003b, 73),[61] PGA is a communication tool for a network of movements and campaigns around the globe rather than an organisation itself. As such the groups affiliated to it are extremely diverse, from indigenous, peasant, landless and trade union movements in Latin America, Africa and Asia to unions, direct actions groups and environmental activists in Europe and North America (Wood, 2005, 101-2). Unequivocally oppositional, the PGA Hallmarks are the means through which such a diverse set of groups can articulate a coherent identity and express common interests and solidarity with one another. Including 'a confrontational attitude' and an 'organisational philosophy based on decentralisation and autonomy', the Hallmarks declare 'a very clear rejection of capitalism' and advocate 'direct action and civil disobedience' as their preferred mode of resistance (PGA, 2009).

The spirit of internationalist solidarity these Hallmarks are designed to express is very much a part of visionOntv's sensibility. However, while the decentralised, peer-to-peer infrastructure of the internet largely facilitated the development of PGA[62] and the alter-globalisation movement of which it is a part – and is the principle on which visionOntv is based – this technological context also gave rise to new problems. As argued above, information overload is one of the foremost of these, which visionOntv propose to solve by 'going hyper-local' (Campbell, 2011, 21), tailoring their work to the interests of local communities. The intersection of this hyper-localism with the internationalist outlook of the alter-globalisation movement is one of visionOntv's most distinguishing features, and is particularly evident in their approach to training. Actively discouraging creativity or innovation,

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[60] It was Campbell who shot the footage of Italian police smashing their way into the IMC in Genoa (Campbell, 2006), for instance, and whose testimony at the subsequent trial of the police officers contributed to their conviction (though none of the officers received jail terms).
[61] To read the call, see Marcos (1996).
[62] See Graeber (2009, 236), Atton (2004, 29-30) and Kingsnorth (2003, 76).

this 'radically different' (Hering, 2011) training model is based on the most readily available equipment – camera-phone technology – and has seen visionOntv dispense with 'everything which would confuse beginners and distract them from basic story-telling. We have produced templates for rapid-turnaround video production ... [and] have told students that they must follow the templates' (Hering, 2011).

While denying the formal or creative impulses of its trainees is certainly a controversial move, it stems from visionOntv's attempt to reconcile the challenges and problems of the networked information economy while taking advantage of its many benefits. With the templates providing a form of quality control, the training model is designed to foster communities of video-activists who will eventually develop their own nodes in the OVN. Thus syndicated to all the other nodes in the network, visionOntv's 'vision' for twenty-first century video-activism consists of a global network of aggregators aggregating hyper-local content of interest to those particular communities. Whether that vision will become a reality remains to be seen.

Reel News

Like visionOntv, Reel News is also based in London. Although established in 2006, Reel News has almost fifteen years experience in the field and is well connected to contemporary video-activist culture, in touch with visionOntv and working closely with SchMOVIES and Camcorder Guerrillas (see below), for instance. They are also well versed in the recent history of British video-activism, acknowledging Undercurrents and Conscious Cinema as 'trailblazers' of the movement and as influences on their own work (2011, 10). Like those earlier groups, Reel News is a newsreel for the radical left but, having already released its bi-monthly newsreel for seven years, it has already outlived its predecessors by some time. Not only is Reel News more prolific than any radical newsreel before it, it is also explicitly class conscious, firmly situated within working class revolutionary political traditions. Furthermore, it is funded solely by donations and sales of and subscriptions to its newsreel, and performs none of the more commercial, less overtly political activities of their contemporaries. For these reasons, Reel News is unique in the history of British video-activism. However, as with its contemporaries, Reel News also cannot be understood outside of either the

contemporary history of British video-activism or the wider socio-political context of the organisation's development.

In part, Reel News' distinctive ideological perspective derives from the trade unionist background of those involved in the collective. At present the only full-time member of the group is its founder, Shaun Dey, although there are at least seven other members and many more exist on the periphery of the organisation (Dey, 2011, 11). According to Dey, 'not just me but the other people involved in Reel News are all or have been activists and in trade unions' (2011, 8), and these roots in the labour movement are the source of Reel News' class consciousness:

> 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, 2011, 8)

Dey was thus acutely aware of the absent class paradigm when watching Undercurrents' newsreel in the 1990s. 'That was more about social and community struggles with direct action going on', says Dey, 'and I was always thinking "yeah this is good, and you can get inspiration from this and often results from it but the most serious direct action you can imagine is a mass strike"' (Dey, 2011, 8). Far from disparaging either the work of earlier video-activist groups or other forms of resistance, however, Reel News is staunchly anti-sectarian. Indeed, it attempts to support as many campaigns and struggles as it can, from

> pensioners protesting against cuts in voluntary services [and] artists and musicians looking at the world in a different way, through [to] strikes against privatisation [and] the astonishing movements in Latin America which have brought down governments through uprisings, mass direct action and general strikes. (Reel News, 2012)

As the reference to Latin America indicates, Reel News' ideological outlook is also an internationalist one. Indeed, as with Undercurrents and visionOntv, the struggles of the alter-globalisation movement that took place in Latin America were a direct influence on Dey, and the impetus for Reel News was forged in the midst of that moment.

In the mid-1990s, prior to the development of the alter-globalisation movement, Dey quit his job as a union representative for Unison to study lens-based media at Camberwell Art College in London. 'Unison were at best turning a blind eye to activists getting victimised and at worst collaborating with management to witch-hunt people', he says, 'so I thought I would quit while I'm ahead' (Dey, 2011, 1). At Camberwell, whilst taking part in and researching the history of student occupations, Dey explored the relationship between art and radical working class politics. Graduating from the course in 1999, this art education and his 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 after that was J18 and Seattle, and the thing that 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. That was the birth of Indymedia. So 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. (Dey, 2011, 2-3)

This he did, and following the Prague demonstration went to the G8 summit protest in Genoa the following year. According to Dey, just after Giuliani's killing at the Genoa protest, some Colombian

activists remarked on the sadness of the event, but pointed out that in Latin America people were killed in the same struggle every day (2011, 3-4). This provided the impetus for Dey to travel to Argentina, where he arrived two weeks after the 2001 uprising that toppled Fernando de la Rua'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, and together they stayed in Argentina, working with Argentinean Indymedia for six weeks.

Working with Indymedia in Europe and Big Noise in Argentina influenced Dey greatly, as did oppositional film culture in Argentina. For example, Indymedia activists at the summit protests in Prague and Genoa had practiced the pooling of their footage, from which anyone could then make their own edit.[63] Argentina Indymedia operated similar practices, and thus when Big Noise arrived Dey worked closely with them and Argentinian oppositional filmmakers to produce 'short, sharp, functional films' from the pool of footage they had shot together (Dey, 2011, 5). According to Dey, the practical skills he learned in this period were invaluable (2011, 4), but 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. (2011, 4)

Returning to Britain, Dey produced a short film about Argentina which was released through the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) as a promotional film for their journal, *International Socialism*. The film received reasonable distribution and, for a few years, Dey continued to produce films sporadically, releasing each one as a separate project and working in the meantime to fund them.

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[63] This practice, as we saw in Chapter One, dates back to the Workers' Film Movement, though the reference point for video-activists at the summit protests was the success of the technique in Seattle, Big Noise's *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (1999) being the best known example.

Frustrated by a process in which more time was spent paying for the films than producing 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. Their struggle directly inspired Dey and 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'. (2011, 5)

As with the other oppositional video-activists, however, developing a sustainable funding model for their video-activism was to be the biggest challenge they would face. This perhaps especially applies to Reel News which, unlike the other groups, would not apply for funding, offer training or sell its footage to the mainstream media.

As with the financial models of the other radical video-activists, Reel News' approach consists of a variety of advantages and drawbacks. Of the advantages to its approach, the political independence that comes with financial independence is perhaps most significant. With no need to moderate its rhetoric to appeal to more liberal funding sources, Reel News is the most outspoken of the contemporary oppositional video-activist groups. According to the Reel News website, for instance, they are '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).

Furthermore, the demands of regular newsreel production mean Reel News must dedicate its time to making the films rather than working on funding applications. Having discussed with Campbell and 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' (2011, 7). In any case, such an overtly oppositional project would be unlikely to receive funding in the first place, 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"' (2011, 70).

Reel News is also loathe to adopt the other activities with which its contemporaries attempt to supplement their income, such as training or selling footage to the media. Although Reel News has an informal policy that it will to train anyone who wants to learn, and Dey argues that political filmmakers have a responsibility to pass on the skills they have learned, he argues that this role is better left to the other groups, such as visionOntv or Undercurrents, because 'technically they're much better than us' (2011, 12). While these other groups may well be more technically proficient, Reel News is certainly sufficiently capable of offering training to other filmmakers. Their reluctance to do so comes more from what Dey describes as a 'punk attitude to filmmaking' (2011, 7). According to Dey, for instance, he 'never even learned how to use anything properly. We're just fucking nerds. I still don't know what I'm doing with a camera and the editing is a bit random, so I'm not sure how much I could ever teach anyone' (2011, 12). While this uncertainty with regards to his ability is part of the reason Reel News do not offer training as a source of income, he is also undoubtedly reluctant to charge for something done out of political commitment.

Political reasons also underpin the policy of not selling footage to mainstream news sources. According to Dey, 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 [he] wouldn't trust what they were going to do with it' (2011, 8). Citing examples

from the miners' strike and Poll Tax riots (see Chapter Three), where footage was re-edited to efface police violence and locate blame with the protestors, Dey is adamant that he would not consider selling footage to the media.

As well as refusing to charge for training other video-activists and not selling footage to the media, Reel News has also, since December 2010, systematically made all of its work available online for free, alongside an option for audiences to pay for it. According to Dey, due to differing opinions among the group the first time this practice took place was during the Copenhagen Climate talks in 2009, when the rushes were placed online at the end of each day's shooting before being sold on DVD as *Reel News 22* (2010). When the student movement began in late 2010, the feeling among the group was that placing the footage online would help build the movement. Far from hindering the organisation financially, however, it actually proved beneficial, since 'more people started seeing [the footage], and that then generated a lot more interest' (Dey, 2011, 10). Not all that interest necessarily translates into financial support, of course, but the percentage that does is enough to make the practice financially worthwhile as well.

Nevertheless, although the DVD subscription model which Reel News' currently operates is only sufficient to sustain one full-time member, the subscription rate is slowly growing. Whether or not the majority of subscribers are purchasing the DVD because they actually want to watch some or all of the films, or because they want a high-quality screening copy, or merely because (as Dey suspects), they want to support a radical newsreel project, Reel News is proof that space remains in the internet era for a newsreel based upon DVD subscription.

Camcorder Guerrillas

By far the most prolific video-activist organisation in Scotland, Camcorder Guerrillas is based in Glasgow and was founded in 2003 following the establishment of an Indymedia Scotland camp at the Faslane 'Really Big Blockade' that year.[64] Since that time it has produced more than twenty short films on a variety of radical topics, ranging from food scavenging and the politics of food waste to

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[64] Faslane is one of three operational Naval bases for the Royal Navy, and home to Britain's nuclear submarine 'deterrent' – the Trident nuclear missiles. For a report on the blockade, see Trident Ploughshares (2003).

Mayday protests, climate change, the Jewish National Fund (an organisation which, among other things, raises funds to purchase Palestinian land), and the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. Geographically furthest from the other radical video-activist groups, Camcorder Guerrillas also has fewer historical links to the video-activist culture of the 1990s. Nevertheless, it is closely connected to the other contemporary radical video-activist organisations. Indeed, Undercurrents played a significant role in helping to establish the group (Campbell, 2011, 12-13), and it has worked closely with Reel News and SchMOVIES, as well as some other emergent video-activist and access groups in Scotland, such as Plantation Productions and the Digital Desperadoes.[65]

Like visionOntv and Undercurrents, Camcorder Guerrillas puts a lot of effort into securing funding for its work. Past funders include, for example, the National Lottery Fund, the Scottish Refugee Council and the Glasgow Refugee and Migrant Network (part of Glasgow University), as well as various Glasgow City Council arts initiatives. Despite its focus on accessing funding, however, Camcorder Guerrillas, like Reel News, currently employs only one paid member (for one day a week), Tim Cowen, to take care of finance, administration and co-ordinate the collective's work. The rest of its membership is entirely voluntary, and fluctuates between a core of six and up to as many as a dozen or fifteen during periods of increased activity (Cowen, 2011, 1). Again, in this way the collective is similar to Reel News or Despite TV, the video activist group in the 1990s (see Chapter One). Camcorder Guerrillas are also similar to Despite TV in that its members organise themselves using consensus-based decision making. So, Camcorder Guerrillas draws on a number of financial and organisational strategies that we have seen in other video-activist organisations, but in its own unique way. In the remainder of this section I want to explore this combination of strategies in more detail, investigating how they intersected to provide what is, after more than a decade of the collective's existence, evidently a sustainable model for contemporary video-activism.

Since 2005 Camcorder Guerrillas has received a small regular grant from Glasgow Life, a charity supporting community arts and events in the area. Although the grant is sufficient only to cover the collective's administrative costs (including Cowen's wage) and a permanent office for their

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[65] Plantation Productions is a charity that focuses on community film and media production, while Digital Desperadoes run free filmmaking courses for women of colour, and host free public film screenings. Both are based in Glasgow.

activities, it is rare for radical video-activist groups to receive this kind of support and, as argued in Chapter One, the stability it affords should not be underestimated. As well as the grant, Camcorder Guerrillas also applies for funding on a project-by-project basis and, when successful, the group expands accordingly to meet the increased workload. Even so, the majority of that funding goes towards the costs of the collective rather than to individual members as wages (the most paid staff they have ever had has been three people for one day per week, and all the filmmaking is unpaid aside from expenses (2011, 2)).

According to Cowen, Camcorder Guerrillas' funding applications benefit significantly from the collective having written up some key working practises into formal policies, since an official constitution or similar document helps to reassure potential funders of their legitimacy (2011, 2). If the applications are successful, these formal policies also help the collective to maintain its organisational structure when the increased funding sees its membership expand. One of the most important of these policies is Camcorder Guerrillas' commitment to using consensus-based decision making, in which all members of the group will agree on a decision collectively before any action is taken.[66] Of course, consensus-based decision making can take considerably longer than voting (and may not always be practical as a result), but its advantages are arguably crucial for voluntary groups like Camcorder Guerrillas whose success depends upon the commitment of their members. For instance, reaching consensus has the advantage of avoiding the divisiveness that may stem from majority voting methods, and therefore allows all members of the group to take ownership over the decisions that have been made and the work that results from it, irrespective of skill or experience. With roughly half the collective consisting of experienced filmmakers, and the group as a whole aspiring towards 'professional' quality productions (Cowen, 2011, 5), this is all the more important. Indeed, ensuring the efforts of all members of the group are recognised equally manifests itself in another of Camcorder Guerrillas' policies, which is that all members of the collective are credited on all of their films (Cowen, 2011, 1).

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[66] In fact, Camcorder Guerrillas actually operate using a system called 'consensus minus one', which differs from full consensus because more than one member is required to block decisions. Although this has been criticised for allowing majority rule by another name, in practice most groups, including Camcorder Guerrillas, find that it is a modification that does not need to be used, and reach full consensus regardless (Cowen, 2011, 2).

The voluntary nature of the group has also seen them adopt another policy which suited Despite TV in the 1990s. As Cowen argues, because the collective relies upon the voluntary labour of those involved, ensuring that all members are passionate about the projects on which they embark is paramount (Cowen, 2011, 3). Thus, like Despite TV, Camcorder Guerrillas requires that ideas for new projects come from within the collective itself, and as a guiding principle will not take commissions (paid or unpaid) from other groups. However, this is fairly loosely interpreted, as indeed it was with Despite TV. For example, rather than just accepting a commission from NukeWatch for a film about their role in monitoring and resisting the transportation of nuclear weapons, Camcorder Guerrillas ensured that one of their own members joined the protest group so as to demonstrate their commitment not only to making the film – *Deadly Cargo* (2008) – but also to the cause it represents. Similarly, when striking nurses asked Despite TV to make a film supporting their campaign they refused, but invited the nurses to join the film collective and take the lead on that particular project themselves (Saunders, 2010, 10). Furthermore, Camcorder Guerrillas is also careful to ensure it does not lose any funding from potential commissions that are not accepted. For instance, if its members receive offers of work through the collective, but which are not suitable for the collective to carry out, those members will carry out the work privately but donate a percentage of their fee back to the collective.

So, while Camcorder Guerrillas' activities sometimes lead to more commercial work, the projects with which it is directly involved remain the work of volunteers. That said, the collective is committed to producing broadcast quality work and openly rebuff what Cowen calls 'riot porn' as 'just protest footage or agit-prop' (2011, 5). To be fair to Cowen, he is discussing quality rather than content, so although this might seem to be a key difference between Camcorder Guerrillas and other contemporary radical video-activists – most of whom produce and distribute at least some work that could be included in this category – that difference is perhaps not as pronounced as it might first seem (the 'riot porn' of groups such as Reel News or SchMOVIES is arguably high quality, for instance). Nevertheless, the emphasis on producing 'professional quality' video-activism is an important distinguishing feature of the collective (Cowen, 2011, 5). Emphasising that their work is produced by

professional filmmakers is undoubtedly appealing to their numerous sources of funding, for example, and an emphasis on high production values also appeals to audiences more used to mainstream fare.

This makes for a fairly unique combination of values in their work, which attempts to appeal to the widest audience possible without compromising the collective's oppositional politics. For example, the content of a short film like 'Skipping Dinner' (2010), which explores the act of scavenging food from commercial waste bins, radically opposes hegemonic ideas about food production, waste, and hygiene and explicitly links supermarket business models and industrialised agriculture to the burning of fossil fuels, climate change and environmental destruction. Furthermore, the appeal to the audience at the end of the film is very much within the video-activist tradition. Striving to have a practical impact in the world, the 'three simple steps for safe and easy skipping'[67] suggest the audience can also take part in 'skipping' their dinner. However, Camcorder Guerrillas' own (punning) description of the film as a 'tasteful' exploration of the practice of skipping one's food is also an accurate description of the formal qualities of the work. With its polite, well-spoken characters, inoffensive urban soundtrack and simple but elegant editing, 'Skipping Dinner' is a good indicator of the way in which Camcorder Guerrillas attempts to appeal to the widest possible audience with films that are frequently explicitly oppositional.

Indeed, Camcorder Guerrillas' attempt to appeal to a non-activist audience is another defining characteristic of the collective. While it is committed to producing oppositional films which 'start or contribute to campaigns', it is also determined that those films 'are made in collaboration with, and used by, minority or disadvantaged communities' (Camcorder Guerrillas, 2013). This determination is part of the reason for the collective's focus on video-activism, rather than feature filmmaking. As Cowen says, chief among their concerns is 'the accessibility of the films to a non-activist audience', and from the feedback from their screenings 'people like the shorter format ... because you can lose people with a longer [film]' (2011, 6). In any case, he argues, 'you can actually have as much of an impact with a twenty minute film as you can have with an hour and a half' (2011, 6). While part of the reason for producing video-activism is political, then, another reason is more pragmatic: '[w]e did

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[67] '1. Be Neat: Re-tie bags and close bins; 2. Don't Wind People Up: be prepared to make a graceful exit; 3. Trust Your Nose: be wary of meat products'.

spend quite a long time talking about the possibility of making a feature-length film about climate change but when people are doing it voluntarily [and] most of us are working full-time – and working with the Guerrillas can often be nearly full-time as well – it's just not doable' (2011, 6)).

The public-facing nature of Camcorder Guerrillas also motivates its strategy with regards to the technological context of the 21st century. As with the other radical video-activist groups, all of Camcorder Guerrillas work is available online for free on the video-sharing website, Vimeo, and it is active on corporate social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. However, while this certainly increases access to its films, Camcorder Guerrillas is also conscious of the limitations of video-activism on social media, and consequently place much emphasis on the importance of public screenings. As Cowen says,

> watching a film by yourself online does not have the same impact as going to a screening, talking to people and making connections. We're a collective whose films are based on bringing people together, and you can only go so far on social networks. It's great for spreading the word – people like UK Uncut and the way they're organising for example – but if you watch a film online what are you meant to do afterwards? By contrast, if you watch a film in a cinema you talk to people afterwards, go for a drink with them, and so on. That way you can change whole attitudes and behaviour. But you can reach a bigger audience online. (2011, 8)

Of course, while this focus on bringing people together aims to reach audiences outside of activist networks, Camcorder Guerrillas is also aware of the value of public screenings for those already aware of the campaigns and the issues the films are about. As Cowen says, a 'screening for those already involved can be a really good way of keeping up energy and engendering solidarity. So it's important to go along to activist screenings even if you're already "on message" as it were' (2011, 10).

Although Camcorder Guerrillas is not as well connected to older cultures of video-activism as the other contemporary radical groups, many of its strategies and practices can be identified in both its

contemporaries and more distant video-activist organisations. However, its particular blend of those strategies and practices is unique. Focusing on accessing funding for its work has resulted in the stability of a permanent base and a paid member to coordinate the subsequent financing of the collective and its other activities. Furthermore, while a written constitution has helped with these funding applications, it has also ensured the collective's non-hierarchical principles remain intact. These policies are undoubtedly all the more important given that Camcorder Guerrillas is composed almost exclusively of volunteers who have decided to accord responsibility for the technical aspects of film production to those with the relevant skills. While the collective's use of consensus mitigates against this decision causing hierarchical power dynamics within the group, the high-quality productions that result are intended to ensure the film's appeal to audiences outside of those already interested in the politics of the radical left.

Conclusion

This chapter has charted the contemporary landscape of British video-activism. As we have seen, this constitutes a thriving aspect of oppositional documentary culture which has nevertheless undergone significant changes as it has adapted to wider transformations in the technological, political and social spheres. However, despite these changes and the fact that contemporary video-activist culture appears quite different from that of the 1990s, numerous genealogical links connect contemporary video-activist organisations with those of the previous decade. For instance, although Undercurrents are the only organisation to have survived intact from that era, albeit in a very different form, SchMOVIES are direct descendants of Conscious Cinema and both these organisations were key influences on Reel News. An understanding of contemporary video-activism thus requires an appreciation of the video-activist culture of the 1990s. As well as these more historical connections, however, this chapter has revealed a web of interconnections across the contemporary culture of British video-activism. From the relationship between Undercurrents and visionOntv and their role in helping to establish Camcorder Guerrillas, to Reel News' collaborations with these organisations and SchMOVIES,

contemporary video-activists must be considered in light of one another if we are to understand their position in the culture as a whole.

Furthermore, the radical video-activist groups also cannot be understood in abstraction from the wider field of British video-activism of which they are a part. As I have shown, the radical groups are part of a broader culture of video-activism which has expanded rapidly as the technological landscape has facilitated the production and distribution of oppositional documentary. Despite the distinctions between radical groups, video-activist NGOs, access groups and oppositional aggregators, none of these organisations exist in isolation from the others. Considering each organisation as part of a broader spectrum of video-activism is therefore crucial, especially since the boundaries between these categories are fluid and complicated by collaborations, personal relationships and historical trajectories.

While digital technologies and the internet have facilitated the growth of the video-activist field as a whole, this technological context has also given rise to both a range of new problems and reconfigured older ones. As I have shown, one of the primary difficulties facing contemporary video-activists is that of making their work financially stable. Financial stability has always been difficult for oppositional filmmakers, of course, but in an era of online video and peer-to-peer networks these difficulties take on new forms and require fresh approaches. Almost all video-activist groups place some or all of their work online for free alongside options to pay for it, in the hope that audiences will either wish to support the producers for political reasons or be sufficiently impressed with what is available for free to purchase that which is not. These participative pricing strategies are frequently only part of more multifaceted financial strategies, however. As we have seen, many radical video-activist organisations, like Undercurrents or BSM, subsidise overtly oppositional work with more commercial productions or, like visionOntv or Camcorder Guerrillas, supplement their work by providing training or accessing funding. Nevertheless, these supplementary activities are not unavoidable. As the existence of Reel News demonstrates, adequate demand exists for a militant, class conscious newsreel to support itself exclusively from the production of radical video-activism.

Finally, the one thing all those video-activists discussed above agree upon is that, despite the availability of oppositional film online, public screenings remain as important as ever. Ultimately,

irrespective of the commercial viability of their work, video-activists and other filmmakers of the political avant-garde are driven by political motivations, and a belief in the political value of radical filmmaking: that film can have a positive social or political impact in the world. That impact depends upon bringing people together to discuss the films they have seen and the issues they raise, and hopefully take action as a result.

3   Oppositional Feature Documentary in the 1990s: Channel 4 and Oppositional Auteurs

Introduction

This chapter explores the culture of oppositional feature documentary in the 1990s, a decade in which Britain's oppositional feature filmmaking community consisted largely of two divergent strands. The first strand, addressed in section one, consists of low- or no-budget productions with limited circulation (unless broadcast) outside of the community or activist circles of which the films were a part. The second strand, addressed in section two, consists of films produced by filmmakers with distinct directorial identities. Usually better funded than their low-budget, activist-oriented counterparts, these oppositional auteurs were often connected to the mainstream film industry and sought mainstream media attention and dominant distribution platforms for their work. As we will see in Chapter Four, these two strands remain a part of contemporary oppositional feature documentary. However, the genre is today characterised by the addition of a third strand which developed from within the film industry as it responded to the changes in the television industry that took place in the 1990s. In contrast to the radicalism of low-budget oppositional filmmakers and oppositional auteurs, the films in this third category are well-funded, receive widespread distribution and are characterised by liberal-humanist ideologies. Saving that discussion for Chapter Four, I here focus on the two strands in the 1990s and the changes that took place during that decade which shaped the genre's development in the new millennium.

There is a common misconception that the broadcast of oppositional documentary on Channel 4 took place almost exclusively in the 1980s, a period of radicalism on the channel especially associated with *The Eleventh Hour* series (1982-9). However, Channel 4 in fact continued to provide a platform for radical documentary until well into the 1990s. *Critical Eye* (1990-4) was the most prominent series in this respect, broadcasting low-budget, activist-oriented oppositional documentary

to hundreds of thousands of people throughout the first half of the decade.[1] As we will see, there are a variety of reasons for the lack of attention *Critical Eye* has received. In part, it has to do with the changing context of British broadcasting in the 1990s. When it launched in November 1982, Channel 4 – in particular the Independent Film and Video Department (IFVD) – broke new ground in public-service television, broadcasting community programmes and low-budget drama alongside world cinema and politically and aesthetically radical work. Unfortunately state support for this kind of cultural diversity – finally achieved after decades of campaigning (Harvey, 1994) – was anathema to the neoliberal ideologies of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government and by the end of the 1980s the commercialisation of Channel 4 was well underway. This process took time to complete, however, and was in fact not concluded until the middle of the next decade. Nevertheless, discussions of radicalism on the channel understandably focus their attention on the early 1980s, with the unfortunate result that the astonishing array of oppositional documentary shown in the first half of the 1990s is obscured.

However, those discussions of radicalism in the 1980s also focus overwhelmingly on the aesthetic rather than the political avant-garde. As we will see, this has not only effaced the presence of political radicalism on Channel 4 in the 1990s, but it has also eclipsed the fact that the political avant-garde was as much a part of series in the 1980s which until now have been celebrated almost exclusively for their aesthetic radicalism. Explaining this argument in more detail, the first part of section one examines political and aesthetic radicalism on Channel 4 in the 1980s, while the second part focuses on the political avant-garde broadcast on the channel in the 1990s. Here, I discuss in detail *Critical Eye* and three filmmakers/groups – Despite TV, Neil Goodwin and Chris Reeves – whose work was broadcast in its first, second and fourth season respectively, before looking at the ways in which they continued to produce oppositional documentary after the demise of *Critical Eye*, albeit without the funding and exhibition support it had provided.

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[1] Audience numbers are of course hard to quantify, though Sylvia Harvey notes that *The Eleventh Hour* broadcast of *The Cause of Ireland* (Platform Films, 1983) reached an estimated 294,000 (1986, 235). Meanwhile, Al Rees (2007) claims that *The Eleventh Hour* reached audiences of half a million, and that the final series of *Midnight Underground* (1997) had audiences of 50,000 after it was moved to a post-midnight transmission (162). Since *Critical Eye* was intentionally moved to a 9pm slot to reach larger audience share (Spry, 2011, 2) it is likely to have at least reached an equivalent audience to that of *The Eleventh Hour*.

While low-budget oppositional film culture was not eradicated by the loss of its broadcast platform, it was driven further underground, distributed and shown predominantly among those already in touch with the campaigns or movements it represented. However, the 1990s also saw oppositional documentary by auteur filmmakers receive significant attention. John Pilger is one of the most established of these, having made oppositional feature documentary from the late 1960s, through the 1990s[2] and into the present day. Like Pilger, Roger Graef has also been producing groundbreaking documentary since the 1960s. Although both his relationship with the Establishment and his typically observational film style are arguably less antagonistic than Pilger's, Graef has maintained a prominent position within oppositional film culture since that time. Adam Curtis, another oppositional auteur, produced two short series in the 1990s, *Pandora's Box* (1992) and *The Mayfair Set* (1999), while some of Nick Broomfield's productions, such as *Tracking Down Maggie* (1994), could also place him in this category.

Rather than discuss these filmmakers, however, section two looks at the emergence of Franny Armstrong. Since her debut feature film, *McLibel* (1998, updated 2005), Armstrong has gone on to make some of the best publicised oppositional documentary in Britain, culminating in *The Age of Stupid* (2009).[3] Section two explores the development of her career across three films: the two versions of *McLibel* and *Drowned Out* (2002). My decision to focus on Armstrong has thus resulted in a rather elastic conception of the 1990s, which for my purposes ends in the middle of the following decade. This is justified for four reasons. First, she is a woman in an overwhelmingly male dominated industry, even within a film culture supposedly most opposed to hierarchical gender relations. Along with her contemporary, Emily James, Armstrong is one of the only female filmmakers to gain prominence as an oppositional auteur and warrants attention in this respect.

Second, she is in other ways a typical 1990s oppositional auteur, with close connections to the film industry and a carefully constructed auteur persona. Third, because her third film is a remake of her first, Armstrong is an especially interesting case-study with which to explore the development of

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[2] See *Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy* (1994), *Breaking the Mirror: The Murdoch Effect* (1997) and *Apartheid Did Not Die* (1998).

[3] *The Age of Stupid* won a Guinness World Record for the largest simultaneous film premiere, showing on sixty-two screens around the UK. http://www.spannerfilms.net/news/dedications_what_you_need

such an auteur persona. Finally, she is also well-connected to the low-budget, activist-oriented strand of oppositional documentary, and has gone on to occupy a space in contemporary feature documentary – along with Emily James, Jamie King, Chris Atkins and others – which exists between the liberal-humanist mainstream and the low-budget radical strand of the genre. Armstrong is thus a particularly pertinent filmmaker with which to close a discussion of oppositional feature documentary in the 1990s, before turning to its contemporary manifestation in Chapter Four.

Section One

The Two Avant-gardes on Channel 4 in the 1980s

Discussions of radicalism on Channel 4 invariably focus on the 1980s, with the IFVD and its series, *The Eleventh Hour* (1982-9), frequently singled out as representative of the period.[4] That this decade, department and series are among the most common topics of such research is understandable. First, Channel 4's first decade is widely recognised as its most 'radical' (Kerr, 2008, 323). According to Rod Stoneman, for instance, it 'constitutes a considerable experiment with experiment – the largest body of avant-garde work shown on network television, encountering its widest audiences, anywhere, ever' (1996, 295).

The IFVD, meanwhile, was set up largely as a result of the Independent Filmmakers' Association's (IFA) campaign to ensure that the radical work the sector had been producing for the preceding two decades was properly represented on the channel. As such it was the IFVD which most frequently screened (politically and aesthetically) avant-garde work. Prior to the launch of Channel 4, the IFA's negotiations with Jeremy Isaacs, the channel's founding chief executive, led to the formation of the IFVD and the appointment of Alan Fountain as its Commissioning Editor (Dickinson, 1999, 58). A member of the IFA himself, Fountain hired two other IFA members, Rod

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[4] For discussions of *The Eleventh Hour* as representative of radicalism on Channel 4 in the 1980s, see Andrews (2011), Rees (1999, 92), Hobson (2008, 75) and Wyver (2007, 55). For radicalism on the channel framed in terms of the aesthetic avant-garde, see various essays in Knight (1996), O'Pray (1996a, 21), Walker (1993, 123-34) and Lambert (1982, 149-51). Rees (2007), Curtis (2007) and Stoneman (2005 and 1996) focus on the *aesthetic* avant-garde in the 1980s and the 1990s, with Rees and Stoneman at least acknowledging the presence of more politically oriented work. Along with Dickinson (1999), Sylvia Harvey's work (1994 and 1986, for example) is probably the most consistent exception to the rule, recognising the existence of and discussing with equal merit both the political and the aesthetic avant-garde, sometimes even focusing exclusively on the former (1984).

Stoneman and Caroline Spry, as his Deputy Commissioning Editors and together they produced *The Eleventh Hour* as the department's flagship series.

The classification of the 1980s as Channel 4's radical decade can also be explained by virtue of the fact that many of the changes that signalled the end of this period occurred around the turn of the decade and the channel's tenth birthday in November 1992. Isaacs was replaced with the more commercially-oriented Michael Grade in 1987, and the following year the government's White Paper, *Broadcasting in the 1990s: Competition, Choice and Quality* (Hansard, 1988), recommended the de-regulation of the industry and the transformation of Channel 4's funding structure. *The Eleventh Hour* was shelved in 1989, and by 1990 other series from the 1980s that featured similar work had also come to an end.[5] That year also saw the government's White Paper enshrined in law in the Broadcasting Act 1990 (Corner et al, 1994, 6), which eventually led to the crucial moment in 1993 when the channel became responsible for selling its own advertising. Previously, Channel 4 had been funded by a levy on the commercially run ITV channels, in exchange for which they received the right to sell advertisements in their regions on the fourth channel. Making the channel responsible for its own advertising forced it to compete with the other commercial channels for revenue, and thus Channel 4 was itself 'obliged to commercialise' (Andrews, 2011, 218). In practice, as Andrews says, this meant 'abandoning the types of programme, such as *The Eleventh Hour*, that could be expected to appeal only to tiny audiences' (218).

From this perspective then, the characterisation of the 1980s as Channel 4's radical phase and the 1990s as marking its shift to 'a tabloid agenda' (Malik, 2002, 51) is reasonable. However, although the events marking that shift were taking place from the late 1980s onwards, their impact did not manifest itself in the schedules immediately. While none of the series broadcasting avant-garde work in the 1980s continued into the 1990s, others took their place. As Al Rees (2007) argues, artists' film and video continued to appear on Channel 4 'through into the next decade' (146) with series such as *TV Interventions* (1990), *The Dazzling Image* (1990 and 1992) and *Midnight Underground* (1993-

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[5] Other Channel 4 series which also broadcast the aesthetic avant-garde include *Visions* (1982-85), *Alter-Image* (1983), *Ghosts in the Machine* (1986), *Ghosts 2* (1988) and *TV Dante* (1987-90).

7).[6] Indeed, according to Rees 'cash-crop culture finally caught up with the visual arts sector' only in 1995, when Stuart Cosgrove took over as Channel 4's Head of Independent Commissioning (160).

Just as 1995 marks an end point for almost all platforms dedicated to the aesthetic avant-garde on Channel 4, the broadcast of oppositional documentary on the channel also continued until the middle of the 1990s. However, despite the fact that radicalism on Channel 4 in the 1980s is discussed almost exclusively in terms of the aesthetic avant-garde, the political avant-garde was as much a part of that radicalism as its aesthetic equivalent. Indeed, this combination of formal and political radicalism is unsurprising given that the independent film sector the IFVD was intended to serve itself consisted of both the aesthetic and the political avant-garde. According to Sylvia Harvey, for instance, the IFA represented both experimental filmmakers interested in 'aesthetic and formal radicalism' as well as others 'whose goals were more socially, politically or community oriented', and who 'made films for the labour movement, the women's movement, the anti-racist movement and other campaigns' (1982a, 160).[7] Rees notes the same distinction, describing the IFA's membership as composed of both 'artist filmmakers' as well as 'social-political filmmakers' (2007, 148).

This combination of emphases is even less surprising when one considers that the IFVD's Commissioning Editors were part of this milieu. Fountain, for example, describes his view of cinema and politics as one in which 'television [was] a site of ideological struggle' (quoted in Dowmunt, 2007a, 248) and, according to Stoneman, the IFVD had 'a sort of unstated agenda ... to push the boundaries of politics, to experiment, to have a basic 68er agenda which would be some mixture of class, gender, race, anti-imperialism, generally libertarian stuff really although we didn't use that word' (2011, 4). Clearly, the IFVD was motivated by political concerns at least as much as it was by aesthetic experimentation.

So, although it is frequently cited as the aesthetic avant-garde's televisual high-point, *The Eleventh Hour* showed a combination of aesthetically *and* politically radical work. This combination occasionally existed in single films, of course, such as *So That You Can Live (for Shirley)* (Cinema

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[6] Other channels also featured platforms for the aesthetic avant-garde in the 1990s, such as *White Noise* (BBC2, 1990), *Eleven O'Clock High* (1995, Carlton) or *The Late Show* (BBC2, 1990-94) (see Flaxton (1996), Walker (1993) and Curtis (2007)). That these other platforms were following Channel 4's lead is noted in, for example, Stoneman (1996, 294).

[7] See also Harvey (1986) and (1982b).

Action, 1982), *Amy!* (Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey, 1980) or *The Filleting Machine* (Amber, 1981), but it was more common for the aesthetic avant-garde to be broadcast alongside the political avant-garde. *The Eleventh Hour*'s series of 'Profiles' (1983) on filmmakers such as Margaret Tait, Jeff Keen and Malcolm LeGrice, and collections of experimental work on video and super-eight[8] were broadcast, for instance, alongside oppositional documentaries such as *The Women of the Rhondda* (The London Women's Film Group, 1973), *The Miners' Film* (Cinema Action, 1974), *The Cause of Ireland* (Platform Films, 1983), *Rocking the Boat* (Cinema Action, 1983), *Welcome to the Spiv Economy* (Newsreel Collective, 1986) and *The Peoples' Flag* (Platform Films, 1987). While these focused on issues in the UK, *The Eleventh Hour* also broadcast other oppositional documentaries addressing radical politics overseas, such as two-part documentary *The New Cinema of Latin America* (Michael Chanan, 1983), *The Bronx: A Cry for Help* (Brent Owens, 1987) or *My Son Che: A Family Portrait by Don Ernesto Guevara* (Fernando Birri, 1987).

Furthermore, *The Eleventh Hour* was not the only platform for the political avant-garde on Channel 4 in the 1980s. The other series the IFVD produced was *People to People* (1983-9), which broadcast an extraordinary range of oppositional documentary, including *Byker* (Amber, 1983), *Coal Not Dole: Miners United* (Banner Film and TV, 1984), *Struggles for the Black Community* (Colin Prescod, 1984), *We Owned and Ran* (Banner Film and TV, 1985), *Hell to Pay* (Anne Cottringer, 1988) and *Dockers* (John Goddard, 1988), to name but a few. Nevertheless, apart from those documents written by members of the department themselves, this series is scarcely acknowledged in the channel's history precisely because it lacked the presence of formally innovative work. In part, this is because experimental films best met the channel's much-quoted remit to 'encourage innovation and experiment in the *form and content* of programmes' (Caughie, 2000, 190; my emphasis). As a result, not only is the presence of oppositional documentary effaced from *The Eleventh Hour* but other sources of the political avant-garde, such as *People to People*, are also disregarded. In acknowledging that the IFVD 'showed the stuff with the best claim to meet Parliament's command that we encourage innovation and experiment', for instance, Jeremy Isaacs argued that without it

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[8] In such series as *Video 1*, *2*, and *3* (1985) and *Super Eight 1* and *2* (1986).

Channel 4 would be all the poorer, and would have a far less convincing claim to innovation. The two series, in particular *The Eleventh Hour*, deserve – what I sought for them – a protected place in the channel's schedule, and an established and guaranteed claim on the channel's budget. (1989, 174)

The other series to which Isaacs is referring is *People to People* but, as we can see, its presence is effaced in favour of foregrounding the series which showcased formal innovation and experiment.

The Political Avant-garde on Channel 4 in the 1990s

The output of the political avant-garde on Channel 4 in the 1990s has received similarly scant attention. *Critical Eye* was arguably the primary platform for oppositional documentary in this period, but the IFVD also produced a number of other neglected series. *Out* (1989-91), for instance, was dedicated to gay and lesbian programming and showed films like *Lust and Liberation* (Clare Bevan, 1989), *After Stonewall* (John Scagliotti, 1989), *Looking for Langston* (Isaac Julien, 1990), *Comrades in Arms* (Mayavision, 1990) and *Over Our Dead Bodies* (Stuart Marshall, 1991). Although *Global Image* (1992-1994) consisted mostly of radical work from overseas, it also broadcast Marc Karlin's *Utopias* (1988), about seven different versions of socialism, and *Life Can be Wonderful* (Martin Smith and Shelagh Brady, 1994), about British communist filmmaker and distributor, Stanley Foreman. Channel 4's *Guide for Producers*, meanwhile, describes the IFVD's *First Sex* (1994-5) as 'a feminist and women's issue series' and *War Cries* (1995-6) as 'a strand for social and polemical films' (Channel 4, 1994, n.p.).

This remarkable variety of politically radical documentary is practically absent from historical accounts. *Critical Eye*, for instance, is missing from the history of oppositional film in Britain, aside from brief references in Harvey (1994, 122) and Stoneman (1996, 289 and 1992, 140). More general histories of Channel 4, such as Hobson (2008) or Brown (2007), hardly recognise the presence of oppositional film on the channel at all, in either the 1980s or the 1990s.[9] Indeed, the conference

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[9] Hobson (2008) briefly mentions Fountain twice, once in the context of *The Eleventh Hour* (75) and once in a list of executives involved in the Channel 4 Campaign Group, an initiative intended to protect the channel from

marking Channel 4's twenty-fifth anniversary in 2007 included only one paper explicitly addressing the channel's relationship with radical film, and this was Stoneman reflecting on the radicalism of the channel's 'early years' (Stoneman, 2007). Writing in *Screen*'s dossier on the conference, Paul Kerr notes that there was 'little or nothing ... about politics or policy', and that although there were panels on race and sexuality, class was conspicuously absent (2008, 318).

This absence of attention is partly a result of the political avant-garde being increasingly unwelcome on Channel 4 from the late 1980s onwards. However, it also derives from the legacy of anti-illusionist film theory that dominated debates about aesthetics and politics in the cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. Judged lacking in the modernist qualities apparently required for political art to qualify for scholarly investigation, the political avant-garde on Channel 4 in the 1990s has been all but ignored. This is also despite *Critical Eye* reaching, by virtue of being broadcast in a 9pm slot, larger audiences than those to which experimental work on the channel ever had access. In spite of their best efforts, the IFVD never succeeded in breaking the aesthetic avant-garde out from the 'tundra of the schedules' (Stoneman, 1996, 290), with *The Eleventh Hour* stuck at 11pm, *Midnight Underground* at 12am, and so on. Of course, *Critical Eye* was permitted the earlier slot largely because it was deemed to adopt a more conservative aesthetic approach, yet the aesthetics of films shown on *Critical Eye* were hardly so straightforward. According to Caroline Spry,

> the late '80s early '90s was when we started to do more *supposedly* mainstream, populist stuff than had been in *The Eleventh Hour*. So *Critical Eye* came in there in the 9 o'clock slot [but] we tried to do things that would bring some of the politics and aesthetics of *The Eleventh Hour* into the more mainstream slots. (2011, 2)

Compared to the experimental work shown on *The Eleventh Hour*, the formal qualities of the films broadcast on *Critical Eye* were indeed closer to the conventional standards of mainstream documentary. However, as Spry says, it was the IFVD's explicit intention to incorporate some

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the privatisation involved in the 1990 Broadcast Act (167). Brown (2007) affords one mention each to Fountain and Spry, the former in a list of Commissioning Editors (47), and the latter in the context of a *Daily Mail* article criticising a programme she commissioned, *Dyke TV* (175).

political and aesthetic radicalism into the mainstream schedule, and the formal qualities of the films they produced are far more complex than 'conventional documentary'. Indeed, in addition to the films I discuss below, the series also showed work by filmmakers known for innovative formal approaches, such as Reece Auguiste's *Mysteries of July* (1991), about deaths in police custody, and Marc Karlin's *Between Times* (1993), in which a socialist and a post-modernist debate the fate of the British Left after Thatcher. Triple Vision, the production company behind *The Eleventh Hour*'s series on video art, also produced *Rites* (1990) and *Animal Acts* (1993) for *Critical Eye*, respectively about female genital mutilation and legislation against animal rights' activists. Nevertheless, the work this series broadcast throughout the first half of the decade is virtually unacknowledged and this period of radical British film history is thus largely unknown. With a view towards recovering some of this history, then, the next part of this section focuses in detail on three *Critical Eye* broadcasts and the filmmakers who made them: *The Battle of Trafalgar* (Despite TV, 1990), *Operation Solstice* (Neil Goodwin, 1991) and *Proud Arabs and Texan Oilmen* (Platform Films, 1993).

The Battle of Trafalgar

As we saw in Chapter One, Despite TV's non-hierarchical, consensus-based approach to filmmaking derived from founder Mark Saunders' anarchist principles, and *The Battle of Trafalgar* is testament to the efficacy of that approach. The 'battle' of the film's title is the poll tax riot that took place in central London on Saturday 31st March 1990. Broadcast six months later on September 18th, the film sets out to contest the dominant version of the day's events as told by the police, media and government. This objective is clearly established in the opening sequence, a montage composed of numerous accounts of the riot in the mainstream media. From the incessant repetition of the word 'trouble' to clichéd statements blaming 'the minority of anarchists who regularly hijack protests', the sequence foregrounds the language with which the media framed the protestors as the cause of the riot and the police as innocent victims caught in the line of duty. Their refusal to deviate from this interpretation is articulated most dramatically when the image track shows a group of mounted police

officers galloping into, and then over, a fleeing woman, while the voice-over declares that 'the violence was caused by about 3000 among them'.[10]

Following this montage the film states its intention to challenge this interpretation of events. It cuts to a close-up of a woman's silhouetted profile as she explains that 'Despite TV was present at the event. Our experience was dramatically different from that portrayed by television news'. As she speaks the lighting of the shot increases, replacing the silhouette with her fully illuminated face as she turns to face the camera. This effect expresses the film's sentiment, shedding light on the narrator as she promises to reveal an alternative interpretation of the riot. Addressing the audience directly, she reminds us that, like all television programmes, their film has been edited, but she insists that the events shown are in chronological order. Unlike modernist reflexivity, this reference to the film's construction is intended to re-affirm rather than de-stabilise *The Battle of Trafalgar's* truth-claim. This kind of self-referentiality is typical of the political avant-garde. Despite TV are too concerned with the political consequences of the riot's representation in the media to focus on ontological distinctions between reality and its representation. Thus the text references itself to underscore the filmmakers' sincerity, not to arouse the audience's suspicion of the filmic apparatus.

The opening sequence also functions to introduce the over-riding structure and form of the film, which is divided into three sections. The first establishes the chronology of the day and substantiates claims that it was in fact the police who antagonised the protestors. The second and third sections of the film explore the consequences of the day, focusing respectively on the response of the media and police and arguing that the violence on the behalf of the protestors constituted 'common defence' against an armoured, baton-wielding police force. Continuing with the form in which the female narrator first appeared, the film frequently features its talking-heads in profile on the left-hand side of the frame, discussing their experiences as the footage of the events in question plays on the remainder of the screen. As with the reference to the editing process in the film's introduction, this composition complements Despite TV's intention to contest the dominant version of events. As the talking-heads of the protestors recall their experiences, the footage of the events being discussed

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[10] Later, this footage is repeated with another reporter explaining that 'with the guilty mingling deliberately with the innocent, such injuries are inevitable'.

forms an audio-visual testimony, authenticating much of what they say and powerfully contesting the claims of the media and the police.

Aesthetic strategies emphasising synchronicity in the protesters' perspective are all the more powerful when used alongside strategies that suggest contradictions in the official version of events. As with the example of mounted police trampling the woman while the accompanying voice-over blames the protestors, this is frequently done by contrasting sound with image. At other times contradictions are articulated in a single visual composition. For instance, the police allegation that 'the crowd were getting fairly determined in their efforts to remove the double row of barriers in Whitehall' is unfurled across the screen in a large white font, while the image beneath it clearly shows police officers calmly removing the barriers themselves, with no protestors in sight. The distinction between the two versions of events is further reinforced by emphasising the opposition between the police and the protestors. One sequence, for instance, uses CGI to visualise the route of the march and demonstrate the way in which police split the crowd, creating panic and forcing a bottle-neck to form at Trafalgar Square. If conventional documentary draws factual capital from the objective connotations of maps and diagrams, here these tropes articulate the openly partisan argument of the film. The protestors are represented as white circles, suggesting unity and cohesiveness, while the police are symbolised as truncheons and horses, indicating their repressive function.

While these aesthetic strategies emphasise the intervention on the part of the filmmakers, others profess to articulate the protestors' version of events more directly. For instance, the film frequently supports its argument with footage of protestors speaking directly into the camera during the riot itself. One man, evidently shaken after fleeing a police cavalry charge in which he was separated from his family, speaks directly into the camera as he articulates his anger and frustration with the police. Moments later another incredulous protestor points for the camera as it whip-pans down the street to capture a squad car speeding through the crowd. 'You got that, yeah?' he says to the cameraperson, 'I fucking hope so'. However, while these sequences do not suggest artifice on the part of the filmmaker in the same way as the CGI sequences, they do implicitly draw attention to the role of the filmmakers. Again, unlike the reflexivity of the anti-illusionist mode, this kind of self-

referentiality creates a powerful sense of insider knowledge which, as well as validating the film's argument, also stresses the vital importance of oppositional filmmaking itself.

Indeed, this is one of the film's overriding themes, present throughout in footage which, shot from the protestors' point of view, is evidently not taken by the mainstream news media. For example, another cavalry charge is depicted from in the midst of the crowd being charged. The sense of danger and panic created by mounted policemen towering above the camera is striking, intensified when one of the policemen lashes out with his baton, carving an arc across the frame as he strikes just to the right of the cameraperson. Footage like this is repeated throughout the film, aligning the audience with the protestors and offering a taste of the reality of police violence for those on the receiving end of it. It also, however, emphasises the distinction between a mainstream media that reports on events from a distance and an oppositional media willing to speak from a position of direct experience – and to be attacked for doing so. Indeed, oppositional filmmakers were liable to attack not only from police. As we saw in Chapter One, as well as benefitting the video-activist community, the increased availability of camcorders in the mid-1990s also led to a heightened suspicion of audio-visual media and sections of the activist community adopted a zero-tolerance approach to recording technology in general. The implicit theme of the importance of oppositional media – and its difference from mainstream media – thus becomes an explicit one at the end of the film. As Michael Mansfield QC (one of the few professional talking-heads in the film) discusses the importance of distinguishing 'independent' cameras from their mainstream counterpart, his speech is illustrated with a cut-away of a protestor smashing a billiard ball into Despite TV's camera lens. This experience was not uncommon among video-activists in the 1990s (Harding, 1998, 92-3), who were often attacked by protestors unable or unwilling to differentiate between them and the mainstream media. This distinction is therefore something the film is at pains to make clear, the narrator prefacing the film's conclusion by reminding the audience that 'if people had not taken their own cameras this story would not have been told'.

Operation Solstice: The Battle of the Beanfield

Asserting the importance of independent media is also a chief concern of *Operation Solstice*. Like *The Battle of Trafalgar*, it adopts an explicitly partisan position, using a number of aesthetic strategies with which to construct another narrative of police brutality and its suppression by the mainstream media. Broadcast on the 7th November 1991 in the second season of *Critical Eye*, the film focuses on the violent encounter between police and the 'Peace Convoy' (Morris and Thomas, 2005, 31), a troupe of 140 vehicles carrying 550 traveller men, women and children to the twentieth anniversary of the Stonehenge free festival (Aitken and Rosenberger, 2005, 146). Known as the 'Battle of the Beanfield' (Worthington, 2005a, 4), the incident itself took place on June 1st, 1985. However, the trial – in which twenty-four of those arrested sued Wiltshire police for unlawful arrest, assault and damage to property – did not take place until October 1991. Like Despite TV's Mark Saunders ten years before him, Goodwin in 1990 was also studying filmmaking at the London College of Printing, and it was here that he teamed up with Gareth Morris, whose knowledge of the forthcoming trial prompted them to make the documentary (Goodwin, 2005, 166).[11]

The trial provides the film's narrative framework, book-ending the talking-heads and archival material that constitutes the main body of the work. The opening scenes outside the court also immediately establish the filmmakers' partisan perspective. Judges, barristers and other legal personnel arriving at the court are represented in a series of extreme long-shots while Don Aitken, the Legal Advisor for the travellers, summarises their arguments in a close-up piece to camera. Structuring the sequence in this way visualises the ideological alignment of the filmmakers with Aitken and the travellers, an explicitly subjective approach adopted by Goodwin and Morris at the beginning. Indeed, like Despite TV, an organisation which Goodwin references in his chapter on the making of the film, they self-identified as anarchist filmmakers concerned with 'championing the cause of marginalised people' (2005, 178). In accordance with these values, the hegemonic ideal of documentary balance and impartiality was recognised as biased toward the status quo. For instance, Goodwin argues that

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[11] The book of which Goodwin's chapter is a part is by far the best available resource on this topic. I am also indebted to Goodwin (2012) for taking the time to answer further questions in personal correspondence.

[t]o give the police their so-called right of reply would have meant losing two or three sound-bites from people who had been deprived of their voice for too long. As far as we were concerned, the police had made their position perfectly clear on June 1st, 1985, with smashed windows and broken limbs. (2005, 179)

According to Goodwin, then, the bias in *Operation Solstice* provides a corrective to an already unequal narrative of conflict between one of society's most marginalised groups and the Establishment, supported by the police and the media.

Like *The Battle of Trafalgar*, *Operation Solstice* represents the beginning of the conflict by setting-up a number of juxtapositions with which to underscore the contrast between the police, the media and the travellers. Accompanied by the soft tones of an acoustic guitar, a montage sequence establishing the history of the Stonehenge festival and its place in traveller culture dissolves into to a television journalist's news report from the start of the disruption. The menacing whir of helicopter blades that bridges the dissolve contrasts with the guitar and associates the media with the resources of the Establishment and police. Nick Davies, one of the journalists present during the attack and a key talking-head in the film, then makes this link explicit, describing how he 'later became aware that the whole of the Wiltshire Establishment had sat down to decide what to do about the convoy [including] various landowners ... the county council, the police and the their solicitors'.[12]

Having established this link, the film then juxtaposes the travellers' peaceful intentions with those of the police. Shot in sunlight with his bus in the background, Alan Lodge, a traveller and photographer for the festival, is shown calmly discussing the lead-up to the event and the lack of anticipation of any violence on the part of the travellers. This pleasant mood continues across the dissolve into the next shot of the colourful convoy en route, complete with accompanying Bob Marley soundtrack. As the lead bus, gaily painted in rainbow colours, trundles towards the camera, a typewritten font and accompanying sound effect punches an ominous message onto the screen: 'Police Radio Log, 2.04pm: "...vehicles 7 through to 15 would appear to be the personnel carriers and

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[12] Davies' interview, along with a number of others seen in the film and involved on the day, as well as the transcript of the police log-book, is available in Worthington (2005b).

the ones to concentrate on"'. Having established a clear opposition between the two groups and the allegiance of the filmmakers to the travellers' version of events, the tone of the film shifts and the film begins its exposition of the police operation proper.

Operation Solstice contains some of the most shocking images of police violence in the history of oppositional documentary in Britain.[13] However, for all the violence that is included in the film, *Operation Solstice* also foregrounds how much of what took place was prevented from being captured on camera. In this way, like *The Battle of Trafalgar*, the film emphasises the importance of oppositional filmmaking itself and the crucial role cameras can play in preventing or exposing violence and injustice. For instance, the initial attack occurred after the police had halted the convoy on a road between two fields eight miles from the festival site. With the trucks trapped on the narrow road, police officers then moved down the line, smashing the screens and windows of the vehicles with their batons. There is sparse audio-visual evidence of this event, however, since journalists were prevented from accessing the site of the attack and the police video that should have recorded it 'accidently' broke down at the crucial moment (Goodwin, 2005, 176). Instead, black-and-white photographs of police with truncheons drawn are intercut with eye-witness talking-heads – a mixture of travellers and their unlikely ally David Brudnell-Bruce, the Earl of Cardigan – that recount the event and their shock at seeing police officers smashing the windows of the vehicles and pulling their occupants out by the hair.[14]

Illustrating the importance of oppositional documentary in other ways are the numerous moments in which the police themselves obstruct the camera or actively attack it. Panning across the bodies of those arrested lying on the ground, a voice off-screen says 'clear out' and a policeman's gloved hand swings up from the bottom of the frame and strikes the lens. The camera shakes and the image distorts for a moment, before jostling riot shields block the screen completely. Another notable

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[13] Although these particular comments do not feature in the film, Kim Sabido, the ITN reporter present during the attack, emphasises the scale of the violence in his interview with Goodwin and Morris. Despite having reported on a number of riots and seen people killed in Northern Ireland and elsewhere, he describes the police violence that day as 'one of the biggest shocks of my life, more shocking than any deaths I've seen in a war zone, simply because the police are a civil force, supposedly carrying out a civil duty' (Goodwin and Morris, 2005, 89).

[14] Brudnell-Bruce was branded a class traitor by *The Daily Telegraph* for lending his support to the travellers in this way. Apparently, he 'hadn't realised that anybody that appeared to be seen to be supporting elements that stood against the establishment would be savaged by establishment newspapers' (Goodwin, 2005, 176).

example occurs earlier on, when the camera approaches the scene of an arrest and is immediately blocked by a police officer who, standing in front of the camera and blocking the lens, warns 'switch it off, alright?'. The cameraperson evidently complied and then switched it on again, as the film cuts to the policeman walking away from the camera back to the arrest. As he does so, the camera pans left to catch another man being marched away between two police, screaming 'they're beating me! Are you getting this, you bastards?'[15] Panning back to the original arrest, we see a man lying on his front with his hands cuffed behind his back, before three officers lift him by his hands and hair and carry him away.

The importance of scenes in which the camera is prevented from recording what is taking place is underscored by those that do show the extent of the police violence that day. Following the attack on the camera mentioned above, another scene shows a young couple cowering on the ground in the foetal position as a group of police stands around them. One of the officers leans down and rams his truncheon into the young man's rib cage, shouting 'now you stay there, boy!' The camera then whip pans 180 degrees to show a stationary, open top vehicle surrounded by police dragging a screaming couple from it. Moments later, another man is seen slowly descending the steps of his vehicle. With his hands clearly raised in submission, he is obviously surrendering to the police by the door. Nevertheless, one of the officers shouts 'on the deck' and punches the man squarely in the face, knocking him to the floor. Repeating his instruction, the officer then screams at the man to stretch his arms out and he complies, now visibly sobbing into the grass. The most horrifying of all these images, though, is also the most fleeting. As the handheld camera jostles with police for a view of an attack on one of the buses, a voice can be heard screaming off-screen. Responding to the sound the camera quickly pans right and reveals its source to be a terrified boy, no more than fifteen years old, being frogmarched away between two police. Only glimpsed for a fraction of a second, his face covered in blood, he screams 'Help me! Help me!'

Such explicit footage of police brutality, as well as those instances the camera was evidently unable to capture, combine with the film's criticism of the reporting of the events in the mainstream

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[15] His expletive, simultaneously insulting those he is asking for help, also indicates the ambivalent relationship to cameras that would become more pronounced in activist communities in the 1990s (see Chapter One).

media. Far from representing the events as the film has shown them, *Operation Solstice* reveals that ITN refused to broadcast Kim Sabido's report (which was critical of the police) while the newspapers represented the police operation as a heroic success. The *Daily Express* printed the title: 'Police Smash Reign of "Peace" Thugs', for instance, while the image of the screaming, bloodied boy mentioned above was used to illustrate the headline '520 Hippies Pack Cells'. Many newspapers also ridiculed the event with clichéd 'hippy' stereotypes, a misrepresentation which, as Nick Davies says in the film, becomes a 'pretty dangerous joke when prospective jurors and voters and people who should be angry about what happened get fed this kind of nonsense'. Like *The Battle of Trafalgar*, then, such criticism of the mainstream media also reinforces the importance of radical filmmakers and journalists who are prepared to contradict the dominant version of events.

Proud Arabs and Texan Oilmen

Proud Arabs and Texan Oilmen also seeks to challenge hegemonic ideas, albeit at a more international level. Directed by Chris Reeves, the film was broadcast on the 7th of October 1993 in *Critical Eye*'s penultimate series. Reeves began making films with Cinema Action in the 1970s, a group to which he was introduced by Steve Sprung (a member of Cinema Action and later editor of Marc Karlin's *Between Times* (1993), broadcast on *Critical Eye* later that year). Reeves also edited films at the London Filmmakers' Co-op, where he came into contact with Peter Gidal, Malcolm LeGrice and other filmmakers of the aesthetic avant-garde, and was later taught by Gidal and LeGrice at Central St Martins College of Art in the 1980s.[16] Although their relationship was amicable, Reeves was very much aligned with the political avant-garde within the IFA and adopted an approach to filmmaking in which communication, rather than formal experiment, was paramount. According to Reeves,

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[16] In this way Reeves is another example of the long history of collaborative practices within left-wing film culture. Ian Aitken (1990, 181), for instance, makes a point of emphasising the degree to which those associated with the Documentary Movement worked with those from the Workers Film Movement, and vice versa. Peter Wollen makes a similar point in 'The Two Avant-gardes' (1975), as does Michael O'Pray (1996b, 178-90).

in Britain today the major issue is politics, not something called 'film' ... This is not Russia in

the 1920s. It is not a post-revolutionary period that allows people's creativity to bloom and all

manner of experimentation to test the senses ... In Britain today there is a bitter, vicious class

struggle taking place, and given the limited resources there is a necessity to prioritise. [It is

therefore] our view that form should allow maximum clarity in terms of political ideas. (cited

in Harvey, 1984, 38)

As we saw earlier, *The Eleventh Hour* supported the political avant-garde as much as the aesthetic

avant-garde, and Platforms Films emerged as a direct result of the IFVD in the 1980s (Reeves, 2010,

3), when Reeves received a commission for *The Cause of Ireland* (1983).[17] *The Eleventh Hour* also

commissioned Platforms Films' *The Peoples' Flag* (1987), a series of five films about radical working

class politics in Britain since 1900. In the meantime, Platform Films were also the principle creative

force behind the production of *The Miners' Campaign Tapes* (1984), a collaborative project

independent of Channel 4 which Reeves' co-ordinated and edited, along with Chris Rushton from

Chapter Film and Video workshop (Reeves, 2010, 6).

Reeves maintained this oppositional outlook for the single film he produced for *Critical Eye*.

However, unlike *The Battle of Trafalgar* and *Operation Solstice*, *Proud Arabs and Texan Oilmen*

adopts more of the formal tropes associated with 'objective' styles of documentary, most notably

voice-of-god narration and consecutive talking-heads advocating opposing sides of an argument.

However, these tropes are superficial, almost to the point of irony. In fact, the film is unambiguous

about which side of the argument it is supporting and uses a number of aesthetic strategies to stage an

explicitly partisan political argument. Indeed, by the end of the film the token guise of conventional

documentary 'objectivity' is abandoned altogether with a piece of performance poetry by Michael

Rosen performed straight to camera.

The film uses the causes and consequences of the first Gulf War (1990-91) as the prism

through which to explore the role of the United Nations (UN) in global politics and George Bush

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[17] *The Cause of Ireland* was produced with Lin Solomon, Geoff Bell and John Underhay (Harvey, 1984, 31).
Solomon also worked with Reeves on *The Peoples' Flag*, along with Stuart Hood, while Solomon went on to
produce another film for *Critical Eye*: *Pack Up the Troubles* (1991).

senior's attempts to establish what he infamously called a 'New World Order' (Oren, 2007, 569). The film's anti-war perspective is immediately established via image- and sound-track juxtaposition, as a montage of desert-based carnage – abandoned boots, burned out cars and the charred remains of bodies – plays out to the trumpet fanfare of and cheering for British troops returning from the war. However, as this introductory montage develops, we also meet the first pro-war voices in the film, as Reeves interviews members of the public present at the parade. First is an American WW2 veteran touched by the celebration of the soldiers' return, and then a middle-aged British man accuses John Major of downplaying the parade to avoid accusations of electioneering, arguing that 'it would've been ten times bigger if Maggie had been prime minister'.

Yet despite the inclusion of voices supportive of the war, the film is unambiguous about its position on their statements. As the man argues that the war objectives were not 'finished off', for instance, the screen fills with flames superimposed over images of an attack helicopter firing missiles. These images of violence and destruction are then connected to American foreign policy via a dissolve to footage of Bush senior's infamous speech outside the White House, in which he declared that 'what we say goes' and that 'there is no place for lawless aggression in the Persian Gulf and in this New World Order that we seek to create'. So, while the inclusion of pro-war arguments and a narrator who introduces and organises those arguments are tropes more commonly found in conventional expository documentary, here their use is clearly superficial. Indeed, instead of mediating the differing views and raising the audience beyond the scope of their arguments, the narrator directly challenges the president's sentiment, questioning that while 'the United Nations' Security Council had unanimously condemned the invasion of Kuwait, ... George Bush talks about the United States ... where does the UN fit into his new world order?'

Variations of this strategy continue as the film includes other Establishment voices. General Sir Anthony Farrar Hockley, for instance, criticises what he calls the 'smart men' who 'tapped their noses and said "ah ... this is nothing to do with the sovereignty of Kuwait – this is about oil"', arguments he dismisses for their 'ignorance of Britain's part in the middle east' and its tradition of preventing 'the oppression of small states by more powerful ones'. As he talks, however, the film undermines his argument with images that suggest its falsity. A Western man in a business suit

sunning himself in a deckchair is contrasted with images of a badly burned Arab child in a hospital bed, which cuts to another little boy picking his way through the rubble of bombed-out buildings. These visual juxtapositions destabilize Hockley's argument, purporting to reveal the real conditions of existence for those on the receiving end of such imperialist ideologies and their material consequences. The narrator then introduces another talking-head to counter Hockley's own example of the Korean War (1950-53), with left Labour MP Tony Benn arguing that the war was essential to the political and economic order established by the Americans after WW2 and that UN support for that invasion was co-opted by the US. So, while the film ostensibly gives space to both pro- and anti-war voices, the pro-war arguments are undermined first visually, then by the narrator, and finally by talking-heads advocating the counter argument.

As the film develops, the veneer of documentary 'objectivity' recedes further, and it adopts visual strategies akin to those used in *The Battle of Trafalgar* and *Operation Solstice*. As the narrator discusses the lead-up to the Gulf War, she states that UN support was again obtained as a result of 'intense pressure' from the United States, with only Cuba and Yemen voting against the invasion. Then, over a still image of the Yemeni ambassador's hand raised mid-vote, scrolling text lists the favourable treatment of the obedient states by the US: 'China: first World Bank loan since Tiananmen Square; Egypt: most foreign debt written-off or postponed; Ethiopia: investment deals with the US' and so on. This visual information is then concluded with footage of the former US Attorney General, Ramsey Clark, explaining the penalties that were inflicted upon Yemen for defying the US, who cut off all US aid to Yemen later that afternoon (which among other things caused the immediate displacement of almost one million Yemenis from Saudi Arabia). While the film does still include pro-war talking-heads (mostly politicians such as Alan Clark, ex-Minister of Trade in Major's government, or Conservative MP Lady Olga Maitland, casually admitting their willingness to sell arms to dictators for profit),[18] the film gradually develops a stronger subjective perspective as it moves towards its final third.

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[18] Clark's willingness to arm dictators is even more readily acknowledged in John Pilger's *Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy* (1994). Asked by Pilger if he was bothered by the fact that the arms he sold to Indonesia for use in their war against East Timor would cause mayhem and human suffering, Clark replied 'no, not in the slightest, it never entered my head'. Pilger says he asks the question because of Clark's status as a vegetarian

Marked by the narrator alluding to class dynamics in the conflict and explicitly aligning herself with the audience, this section sees *Proud Arabs* discard the semblance of neutrality entirely. Addressing the aftermath of the war and Bush's refusal, backed by John Major, of Saddam's offer of withdrawal from Kuwait on the condition that Western forces cease fire, the film shows a montage of the burned and blackened corpses of Iraqi soldiers. Contextualising the images, the narrator emphasises that 'these men did not own the great oil fields they were forced to fight for. Before they died, like all the poor of the world, they had dreams of the wealth of the West'. The film then contrasts this statement with a tracking shot of Major, Margaret Thatcher and numerous other figures from the British Establishment. These images, combined with a narrator discussing issues of ownership, wealth and poverty, constitute a stark depiction of antagonistic class relations. That the film's argument stems from class-based politics is further evident when the narrator asserts a shared identity and common interest with the audience: 'a few nations led by the US want to control the wealth of the world. To this end, they want to impose on us their own cynical and dangerous solutions'.

This signals the start of the film's closing montage sequence, which sees *Proud Arabs* at its most unconventional. An anti-war folk song, Steve Skaith's 'Not in My Name', accompanies a montage that splices together images of planes dropping bombs in the middle east with George Bush's presidential address, fleeing Arab citizens, and the Los Angeles riots. As the music subsides the narrator suggests argues that 'it has become intellectually respectable to say we cannot establish connections between today's economic crises, the rift between North and South, the gulf between rich and poor ... and all wars, big and small, throughout the world'. As she finishes speaking, the montage of rioting and burning buildings dissolves into the black background of the numerous talking-head sequences. Instead of the conventional subject, seated angled to the camera and addressing an off-screen interviewer, the poet Michael Rosen stares straight into the camera and addresses the viewer directly:

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who is seriously concerned with the treatment of animals. 'Doesn't that concern extend to the way humans, albeit foreigners, are killed?' asks Pilger. 'Curiously not, no,' Clark replies.

Nothing is connected to anything, there is no linkage ... South Africa and Namibia? Nothing to do with this. Indonesia and East Timor? Nothing to do with this. US in Panama? Nothing to do with this. Israel in the West Bank? Nothing to do with this. US in Granada? Nothing to do with this. Israel in the Gaza Strip? Nothing to do with this. Nothing is connected to anything, there is no linkage. Nothing is connected to anything, there is no linkage...

This final scene breaks not only with the dominant form of documentary 'objectivity' but also with the charade of that form adopted in *Proud Arabs*. As we have seen, though the closest of the three films to the paradigmatic objective and balanced documentary, *Proud Arabs* in fact subverts that paradigm to stage a polemical argument advocating radically oppositional politics.

Low-budget oppositional documentary after Critical Eye

Critical Eye ran for one more series after *Proud Arabs* was broadcast, coming to an end on the 10th November 1994. While the cancellation of the series meant that oppositional documentary in Britain lost its major distribution platform and funding source, the strand of low-budget oppositional documentary filmmaking remained, albeit to a lesser extent and necessarily further removed from the mainstream public sphere. I will finish this section of the chapter by touching on what became of the three filmmakers we have looked at. Obviously they do not represent the culture as a whole, but a brief discussion of their subsequent work is indicative of how this marginalised strand of British oppositional documentary continued even after the demise of *Critical Eye*.

Despite TV finally faded in 1993, although Mark Saunders continued making films throughout the decade as Spectacle, the production company he still runs in Deptford, London. Part of the reason for the decline of Despite TV was that Saunders and another member of the collective, Siobhan Cleary, were involved in developing an access project in East Germany in the early part of the decade. Working with the University of Rostock, they eventually established the Jako media collective there and helped produce another feature documentary, *The Truth Lies in Rostock* (1993), about a far right attack on an immigrant community in the city.

In addition to their access work, Spectacle produced two other oppositional feature documentaries in Britain in the second half of the decade – *Exodus: Movement of Jah People* (1996) and *Listen to Us* (aka *Hear Our* Voices, 1998) – as well as *Pop 68*, a three screen installation piece for The Lux celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of 1968. *Exodus* focuses on the Exodus Collective,[19] the free-party group formed in Luton in 1992, while *Listen to Us* explores the history of Black peoples' experience in the British mental health system. The former is one of Spectacle's most explicitly political works. The film explores the emergence of the collective and the extension of their activities, funded by donations from the raves, into squatting and social housing initiatives and the establishment of Luton's city farm. Foregrounding the explicitly oppositional politics of the group, the film also emphasises the numerous attempts by police to shut down Exodus' operations, including multiple (and violent) raids, evictions and arrests, and explores the collective's attitude towards issues such as 'wage slavery', private property, education and political autonomy (for more on Spectacle's work since 2000, see Chapter Four).

Neil Goodwin also continued to make films on into the decade before emigrating to South Africa in the early 2000s, producing *Life in the Fast Lane: The Story of the No M11 Campaign* (1995) and *Seeds of Hope: Women Disarming for Peace and Justice* (1996) with Mayyasa Al-Malazi. The first of these is a feature documentary on the resistance to the M11 link road. Expanding on the first two Undercurrents' films on this topic, 'You Must Be Choking' and 'You Must Be Choking Too' (*Undercurrents 1* (1994) and *2* (1994)), it explores the struggle in much more detail, situating the M11 campaign in relation to the other anti-roads struggles that preceded it, and exploring in detail the various stages of the protest: the mass community action to protect the cherry tree and the public green on which it stood; the occupation and eviction of Wanstonia, one of the houses on the proposed route; the subsequent month-long direct-action campaign and the occupation and eviction of Claremont Road; and finally the occupation of the roof of the Parliament buildings in November 1994. *Seeds of Hope* tells the story of the four women who disarmed a British Hawk jet with hammers, setting legal precedent by avoiding jail sentences when a judge agreed their actions were

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[19] See Malyon (1999) for an in-depth discussion of Exodus. Activist, photographer and author Tim Malyon is another key figure in oppositional culture at this time. He worked on a number of films in this period, including contributing archive footage to *Operation Solstice*.

justified to prevent the larger crime of genocide. Exploring the history of Indonesia's brutal occupation of East Timor and oppression of its people, the film exposes, in a similar manner to *Proud Arabs*, the cynicism of the arms industry and the bravery of the women who took direct-action to oppose it.[20]

Platform Films, meanwhile, did not make another film until *Outlaw War* in 1999, about New Labour's bombing of Serbia. This was followed by the *Who Killed Mark Faulkner?* series (2000), made for the BBC2 Disability Unit about a disabled homeless man who died on the street in London. Although the films foreground the social and economic inequalities that allowed such a death to happen, the *Mark Faulkner* series is not as politically outspoken as Platform Films' other work, and as such is in stark contrast to the *Not in My Name* (2002-4) trilogy Platform produced against the war a few years later (see Chapter Four). However, Reeves was also involved in oppositional film culture in other ways. As well as running the London Socialist Film Co-op with Margaret Dickinson, an organisation which has held annual seasons of screenings since 1989 (Reeves, 2010, 8-9), his facilities at Platform Films were also used by other low-budget oppositional filmmakers in the 1990s. *Life in the Fast Lane*, for instance, was edited on Platform Films' edit suite (Goodwin, 2012). Indeed, these kinds of collaborative connections are rife in this strand of oppositional documentary, and surely played a significant part in enabling low-budget oppositional filmmakers to continue producing films without Channel 4's support. For instance, the four founding members of Undercurrents – Roddy Mansfield, Zoe Broughton, Paul O'Connor and Jamie Hartzell – are credited on *Life in the Fast Lane*,[21] and were also a large part of the creative force behind *Seeds of Hope*, with all four of them receiving editing or photography credits.

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[20] For instance, *Seeds of Hope* shows Conservative Defence minister, Archie Hamilton, informing the House of Commons that the reason for selling Indonesia twenty-four Hawk jets was to create British jobs, that the jets were not capable of oppressing the East Timorese and that he has 'guarantees' from the Indonesians that the planes would not be used for that purpose. The speciousness of his claims is revealed with footage of Indonesian forces attacking the East Timorese, eye-witness testimony of Indonesian forces' use of the planes, and a promotional video advertising their deadly capacities.
[21] Paul Kousoulides is also credited on *Life in the Fast Lane.* Kousoulides is not an oppositional filmmaker: having trained at the National Film and Television School he developed a career in mainstream television, directing episodes of *Cold Feet* (1997) and *Holby City* (2005)). However, he knew Emily James from film school and introduced her to Undercurrents and visionOntv when they were setting-up Climate Camp TV (see Chapter Two), and as such is indicative of the connection between the low-budget strand of oppositional documentary and the mainstream film industry (see Chapter Four).

Of course, some oppositional documentary continued to be screened in the latter half of the decade. Zoe Broughton's *It's a Dog's Life* (1997), about the testing of chemicals on dogs, for instance, was shown on Channel 4 as part of a series on unpleasant aspects of life in the countryside, while Platform Films' *Who Killed Mark Faulkner?* was broadcast on the BBC, as mentioned above. Yet without a dedicated platform for oppositional documentary after 1995, the genre's presence on television significantly reduced. *Critical Eye* broadcast films similar to *Exodus*, *Listen to Us*, *Life in the Fast Lane* and *Seeds of Hope* to audiences in the hundreds of thousands just a few years prior to their production. After the demise of the series, the only oppositional filmmakers able to maintain anything like high-profile visibility for their work were those with distinct directorial personas. These oppositional auteurs constitute the second strand of oppositional feature documentary in the 1990s.

Section Two

Franny Armstrong as oppositional auteur

As a filmmaker whose career began in the latter half of the 1990s, Armstrong is a useful case-study with which to explore how the development of a distinct auteur persona and filmmaking style helped her negotiate a period in which television's support for oppositional documentary had all but disappeared. Tracing the development of this persona and style across her first three films[22] – the two versions of *McLibel* (1997 and 2005) and *Drowned Out* (2002) – I will show how they have facilitated her development into one of the few relatively high-profile oppositional filmmakers whose work receives both broadcast transmission and cinema distribution.

The 1997 version of *McLibel* shows these filmmaking strategies in the early stages of their development. Although some of the characteristics of the style for which she would later become known are in evidence, such as formal inventiveness and celebrity endorsement, they are overshadowed by more conservative documentary conventions, typified by the use of a stereotypically 'objective' narrator. In *Drowned Out*, these more conventional strategies recede, the celebrity presence increases and the film adopts the more subjective tone suited to an authorial, oppositional

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[22] I do not consider her shorter and less significant *Baked Alaska* (2002).

auteur. By the 2005 version of *McLibel*, these strategies have matured into a distinctive oppositional style, complete with formal idiosyncrasies and politically radical arguments endorsed by a range of high-profile political figures (behind and in front of the camera).

Moreover, permeating the publicity for all three films is Armstrong's carefully constructed persona as an informal, do-it-yourself filmmaker whose films result from a combination of relentless hard-work, jovial disposition and political commitment. Without denying Armstrong any of these characteristics, this persona also constitutes a valuable commercial asset with which her films can be marketed. As such, as we will see, certain characteristics are foregrounded (her risky, happy-go-lucky attitude, for instance) while others are effaced (such as her familial ties to the film industry). Nevertheless, this persona and the filmmaking style expressing it have seen Armstrong maintain a high-profile within oppositional film culture.

McLibel (1997)

Both versions of *McLibel* tell the story of the 'McLibel Two', Helen Steel and Dave Morris, two activists sued by McDonald's in 1990 for handing out allegedly libellous leaflets about the corporation outside one of its restaurants. Prior to the McLibel case, McDonald's had an established policy of threatening with legal action those critical of its practices.[23] Faced with the potentially crippling expense of libel proceedings (not covered by legal aid), critics of the corporation would hastily retract their claims and be made to apologise in public. Steel and Morris refused to do so and fought McDonald's in court on each point in the leaflet. The resulting trial became the longest in British legal history[24] and the outcome, according to the defendants, 'exposed the notoriously oppressive and unfair UK libel laws [and] proved that determined and widespread grass roots protest and defiance can undermine those who try to silence their critics' (Steel and Morris, 2005). Of Armstrong's two attempts at documenting the case, however, only the 2005 version of *McLibel* attracted significant interest. In addition to cinema distribution, DVD release and broadcast

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[23] See Carey (1999) and Schlosser (2002). According to Schlosser, during the 1980s alone the corporation threatened to sue 'at least fifty British publications and organisations, including Channel 4, the *Sunday Times*, the *Guardian*, student publications, a vegetarian society, and a Scottish young theatre group' (246).
[24] Even before Steel and Morris appealed the decision and took the British government to the European Court of Human Rights in 2005, winning £57,000 for being denied a fair trial in the first place (Mansfield, 2009, 343).

transmission on BBC2, for instance, it was also selected as one of *Ten Documentaries That Shook the World*, a season curated by Mark Cousins at the BFI Southbank in 2008. As Cousins says, although 'these films were chosen because of their social impact, that impact is in part explained by aesthetics' (2007, 26). Aesthetics is part of the reason for the dearth of attention accorded to the 1997 *McLibel*, a film marked by a formal conservatism that Armstrong had abandoned by the time she updated the film in 2005.

This conservatism is epitomised in the film's structuring principle of the voice-of-God narrator, a formal convention which blatantly contradicts the starkly unequal power relationship between McDonald's and the defendants. This is the main organising force in the film, structuring the viewers' access to and interpretation of the material, and fundamentally undermines the position of commitment from which oppositional documentary typically approaches its subject matter. Furthermore, the clipped, well-spoken tones of the narrator contrasts with the local London accents of Steel, Morris and Charlie (Morris' six-year-old son). Combined with the position of power that an unseen, omniscient narrator occupies in relation to the subjects on screen, this formal structure produces a clear divide between the viewer and the protagonists.

This version of the film also, however, displays evidence of the astute strategy and bold filmmaking style that would go on to define Armstrong's authorial signature. The best example of this is the film's reconstruction of the courtroom cross-examinations. Contrasting with the conventional documentary tropes of objectivity and balance, these expressive, heavily stylised sequences feature actors playing the roles of judge and witnesses for McDonald's, and Steel and Morris playing themselves. With the characters placed against a looming black background, the echo of their voices signifying the austerity of the courtroom, these scenes abandon conventional documentary realism in favour of emphasising their own construction and celebrating Morris and Steel's efforts at cross-examining witnesses themselves. As such, these reconstructed scenes are much more suited to politically committed documentary.

The responsibility for such a bold aesthetic decision was Armstrong's, and this distinctive disregard for formal boundaries is one of the characteristics that would go on to define her auteur persona (Armstrong, 1997). However, since they were shot by Ken Loach, these sequences are also

indicative of Armstrong's typically astute use of celebrity. One of Britain's best-established and respected oppositional filmmakers, his contribution to the film was a powerful endorsement. As Armstrong says on the website for her production company, Spanner Films,

> Ken's involvement in the film immediately gave it a level of kudos that had previously been sorely lacking and enabled us to sell the finished product to [overseas] television and cinema all across the world, meaning about 22 million people have now seen it. So, Ken, thank you so much for believing in us and helping getting the McLibel story out there. (Armstrong, 1997)

As we will see, securing the support of famous or respected figures is a strategy Armstrong would develop in her later work.

The informal tone in the passage from which the above quotation is taken is also revealing of Franny's emergent directorial persona. The text notes that their offer to interview McDonald's were met with replies saying 'thanks but no thanks', for instance, and at the bottom of the page a jovial asterisk explains that the month for which they borrowed her father's editing suite in fact '= two years' (Armstrong, 1997). This kind of language helps to articulate the fine blend of informality, competence, impulsiveness and commitment that constitute Armstrong's persona. Constructed as an autodidact who picked up a camera one day and became a director, this persona pervades Spanner Films' website and the publicity for Armstrong's films. For example, her biography on the website describes her as a 'former pop drummer and self-taught filmmaker' who 'dreamt up the whole kaboodle' of Spanner Films (Spanner Films, 2012b). Her decision to request Loach's assistance, meanwhile, emphasises that 'this was Franny's first film, she barely knew how to do documentary, let alone drama' (Armstrong, 1997).

Of course, while Armstrong's persona is not necessarily deceitful, it is somewhat economical with the truth. She had been a drummer in a band before she made *McLibel*, for instance, and she is Spanner Films' founder. However, as we saw in Chapter Two, her father, Peter Armstrong, had a twenty-five year career in radio and television at the BBC and until 2013 ran one of the most

significant video-activist NGOs in Britain. Unsurprisingly, *McLibel* benefitted significantly from her family background. It was shot with a Betacam SP – the industrial standard for 'high-end' production houses at that time (Digimad, 2011) – and edited on a state-of-the-art Avid edit suite at her father's house in Oxfordshire (Armstrong, 1997).

Armstrong does not deny this background or the support it afforded her, but they are distanced from her directorial persona as a self-taught auteur. Again, this is perfectly reasonable in the sense that *McLibel* (especially the 2005 version) is a remarkable film and her achievements as its director should be recognised in their own right – not over-shadowed because of her father's successful career. However, distancing herself from the advantages of her family background also makes distinct commercial sense. As we have seen, support for oppositional documentary from the television industry was increasingly unlikely after the mid-1990s (indeed, the DVD release of the second version includes the stack of rejection letters the first film received from television executives as part of the disc's special features). In this context, a distinct directorial persona is an especially valuable commercial asset. Irrespective of its accuracy, Armstrong's persona as a former drummer who 'stumbled into' filmmaking because she cared so passionately about the issues raised by the McLibel case is one of the film's unique selling points (Spanner Films, 2010). Obviously, the more unusual or extraordinary this persona is, the more effective is its marketing potential. Thus, skirting those advantages or sources of support which do not add to this persona help protect its value. So, describing the background to *McLibel* in a promotional interview, for instance, Armstrong recognises her father's support but avoids any detail, instead foregrounding her novice status: 'I didn't know anything about filmmaking. Luckily my dad owned a TV production company so I said "can I borrow your camera for six months?" and he said "yeah fine"' (Spanner Films, 2010). As we will see, this auteur persona is something Armstrong developed over her next two films.

Drowned Out

Drowned Out represents a transitional point in the development of Armstrong's filmmaking style and identity. The appeal to an independent and objective spectator is discarded in favour of a more explicitly subjective rhetoric, and the film draws on celebrity endorsement and its surrounding

publicity, which in turn enhanced Armstrong's persona and helped market the film. The film documents the plight of a tribe of Adivasi (India's aboriginal ethnicity) in Central India whose villages along the banks of the river Narmada are being submerged as a result of one of the largest dam-building projects in the world: the Narmada River Development (NRD). For the Indian government and the industrialists who will be the primary beneficiaries of the NRD,[25] the dam represents the pinnacle of 21st century development. The Adivasi, meanwhile, face the eradication of their homes and livelihoods and either the displacement and dispersal of their families to overcrowded and under-resourced resettlement areas or destitution and degradation in inner-city slums. Faced with such a choice, many intend to drown with their land.

Like the first version of *McLibel*, *Drowned Out* also relies on a female narrator to provide its narrative cohesion. Unlike the earlier film, however, here this device is used, as in *Proud Arabs and Texan Oilmen*, to express an explicit position of support for the Adivasi. Introducing the conflict, for instance, the narrator states that the 'Narmada river reveals a dark secret in the history of modern progress', and denounces the woefully inadequate resettlement sites as places in which, contrary to the self-sufficiency of the Adivasi's current existence, 'everything depends on somebody else, and everything has to be paid for – a harsh introduction to the money economy'.

In addition to the explicitly supportive voice-over, the pronounced division between subject and spectator that characterised the first version of *McLibel* is discarded in favour of a more intimate approach. Here, much more of an effort is made to allow the talking-heads in the film to speak for themselves, either straight to camera or by providing a commentary of their own over sequences depicting the issues affecting them. Describing the poverty of one family who opted for financial reparation and moved to the city, the narrator explains how Omkar Thakys has become a rickshaw driver while his wife, Mumta, waits on a street corner each day hoping to find work as a construction labourer. Having introduced the sequence, the principle narrator recedes and it is the voices of the subjects themselves which contextualise and explain the images. Omar describes, for instance, how he sometimes manages to make the equivalent of half a dollar a day – not enough to move his family out

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[25] The film exposes the notion of the dam ever supplying fresh drinking water to drought affected regions as a hydrological impossibility.

of the slums. Over images of him working and sitting outside his shack, he asks 'do you think this is fair? They have flung us into the gutter here. Into this filth. Nobody thought about what would happen to us'. As a result of moving to the slums, a friend of theirs has contracted tuberculosis. Mumta, speaking almost directly into the camera, gestures around their living quarters: 'we live in the damp here. Of course diseases will spread. See all these people sitting here? All of them are ill'.

The film also makes use of a celebrity figure, this time in front of the camera: Arundhati Roy, the best-selling author and political activist, is one of the first talking-heads we see. 'This is the heart of politics, this is the story of modern India', she says, 'this is remote control brutality that should not be happening. You have to ask the question, "development for whom?" Who owns the forest? Who owns the river?' As the film shows, Roy's high-profile support for the campaign provides the villagers' struggle with much-needed media attention. Over footage of the media furore surrounding her visit to the submerging villages, for instance, the narrator explains that 'the people have no media, but they know that when Arundhati comes, the cameras will follow'.

Roy's contribution to *Drowned Out* functions in the same way. As with Loach's involvement in *McLibel*, her presence was a powerful endorsement of the film, and Armstrong was hopeful that *Drowned Out* would receive a television broadcast as a result. Writing of her attempts to get the film commissioned she recalls that, because of Roy's involvement, 'I did think we had a chance with this one' (Armstrong, 2002). Nevertheless, she says, '[p]lenty of TV companies were interested in the beautiful celebrity but none in how and why the famers had decided to drown', confirming her belief that 'British TV [was] no longer interested in poor people in faraway places' (Armstrong, 2002). Of course, with even Roy's presence unable to garner the film television broadcast, her endorsement of the film is arguably all the more important for subsequent sales of DVDs and streaming rights with which Armstrong can attempt to recoup the costs of its production.

The publicity for *Drowned Out* also demonstrates the development of Armstrong's directorial persona. The fact that the film did not receive a television commission became a part of its publicity, underscoring Armstrong's status as a truly independent filmmaker determined to expose injustice irrespective of financial support. The Spanner Films website describes the film as a 'no-budget, no-electricity, no-Hindi [in that most of the protagonists speak tribal dialects] documentary' (Spanner

Films, 2012c). Other publicity included Armstrong discussing the reasons 'why documentaries work better without a commission' and the virtues of making films 'independently, on your own with no money' (Armstrong, 2002). Although not mentioned, one of these reasons is the opportunity to foreground her persona as a penniless but impulsive independent filmmaker driven by political commitment.

As before, sources of support and assistance are not denied, but they are skirted in order to emphasise her spontaneous, do-it-yourself persona. For instance, explaining the background to the film, she describes how she came across the story when she saw an article in *The Guardian* 'over a shoulder on a crowded train one morning' (Armstrong, 2002). She phoned a friend 'who had accidently become a millionaire through a web company', who 'lent me a thousand pounds and I bought me and my sister two tickets to India' (Spanner Films, 2010). Six days later, she found herself 'sardined in the back of an Indian police truck winding through the Narmada River valley on my way to jail' (Armstrong, 2002).

Armstrong's partisan perspective is also readily acknowledged in *Drowned Out*'s publicity. For instance, when BBC journalist Anita Anand suggests that, by living with the Adivasi while making the film, Armstrong 'kind of crossed the line between documentary-maker and [became] much more involved', she agrees. This was a 'non-thinking process' where, arriving at the river in Jalsindi, Armstrong 'just headed straight into the water – stupidly, with my camera batteries and passport in my back pocket – and started to film' (Spanner Films, 2010). Again, this is not to cast doubt over Armstrong's claims or the sincerity of her intentions, but to recognise that these remarks also help create a recognisable directorial persona which functions as a valuable marketing tool. The more distinct Armstrong's status as an oppositional auteur, the more able she is to engage both mainstream publicity and distribution platforms.

Armstrong's position as a high-profile yet committed political filmmaker also enables her to access the support of other, more low-key aspects of oppositional film culture, despite her insistence that she 'can't stand activist films' and has 'never seen a good one' (Mees, 2011). Both *McLibel* and *Drowned Out* reveal close ties to these more activist-oriented grassroots film cultures. *McLibel* credits Undercurrents' co-founder Thomas Harding as camera operator, for instance, and cites the input of

oppositional photographer Nick Cobbing, whose work also features frequently in the video-activist culture of the 1990s.[26] *Drowned Out*, meanwhile, credits the Brighton-based video-activist organisation, Conscious Cinema. Their film *Suits and Savages* (2000) – produced in the group's second phase (see Chapter Four) – also focused on the World Bank's role in so-called 'eco-development' projects in India. Though *Suits and Savages* focuses more on the global political and economic function of the World Bank, *Drowned Out* also points to its culpability in the NRD project, having kick-started its development in 1987 with a $450 million loan. Armstrong's position as an oppositional auteur thus not only enables her to access mainstream publicity and distribution platforms but also to draw on those filmmakers whose work is less able to do so.

McLibel (2005)

The re-release of *McLibel* saw Armstrong's persona and filmmaking style fully developed. Her satirical, committed approach (hardly appropriate for *Drowned Out*'s life and death subject matter), is in evidence from the start, with *Star Wars* (1977) inspired opening titles unequivocally aligning the film with the defendants: 'A Long Time Ago There Was a Company That Made Lots of Money Selling Bits of Meat Between Two Bits of Bread...'. These titles also make much more explicit the underlying issue of England and Wales' anti-free speech libel laws: 'The Company Looked Around the World and Saw That in England There Existed a Special Law That Could Stop People Saying Things the Company Didn't Like. And Make Them Say Sorry'. As with the other sections of the narrative (such as Steel and Morris' relationship, the legal team for McDonald's, and Morris struggling to look after Charlie and work on the case), the issue of libel law is introduced much more clearly, Keir Starmer QC explaining the 'huge and disproportionate burden' of proof which is placed on those accused of making libellous statements. Gone also is the narrator. Instead, Steel, Morris and the other talking-heads provide their own commentary over the images. As well as Loach's original reconstruction scenes, new re-enactment footage adds extra dramatic effect to sequences detailing the

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[26] Cobbing covered the McLibel campaign, which also featured on *Undercurrents 2* (1995). His work frequently accompanies Undercurrents press material and was featured on many of Undercurrents' newsreels, and he is interviewed on Undercurrents' *Globalisation and the Media* (2002).

infiltration by corporate spies, paid by McDonald's (McSpotlight, 2005), of the London Green Peace[27] anarchist group of which Steel and Morris were a part. These bold aesthetic decisions are also evident in the narrative device reconstructing Helen Steel's diary, which clearly demarcates the chronological progression of the case and adds a level of intimacy to the characters.

The 2005 version also features new talking-head celebrities, most notably Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation* (2002), and includes footage from Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004). The DVD special-features also include commentaries by Steel and Morris and by Ken Loach, and interviews with Schlosser, Vandana Shiva, Michael Mansfield and other well-known figures. This version of *McLibel* is also the most explicitly oppositional in terms of the fundamental political ideas it addresses. The clearest example of this is in the entirely new ending, which sees Armstrong follow Steel and Morris on their journey to the European Court of Human Rights to argue that they had been denied the right to a fair trial in the original case. As with the decision to rid this version of the original voice-over, Steel and Morris are left to make the film's most defiant, lucid and radical argument themselves. Sitting in the sleeper carriage of the Eurostar, Armstrong (off-camera) says, 'ok, so we know you don't like corporations, but what's the alternative?' The pair's relaxed, conversational response provides the commentary to footage of their disembarking the train and journeying to the court:

> **Dave Morris:** The alternative is basically taking control over our own lives, our own communities, our own workplaces and making all the decisions about our lives and our environment – deciding what happens to the resources [and] what work needs to be done.
>
> **Helen Steel:** People say 'oh, it just could never work – you'd have all these people going around murdering and stealing and things like that', but actually, that's what happens in this society already. Right now you've got corporations and wealthy individuals that own vast swathes of the planet and deny other people access to them. And that's stolen from everybody else.

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[27] The group, active between 1972 and 2001, were not affiliated with the better known Greenpeace organisation (Klein, 2001, 388).

DM: Obviously there's always going to be problems in whatever society you have, but the aim is to get rid of all the unnecessary problems: poverty in the midst of plenty, for example, or some people owning fifty houses and others not having a home to live in.

HS: Most so-called anti-social behaviour is people fighting over the crumbs that fall from the table. The real people who are behaving anti-socially are those that control all the resources and deprive other people of what should be shared amongst us all.

DM: [we need to] remove all governments and corporations who care only about profits and power, and take things into our own hands. Obviously, that's basically transforming society. That's a revolution. But not just on a single day. This is building up over a period of years strong grass-roots movements until one day we can take over all the decision-making ourselves, and look after our planet.

Such an explicit statement of revolutionary politics is rare even among a film culture generally predisposed to radical perspectives. As we have seen, Armstrong's blend of tenacity and independence, combined with a lot of support, encouragement, opportunity and a carefully crafted auteur persona and filmmaking style, combine to make *McLibel* a rare example of an oppositional feature film to gain significant exposure.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored two divergent strands of oppositional feature documentary in the 1990s. The first consisted of films made with low budgets by filmmakers closely related to activist communities or who self-identified as activists themselves. The second strand consisted of films produced by oppositional auteurs, those filmmakers who seek mainstream platforms of distribution and exhibition for their work, their access to which is aided by clearly identifiable directorial identities, recognisable styles of filmmaking and distinct auteur personas. Of course, while these two strands are clearly identifiable, they are not completely separate. Those low-budget filmmakers who received Channel 4 support, for instance, would have had access to considerable financial assistance

unavailable to those making films after that support was eradicated, and would hardly have turned down cinema exhibition had it been offered them. Furthermore, as the case-study of Franny Armstrong reveals, although she is well-connected to the mainstream film industry and has a carefully constructed directorial identity and filmmaking style, she is also allied with the more grassroots activist-oriented strand of oppositional documentary, even though she does not identify as an 'activist filmmaker' (Mees, 2011).

That grassroots strand of oppositional documentary received unprecedented levels of exhibition in the first half of the 1990s as a result of the IFVD at Channel 4. Indeed, the wealth of radical British documentary broadcast by the channel in this period is astonishing, yet the films and the series in which they were shown have been sorely neglected in histories of both radical British film and of the channel more generally. In fact, as I have shown, this neglect also characterises much of the debate about the channel's radical output in the 1980s. Although this decade has been much more widely discussed than the 1990s, that discussion has itself focused overwhelmingly on Channel 4's broadcast of the aesthetic avant-garde, all but effacing the political avant-garde altogether. In part, of course, the focus on the 1980s and on the aesthetic avant-garde is understandable. The 1980s is indeed the most radical period in the channel's history, and many of the changes that took place which caused the radicalism of the 1980s to come to an end took place around the end of the decade and the beginning of the next. Furthermore, one of the reasons that the formal radicalism of the aesthetic avant-garde was singled out in particular is because it most obviously met Channel 4's remit to encourage innovation and experiment in both the form and the content of programmes.

However, this focus on formal radicalism has overshadowed those works of the political avant-garde which were broadcast in both the 1980s and the 1990s. Indeed, although the flagship series of the IFVD in the 1980s is discussed almost exclusively in terms of its value for the aesthetic avant-garde, *The Eleventh Hour* also showed a range of films produced by the political avant-garde. While none of the series known for broadcasting the aesthetic avant-garde in the 1980s continued into the 1990s, other series, such as *The Dazzling Image* and *Midnight Underground*, continued that tradition. Just as series showcasing experimental or formally radical work continued into the 1990s, so did series specialising in the political avant-garde. Furthermore, while programmes in these latter

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series were not characterised by formal experimentation, often they were hardly conventional in their aesthetic approach. Although my discussion of this period has been limited to just three films from one series, I hope this has been sufficient to demonstrate that this is an area worthy of further investigation. As well as the other filmmakers and organisations shoe work *Critical Eye* showcased, such as Glen Ellis, Penny Dedman, Marc Karlin and Lusia Films, Pramar Pratibhar, the Steel Bank Film Co-op, Yvette Vanson, Christine Ward and Tessa Shaw of PoW Television, other series, such as *Out*, *Global Image* and *War Cries*, also warrant attention.

The demise of Channel 4 as a broadcast platform did not eradicate this strand of oppositional documentary. Although their work was no longer being seen by hundreds of thousands of people, these activist-oriented feature filmmakers continued making films, albeit for a dramatically reduced audience. Without a broadcast platform, this strand of oppositional documentary was distributed among informal networks of activists and community groups, similar to the one established by Undercurrents for their newsreel (see Chapter One). However, while the decline of a dedicated broadcast platform for oppositional documentary severely reduced the presence of the genre on television, it was not completely absent from the airwaves. Some oppositional documentary was broadcast as part of other series, although television broadcast was mostly reserved for those few filmmakers who could claim the status of oppositional auteurs. All three of John Pilger's films made in the 1990s were broadcast on television, for instance, as was work by Adam Curtis and Nick Broomfield. As I have argued, given that her career was just beginning in the latter half of the 1990s, Franny Armstrong is an especially interesting filmmaker with which to explore how the creation of a directorial persona and filmmaking style helped her negotiate a context in which institutional support for oppositional documentary was in decline. Analysis of the two versions *McLibel* and *Drowned Out* clearly show the development of her persona and accompanying filmmaking style, and it is her resultant status as a high profile oppositional auteur that has enabled her to flourish in ways that others have not.

4   Oppositional Feature Documentary since 2000:

Liberal-humanists and Radical Activists

Introduction

This chapter investigates oppositional feature documentary produced in Britain since 2000. As one would expect, this encompasses a wide range of films produced by a variety of groups and organisations with different practices, politics and resources. Nevertheless, while a comprehensive account of this body of work is beyond the scope of a single chapter, it is possible to outline the general development of the genre in this period.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, contemporary oppositional feature documentary is characterised by three distinct strands. The two strands which characterised the genre in the 1990s – low-budget, activist-oriented films and films produced by oppositional auteur filmmakers – remain today, though the former no longer enjoys the support received from Channel 4 in the first half of that decade. With such support structures for radical film production no longer available, political documentary has since the mid-2000s become a distinct commercial sector within the film and television industry. Consequently, this third strand of oppositional feature documentary receives relatively substantial funding and reasonably widespread distribution, and has become the most visible aspect of the genre as a result. However, it also tends to be distinctly less oppositional in outlook than either low-budget activist-oriented documentaries or those produced by oppositional auteur filmmakers. Instead, this kind of filmmaking is best described as 'liberal-humanist', an ideology characterised by a preference for individual solutions to social problems and limited to reformist arguments fundamentally amenable to the status quo.

This chapter is divided into two sections, the first of which explores this liberal-humanist strand of oppositional feature documentary. Beginning with a more thorough explanation of the term 'liberal-humanist', I will argue that one of the consequences of this ideological orientation is the sponsorship of political filmmaking by corporations. Eager for their brand identities to appear socially

responsible, corporate 'branded documentaries' (Jack, 2009) are an increasingly prominent part of liberal-humanist documentary. In part, branded documentaries and the liberal-humanist ideology they espouse (and which facilitates their production) is a result of the commercialisation of British broadcasting discussed in Chapter Three. As we will see, Channel 4 remains a key institution in this strand of documentary, but as the primary funder of another organisation, The Channel 4 BRITDOC Foundation, which brokers partnerships between filmmakers and corporations or charities. Along with Dogwoof, the London-based distributor specialising in 'social issue films and documentaries' (Dogwoof, 2012), and Dartmouth Films, a production company with the tagline, 'documentaries that make a difference' (Dartmouth Films, 2013),[1] BRITDOC are responsible for the vast majority of liberal-humanist documentary produced or distributed in the Britain since 2006.[2] Section One explores BRITDOC in more detail, before investigating how the liberal-humanist ideology at its heart manifests itself in *The End of the Line* (2009), one of its flagship branded documentaries.

Having discussed Franny Armstrong as an oppositional auteur in Chapter Three, Section Two is dedicated exclusively to a discussion of activist-oriented films. Of course, Armstrong's recent work as well as that of other contemporary oppositional auteurs is also in need of further research, even if filmmakers such as John Pilger and Adam Curtis have received a modicum of critical attention.[3] In

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[1] Originally co-founded by management and marketing executives Andy Whittaker and Anna Godas to distribute foreign language films in 2006, Dogwoof began distributing 'socially important documentaries' (Harbottle cited in Chase, 2008) around 2008 with films such as *Black Gold* (2006), *Crude Awakening* (2006) and *The Devil Came on Horseback* (2007). Dartmouth Films was founded by the ex- stockbroker, Christopher Hird, in 2008, and includes in its portfolio a range of social, political and environmental documentaries, some of which involved collaborations with BRITDOC. *The End of the Line* is one of these, for which Hird is credited as Executive Producer.

[2] Films supported by BRITDOC include *Up in Smoke* (2011), *The End of the Line* (2009), *Steal This Film II* (2007) and *Black Gold*. Dogwoof distributed *The End of the Line* and *Black Gold* and are also responsible for the distribution of *Just Do It* (2011) and *The Age of Stupid* (2009). Dogwoof's overseas catalogue, meanwhile, includes *The Island President* (2012), *Better This World* (2012), *If a Tree Falls* (2011), *Blood in the Mobile* (2011), *Countdown to Zero* (2010), *GasLand* (2010), *The Green Wave* (2010), *Into Eternity* (2010), *The Vanishing of the Bees* (2009), *Petropolis* (2009), *The Shock Doctrine* (2009), *Collapse* (2009), *Videocracy* (2009), *Bananas!** (2009), *H2Oil* (2009), *Crude* (2009), *The Yes Men Fix the World* (2009), *Burma VJ* (2008), *Food Inc.* (2008) and *A Crude Awakening* (2006). BRITDOC's support for non-UK films includes *The Interrupters* (2011), *Out in the Silence* (2009) and *We Are Together* (2006). Both companies had input into *The Yes Men Fix the World*. Dartmouth Films also had input into *The End of the Line* and *Just Do It*, while other recent films in its portfolio include *Fire in the Blood* (2012), *The Flaw* (2011), *The Kids Britain Doesn't Want* (2010) and *The Interconnected World* (2010). Its forthcoming films include *We're Only Trying to Help*, *The Spirit Level* and *The Cotton Film: Dirty White Gold*.

[3] On Pilger see Spindler-Brown (2010), Hayward (2007), Goddard et al (2007), Barsamian (2002) and Dixon (2002). On Curtis see Preston (2011), Rosenbaum (2008) and Arthur (2007a and b).

contrast, research on activist-oriented filmmakers is practically non-existent. So, in an attempt to redress this situation, I focus on those to the exclusion of the better known oppositional filmmakers.

However, even this strand of activist-oriented oppositional documentary is difficult to navigate. The films comprising it differ enormously in terms of their political contexts, subject matter and form, and attempts at categorising them are inevitably inadequate to such complex variables. Nevertheless, while the categories and distinctions with which such heterogeneous work can be understood are invariably porous, such boundaries are useful markers with which to begin the process of navigating that work. With this in mind, Section Two is divided into three sub-sections. First, I discuss the cluster of anti-summit films produced just after the turn of the century. As the alter-globalisation movement expressed itself in a series of protests at G8 summits and other meetings of global financial institutions, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), activist filmmakers produced a series of films supporting the protests and documenting the police brutality with which they were greeted. I also discuss other films produced in this period, such as *Suits and Savages: Why the World Bank Won't Save the World* (2000) and *Rebel Colours: Prague 2000* (2000), before the shifting political and technological contexts marked a corresponding shift in activist documentary production later into the decade.

Second, I focus on Platform Films and SchMOVIES as two of the most prominent producers of activist-oriented feature documentary in the 2000s. Platform is one of the longest-running producers of such work in the country. As we saw in Chapter Three, it produced work throughout the 1980s and 1990s and has remained active in the 2000s, despite receiving almost no recognition since the 1980s and their work with *The Miners' Campaign Tapes.* In contrast, as we saw in Chapter Two, SchMOVIES is one of the more recent additions to contemporary oppositional film culture, and work predominantly as a video-activist organisation. They have also, however, produced two feature films remarkable for the ways in which they embody the characteristics and politics of the protest culture with which they are aligned: *SchNEWS at Ten: The Movie* (2005) and *On the Verge* (2008). Finally, the third sub-section is dedicated to sketching out in more detail the culture of which Platform and SchMOVIES are a part. This consists of a great many more filmmakers which can be broadly divided into two types, which I will consider turn. First, activist-oriented films, by either more experienced

oppositional filmmakers or newcomers, which nevertheless rely upon much the same informal, grassroots and local networks of production, distribution and exhibition. Second, works which circulate at the boundary between activist filmmaking and liberal-humanist sector of the mainstream film industry.

Section One

Liberal-humanism and branded documentary

'Liberal-humanism' is a term that requires some clarification. As Tony Davies points out, 'humanism' alone is a word with a more complex definitional history than most: 'like "realism" or socialism"', he argues, it is a word 'whose range of possible uses runs from the pedantically exact to the cosmically vague' (1997, 3). One could make the same argument with regards to 'liberalism', a word which frequently demands its own league of prefixes to specify whether one is discussing its classical, social, democratic, egalitarian and ethical traditions, or its deontological, individualist, perfectionist, meliorist or universalist varieties. Therefore, it is important to establish the key ideas which inform my usage of 'liberal-humanism' here, and which make it a suitable descriptor for this contemporary strand of oppositional feature documentary.

Liberalism and humanism share many of the same values. Two related themes of both ideologies that inform my usage are an emphasis on rational and reasonable individuals as the key component of society, with a corresponding suspicion of or doubt in social structures or 'metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1976, xxiv-xxv). Tolerance is another characteristic of liberal-humanism, more pronounced in liberal thought than in humanist, while a fundamental focus on or belief in universal human characteristics is a defining feature of the latter. These are the seemingly positive key values associated with liberal-humanism, though together they combine into a reformist ideology which is counter to the more radical values found in oppositional politics. Because of the way in which both liberalism and humanism 'enshrine the autonomous and rational individual as the central unit of society' (Carroll, 1993, 124), overriding social structures cannot be targeted, much less critiqued. A Marxist critique would thus argue, for instance, that liberal-humanism is incapable of

'radicalism' in the literal sense of the word because it is unable to address root causes of structural problems.

Liberalism's attachment to tolerance is also a consequence of viewing society as composed primarily of rational and autonomous individuals. If society is composed of citizens 'profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical and moral doctrines' (Rawls, 2005, xix), the liberal response is to formulate a political philosophy tolerant of them all. Indeed, a central tenet of political liberalism's philosophy is that it is 'it does not attack or criticize any reasonable view' (Rawls, 2005, xix). If reason holds that human well-being is best served by facilitating primarily private property rights and de-regulating markets, liberalism is thus incapable of staging a serious counter-argument. For instance, in one of the classic works of liberal philosophy, John Rawls acknowledges the basic liberties of the citizen to have and hold personal property but will not address the key issue of productive properties and whether these should be under social or private ownership (298).[4] Retreating to a stage where all 'reasonable' doctrines are equally valid, and therefore to be tolerated, renders liberalism incapable of challenging fundamental inequalities in control and ownership of resources, which most on the radical left would argue are the root causes of many social and economic problems.

Meanwhile, one of the appeals of humanism's universal human characteristics, rights and responsibilities is its promise to rise above the messy, conflict-ridden world of politics. Yet, however attractive this might sometimes seem, it is equally incapable of challenging inequality in systems which claim those universal human characteristics as their own.[5] Wedded to hegemonic ideas about universal reason and humanity, humanism is unable to perceive the ideological nature of those ideas because of its categorical prioritisation of 'concrete individuals over abstract systems' (Davies, 1997,

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[4] Brushing these questions aside as issues to be decided according to the particular social and economic context of the society in question, Rawls contends that it is 'improbable that ... control of economic activity in a socially regulated system would be more just on balance than control exercised by means of prices' (1971, 281). The most progressive alternative he suggests is that 'positions and offices' of the elites to are available to all under conditions of 'fair equality of opportunity' (2005, 4).

[5] For instance, describing the attitudes of liberals to the rise of Nazism in Germany, Davies cites Thomas Mann's realisation that it was 'precisely the fastidious political abstinence of liberal bourgeois like himself that had permitted it to happen, and that he could not absolve his class and his generation of responsibility for the approaching catastrophe' (1997, 45). By refusing to intervene, seeing only individual 'silliness', as E.M Forster described it (cited in Davies, 1997, 43), and not the ideological framework of which anti-Semitism was a part, humanism's ideological refusal to recognise or engage with politics at an ideological level shows how potentially dangerous attractively 'non-political' or 'universal' value systems can be.

41). Unable to acknowledge, for example, the fundamental 'antagonism [between] oppressing and oppressed classes' that, according to Marx, constitutes the course of human history (1848), humanism cannot articulate the fact that the 'ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' (Marx, 1846). According to Marx's view, human nature is changeable, capable of adapting to the organisation of the forces and relations of production in any given epoch (Harman, 2008). When human nature is designated selfish and competitive (or whatever the dominant class deems it to be), humanism therefore has no theoretical ground from which to stage an objection. It is for these reasons that humanism has been denounced as 'an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society [and] the marginalisation and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose name it pretends to speak' (Davies, 1997, 5).

I will argue that all these limitations apply to the liberal-humanist strand of oppositional documentary. In spite of these limitations, however, liberal-humanist documentaries can be influential tools with which to draw attention to pressing social, political, economic and environmental problems. Yet while they draw attention to these problems, they also tend to steer clear of suggesting the fundamental changes necessary to rectify them, suggesting instead individualist or consumerist solutions which are largely amenable to the existing state of things. *Black Gold* (2006), for example, is a powerful exposé of exploitation in the coffee industry and of the brutality and injustice of the international monetary system on which that industry depends. However, the most radical response suggested by the film is that audiences use their consumer power to push for fair trade. According to the booklet accompanying the *Black Gold* DVD, the three ways to 'take action' include persuading people to buy the DVD, 'voting with your wallet' and putting pressure on politicians (Francis and Francis, 2006). This preference for political change to stem from consumers, corporations and other top-down 'change-makers' is typical of liberal-humanist politics. Unwilling or unable to stage more radical criticisms of the fundamental socio-economic and political structures that cause the very problems the film is addressing, *Black Gold* ultimately suggests solutions agreeable to those structures – after all, 'ethical' consumerism is still consumerism. Indeed, so compatible is liberal-humanism with consumerism that, since the mid-2000s, corporations have increasingly funded the production of liberal-humanist documentaries themselves.

Corporate sponsorship of documentary is not a new phenomenon, of course. For instance, John Grierson and the British documentary movement, for example, are well known for having made films for corporations including Shell, Ford and the British Gas and Coke Company, among others, and for the state, as the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) and the General Post-Office Unit (GPU) (Aitken, 1990). Indeed, this period is only the most celebrated of a much longer history of corporate sponsored documentary in Britain, ranging from before WW1 (Russell, 2003a) to the post WW2 'golden era of industrial filmmaking' (Russell, 2003b and 2012) and after. Recently, however, corporate sponsorship has become an increasingly prominent part of the contemporary liberal-humanist strand of oppositional documentary for at least two reasons. First, oppositional filmmakers have turned increasingly towards private or commercial sources of funding for their work as public or state-funded support structures have been eradicated. As we saw in Chapter Three, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government dismantled deals like the Workshop Agreement in the 1990s as part of their wider programme of deregulation and privatisation, and the expansion of branding and other corporate practices in the film and television industries result from those policies (Johnson, 2012, 81).

Second, corporations are increasingly turning to documentary as a means of fulfilling their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agendas. As successive British governments have pursued neoliberal policies broadly similar to those of Thatcher's government, recent decades have seen corporate power and profitability rise to unprecedented levels (Harvey, 2005, 16-17). As a result, corporations have come under increasing pressure to justify their profits and 'off-set' their devastating social, economic and environmental impacts. Now a standard part of the modern corporation, CSR was initially developed as a response to anti-corporate activism in the 1970s and 1980s, which reached new highs in 1995 when Shell was accused of complicity in the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other activists in Nigeria (the same year as Greenpeace exposed Shell's plans simply to sink its Brent Spar oil platform instead of disposing of it in an environmentally responsible way) (Corporate Watch, 2006, 6). Following Shell's lead, corporations invested large amounts of capital in campaigns to make their activities appear socially and ethically responsible, and since that time CSR has become an established industry in its own right.

That the development of CSR was roughly coterminous with the dismantling of funding structures for oppositional documentary is unsurprising given that they were ultimately part of the same neoliberal project. It is also unsurprising, therefore, that the funding needs of filmmakers eventually coincided with the CSR agendas. Of the variety of CSR strategies that have developed over the last twenty years, the sponsoring of awards and Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) are two of the most visible ways in which corporate interests have manifested themselves in oppositional documentary culture. According to one of its advocates, CRM can be defined as 'a commercial activity by which a business with a product, service or image to market builds a relationship with a cause or number of causes for mutual benefit' (Adkins, 1999, 11).

However, while documentaries subject to CRM and other CSR strategies undoubtedly benefit from the funding they receive, the 'causes' do not. Corporations are beholden by law to act in the best interests of their shareholders, and therefore will not support documentaries which place social needs over corporate revenue. As Corporate Watch argue, 'tackling the big issues of overconsumption, climate change and massive economic inequality requires major shifts in our lifestyles and systems of social organisation' (2006). Liberal-humanist documentary addresses these issues, but does not argue for the 'major' changes required to deal with them. As such, it is the ideal vehicle for CSR campaigns, aligning corporations with progressive causes whilst promoting the individualist and consumerist solutions from which those corporations benefit. At present, the Channel 4 BRITDOC Foundation is the leading proponent of liberal-humanist oppositional documentary in Britain, and is increasingly specialising in the production of corporate sponsored 'branded documentary'. The next part of this chapter explores that organisation in more detail, before focusing on its flagship 'branded documentary', *The End of the Line*.

BRITDOC and branded documentary

The BRITDOC Foundation was founded in 2005 by Jess Search, Beadie Finzi and Maxyne Franklin. Search has long been a prominent figure in Britain's 'independent' film industry, having co-founded the networking site for independent filmmakers, Shooting People, in 1998 before going on to work as

a Commissioning Editor for Channel 4 for five years.[6] She was instrumental in the founding of

BRITDOC and is currently the organisation's Chief Executive. A self-proclaimed 'social-

entrepreneurship organisation' (2012a), BRITDOC's primary function is to broker partnerships

between filmmakers and a variety of funding sources, from charities and NGOs to corporations such

as Orange, Ford, Waitrose, Saatchi & Saatchi, Stella Artois, Nokia, Google and ASDA Wal-mart.

However, the three main organisations with which BRITDOC is partnered are Channel 4, The Bertha

Foundation and Puma. The company received its foundation funding from Channel 4 in 2005, and as

BRITDOC's founding sponsor the channel has first option to broadcast any of the films the

Foundation finances from its UK production fund. Entitled the 'Channel 4 BRITDOC Fund', it is the

largest of the four different sources of financial support that the organisation offers, and it is available

to 'British and British-based filmmakers' with projects deemed unattractive to broadcasters

(BRITDOC, 2012b). If successful, the funds available range between £10,000 and £30,000, with an

average of £20,000 invested in each project.

While this is the fund most likely to contribute to British documentary, the organisation also

offers three other funding streams in association with its two other major supporters. The Bertha

Foundation[7] is a philanthropic organisation that has contributed £1.5 million funding for two of the

three other funds, the Bertha Journalism Fund and the Bertha Connect Fund, both of which offer

between £5000 and £50,000.[8] BRITDOC's partnership with Puma, the multinational sports clothing

corporation, began in 2010 with the Puma.Creative Fund (BRITDOC, 2012e). Currently divided into

seven categories, the primary fund is the 'Creative Catalyst Award' which provides up to €5,000 for

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[6] As Commissioning Editor, she produced Emily James' mini-series, *Don't Worry* (2004), as well as her short film about globalisation, *The Luckiest Nut in the World* (2004) (see below).

[7] The Bertha Foundation responded to my attempts to find out more about their organisation by regretfully informing me that, as they had decided to maintain a 'low profile', they were not at liberty to disclose any further information than the little that is available on their website.

[8] The first of these is an international fund 'dedicated to supporting long form feature documentaries of a journalistic nature' (BRITDOC, 2012c). Recognising that journalistic documentaries are often ongoing projects that are unattractive to conventional modes of film funding, this fund specifically aims to work with filmmakers that have journalistic backgrounds or who are working with journalists (BRITDOC, 2012c). The second is another internationally available fund. Announced at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IFDA) in 2011, the Bertha Connect Fund is BRITDOC's most recent development, and aims to support 'smart, strategic outreach campaigns for ambitious independent documentary films with a social issue at their core; films which have the ability to achieve real change on a local, regional or global level' (BRITDOC, 2012d).

documentaries in the early stages of production. Far more lucrative is the annual prize of €50,000 for the Puma.Creative Impact Award, the first winner of which was *The End of the Line* in 2011.

Liberal-humanism is the ideological orientation which best describes BRITDOC's approach to its funding partnerships, whether these be with its three main funders or with any of the other brand identities with which it works. This orientation is encapsulated in BRITDOC's slogan, 'Real Good', two words which themselves brand almost all of the organisation's activities. Helpfully polysemic, 'real' and 'good' appeal to an apparently universal ethical code, allowing BRITDOC's political scope to remain ideologically elastic at the same time as it draws political capital from the positive connotations of its slogan. 'Real Good' thus ideally serves liberalism's famous insistence 'that fundamental political matters should not be decided by reference to any controversial moral, religious or philosophical doctrines' (Quong, 2007, 320). The opening declaration of BRITDOC's executive in its promotional catalogue demonstrates their expertise in avoiding controversy, stating that '[d]ocumentary films are just beginning to show us the global impact they can have – changing minds, hearts, lives, influencing governments and press and inspiring individuals to work for change' (BRITDOC, 2011a, 1). This classically liberal-humanist statement is so careful to avoid positioning itself too far from the political status quo that it is amenable to almost any political position. Having global impact, influencing governments and the press, and changing minds, hearts and lives are objectives that can be claimed across the political spectrum, as well as the corporate one.

Indeed, BRITDOC readily acknowledge the ways in which documentaries can help corporations improve their public image. As Search says, 'documentaries are good for business' (BRITDOC, 2012f) because they 'can be authentic – something brands are eternally seeking to be when they communicate their values' (cited in Jack, 2009, 15). Of course, BRITDOC are also keen to show that the relationship between filmmakers and brands is mutually beneficial. Their website claims, for instance, that 'brands and documentary filmmakers have much in common; they both want to influence the hearts and minds of their target audience' (BRITDOC, 2012e). In fact, in 2011 BRITDOC published two reports aimed at demonstrating this mutually beneficial relationship. The first of these attempted to develop a methodology with which filmmakers could measure the social value of their films in financial terms, enabling them to 'report back' to their 'new investors and

stakeholders' the economic advantages of investing in their film (Search, 2011, 5). The second report attempts to evaluate *The End of the Line* in exactly these terms, compiling data from audience research and cinema and television releases to calculate its social impact (BRITDOC, 2011b).

Unsurprisingly, neither report considers the detrimental effects of these attempts to commodify political filmmaking. Furthermore, one should with treat with caution research written by a film's producers who acknowledge themselves as that film's 'greatest asset', and even recommend that the results on which their findings are based should be taken 'with a pinch of salt' (BRITDOC, 2011b, 4 and 24). Nevertheless, both reports demonstrate emphatically the considerable advantages to be gained from corporate investment. From production budgets to marketing and distribution campaigns, corporate brands' capital investment inevitably increases a documentary's potential social and political impact. Unsurprisingly, however, corporate sponsorship also tends to result in films which do not criticise those values on which corporate power and profitability depend. Consequently, while films in receipt of corporate sponsorship are often adept at articulating pressing socio-political and environmental problems, the liberal-humanist solutions they suggest are often woefully incapable of dealing with them, as the following analysis of *The End of Line* shows.

The End of the Line

Often held up by the BRITDOC as one of its most successful projects to date, *The End of the Line* is a good example of the liberal-humanist strand of oppositional documentary. The film focuses on the catastrophic effects of over-fishing, which scientists predict will leave fish stocks almost completely depleted by 2050. However, while the film effectively communicates the gravity of this issue, its argument is framed from an individualist perspective that avoids asking the fundamental questions about over-consumption and the reasons why the current socio-economic and political infrastructure prevents an adequate engagement with the problem. As a result, while some of the key causes of the problems are pointed out, the film advocates consumer-driven solutions which ultimately exacerbate the issue.

The first indication of *The End of the Line*'s individualist perspective is Ted Danson's voice-over narration, which introduces and contextualises the opening montage of underwater footage.

Introducing the exuberant beauty of one of the world's few marine reserves, Danson's instantly recognisable voice creates a chain of command in which his narration provides the viewer's access to the material. While for some viewers the recognisable tones of Danson's voice might provide a welcoming introduction to the film, it also suggests that the solutions to social problems begin with finding prominent individuals through which to engage those problems by proxy.

This kind of celebrity inclusion is suggestive of the ways in which liberal-humanism avoids controversial or divisive arguments in favour of alluding to conflict-free notions of universal human values. Instead of adopting properly oppositional perspectives and challenging existing power structures, the film latches onto widely known figures in an attempt to suggest its cause as an unequivocally good one. Consequently, support is garnered from politicians across the mainstream political spectrum. Extracts from *The End of the Line* were shown at both Labour and Conservative Party conferences in 2009 (BRITDOC, 2011c, 57), for instance, and prompted declarations of support and dedication from both parties. Conservative MP Bernard Jenkin labelled the film a 'call to arms to the citizens of the world to hold politicians accountable', while Gordon Brown's Fisheries Minister, Huw Irranca, declared the film a 'wake-up call for all of us ... we all have a responsibility as consumers to help spread the message' (BRITDOC, 2011c, 20). As well as this political support, the film also received numerous endorsements from a range of celebrities (Williams, 2010), while the panel of judges that awarded the film the first PUMA.Creative Impact Award in October 2011 included documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock and Hollywood actor Djimon Hounsou,[9] and was chaired by the millionaire philanthropist, Queen Noor of Jordan. This kind of high profile support undoubtedly increases and diversifies the audiences the film can reach, but it is only available to those films which do not require its supporters to adopt or endorse political perspectives which could be deemed divisive or controversial. As a result, more radical arguments which suggest more fundamental changes are effaced.

However, the film is very successful at articulating the multifarious problems caused by over-fishing very successfully. For example, although the talking-heads in the film are almost exclusively

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[9] Hounsou remained on the panel for the award in 2012, which includes Danny Glover and other high-profile figures known for advocacy and human rights work.

white, male and middle-aged, they are also compelling and authoritative, represented in an aesthetic style that effectively communicates the gravity and scale of the issue. Frequent extreme close-ups, with only the eyes and mouth of the speaker in the frame, add a sense of urgency to their dialogue, and the classical score complements speech which is often prone to poeticism. For instance, one of the scientists describes how the industrial and technological power of the fishing industry is decimating species and destroying habitats in ways that 'would make an angel weep'. This power is then illustrated with rapid montages of whirring machinery and computer technology, struggling fish in massive nets and the gigantic weights of bottom trawlers' ploughing through delicate seabed environments.

The film also documents the inability of the mainstream political sphere to engage with the problem in any meaningful way. As sleek looking Mercedes slide into a car park at the EU Fisheries Summit in Luxembourg, Danson's voice-over informs us that these are European ministers congregating to decide 'the fate of the fish and the industry which depends on it'. Focusing on blue fin tuna (but pointing out that this is only one of many overfished species), the film shows with a simple graph the shocking difference between the tonnage of tuna which can be caught merely to avoid the collapse of fish stocks (15,000), the catch recommended to allow the stocks to recover (10,000) and finally the catch which the ministers actually vote for (29,500). Later on, the film also points out the complicity of corporations in this process and some of the interconnections between politics and economics. Exposing Mitsubishi Corporation as the world's largest buyer of blue fin tuna, Danson explains that the fate of blue fin 'shows what multi-national corporations, international fisheries policy and consumer demand can do to a wild species'. Indeed, it even leans towards socialist sentiments at times, with talking-heads claiming that 'the oceans are the common heritage of all mankind [*sic*]', for instance. Ultimately though, the fundamental contradiction between a global economic model dependent on infinite growth and the finite resources of the planet are skirted. Along with the revolving door between business and politics, for instance, these issues are too controversial for the film to address. As a result, it is when the film begins to cover solutions to the problems it identifies that the limitations of the liberal-humanist documentary become most evident.

Having explored the problems of overfishing, the final third of the film turns, as do so many liberal-humanist documentaries, much more hopeful. The montage signalling this shift to the reassuring, inspiring tone on which the film will end consists of a handful of vox-pops in which members of the public declare their love of fish as food. That the film will not even entertain the notion of slowing, or stopping, our consumption of fish is indicative of its consumerist paradigm. Starting with the next best thing, the first solution the film documents is Charles Clover's campaign to get endangered species removed from restaurant menus and supermarket shelves.[10] This a laudable aim in itself, of course, and one that did have some impact. For example, the week that the film was released saw Marks and Spencer announce they were switching all their canned tuna to skipjack (the most plentiful species of tuna) and its fresh tuna to line-caught yellowfin (BRITDOC, 2011c).[11] Other celebrity chefs and restaurant chains also removed the fish from their menus. Julian Metcalfe, founder of the Pret a Manger sandwich chain (part owned by McDonald's until 2008 (Baker, 2011)), removed tuna sandwiches from the retailer's selection, and is consequently quoted in the film's impact report as saying 'we could lose some customers in the short term, but I do feel they will eventually come back as they realise what it is all about ... it's something we had to do, and if it costs us, so be it' (BRITDOC, 2011c).

However, these valid achievements are also deeply flawed. Aside from the fact that other restaurants simply refused to make any changes, the film does not recognise that, for example, switching to more plentiful species of tuna will soon bring those species to the point of collapse as well. Similarly, the notion that corporations could be interested in portraying themselves as caring and sustainable only to protect their profit margins is not considered, nor is the potential for such reputations to mask the continuation of socially and environmentally damaging behaviour. Moreover, the film does not explore the politically controversial reasons why corporations are allowed to prioritise their profitability over the health of the environment in the first place.

This liberal refusal to acknowledge or engage with politics at an ideological level gives rise to much more explicit statements of complicity with the status quo. Having demonstrated the value of

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[10] Clover is the author of the book on which the film is based (2008).
[11] It is unclear if this was a direct consequence of the film or as a result of increasing awareness of declining fish stocks more generally.

consumer power, with footage of inquisitive consumers investigating labelled products on supermarket shelves, the film goes on to endorse WAL-MART, Birdseye and McDonald's as ethical corporations apparently leading the way in sustainable fish retailing. The truth value of these claims[12] or whether or not the filmmakers are consciously endorsing some of the most destructive and exploitative corporations on the planet[13] are beside the point. The issue is that, as a result of the their inability to grasp wider socio-economic structures – or as Davies puts it, to see only trees, not forests (44) – liberal-humanist documentaries like *The End of the Line* end up supporting the very causes of the social, environmental and economic ills they claim to address.

For example, *The End of the Line*'s corporate-friendly representations secured the film other sources of corporate support which, while beneficial for the film, were not necessarily beneficial for its cause. One of the film's major supporters, for instance, was the supermarket chain Waitrose, whose distribution and marketing support for the film included a poster and leaflet campaign across its 243 stores, sneak-previews of the film for customers and even discounts on both fish and cinema ticket sales. Not only did this secure Waitrose a high-profile platform with which to advertise its business, but its fish sales increased by 15%. Little wonder, then, that senior representatives of the corporation felt that they 'immediately ... knew the values of the film were ones we could share', and that 'the film's message is one we were wanting to put across' (cited in Jack, 15). Although Waitrose dismisses as 'less than convenient' (Jack, 15) suggestions that their support for *The End of the Line* is akin to a butcher sponsoring *Babe* (1995), that a film about the dangers of over fishing could lead to an increase in fish consumption is so blatantly contradictory that the limitations of liberal-humanist documentary are palpable. Of course, commitments to selling only sustainable fish are to be commended, but one wonders if a film which dared to advocate the more radical changes required to bring fish stocks back from the brink of collapse would receive similar support. Given that corporate support for documentary is limited to films which benefit their brand, this seems unlikely.

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[12] McDonald's claim to use wholly sustainable fish products applies only to its restaurants in Europe, for instance. See Forbes (2011) and Hickman (2011).

[13] Corporate Watch has found WAL-MART to be one of 'the most ruthless employers in the world' (2004).

Section Two

Activist-Oriented Documentary: Anti-Summit and Other Activist Films

In contrast to the liberal-humanist perspectives of BRITDOC, activist-oriented oppositional documentary stages considerably more radical arguments. In the early 2000s, many of these films focused on the alter-globalisation movement and the series of anti-summit protests that had been taking place since the end of the 1990s.[14] Among the first of these films to be made after the turn of the century was the Indymedia European co-production *Rebel Colours: Prague 2000* (2000).[15] Documenting the protests against the World Bank and IMF in Prague in September 2000, the film is both typical of the period in which it was made – as one of the cluster of films addressing the anti-summit protests at the turn of the millennium – and paradigmatic of this kind of activist filmmaking. Openly partisan in its commitment to radical politics, the film also recognises itself as being part of that tradition, explicitly addressing the radical collective practices with which it was made as part of its subject matter.

Rebel Colours offers a roughly chronological account of the protest. The opening section introduces key arguments against the IMF and World Bank and introduces the viewer to the range of protestors involved. The middle section then documents the protest itself, showing the various tactics of the protestors and their respective colour schemes, from the civil disobedience of the Yellow bloc and the Italian 'Ya Basta!' group to the Pink, Blue and Black blocs. As is clear from the female narrator, passionately voicing anti-capitalist arguments over a montage of images of exploitation and violent resistance, this section explicitly aligns the film in support of the diversity of approaches and tactics of the protestors and their overall intention to shut the meeting down. In the final third, the film takes a darker turn, showing the water cannon and tear gas attacks by the police as well as the protestors fighting back. This structure is typical of anti-summit activist films: a lively, upbeat introduction representing the optimism and excitement of protest is laced with arguments from talking-heads and voice-over narrators outlining more detailed political arguments, followed by the

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[14] For films of this kind from the US, see *Breaking the Spell: Anarchists, Eugene and the WTO* (CrimethInc, 1999), *This is What Democracy Looks Like* (Big Noise Films, 2000) and *A Year in the Streets* (Cascadia Media Collective, 2001).

[15] The film was produced by Indymedia Centres from the Czech Republic, Britain and Italy.

protest itself and its violent repression by the police. The closing section deals with the aftermath of the violence and celebrates the protestors' success in shutting down the meeting, and is followed by a final montage that reinforces theorcing the importance of resistance and renewed determination of those involved.

The film is also exemplary of this kind of activist filmmaking because of the way in which it foregrounds the collective mode of production with which it was created. This is not a film with a single, authorial creative presence, but an intensely collaborative endeavour, formed from the contributions of over 200 media activists present at the demonstrations. The emphasis on collaboration is present from the beginning of the film, which forms an advertisement for Indymedia, the narrator explaining what Indymedia is and urging the audience that 'it's time to fight back'. Later this is reinforced with Undercurrents' Paul O'Connor discussing how the same strategy was trialled at the J18 protests in London the year before (see Chapter Two), and how the Indymedia network has been growing since Seattle in 1999. This emphasis on collaborative practise is characteristic of activist filmmaking, and consequently it is not uncommon to see footage repeated in activist-oriented documentary (which cares much less for copyright law than more liberal-humanist or oppositional auteur filmmaking). A number of sequences in *Rebel Colours* can be seen in Undercurrents' videos of this time, for instance, while the footage of the 'Ya Basta!' activist swiping a policeman's truncheon from a line of riot police is a staple scene in films of this period and type.

Of the anti-summit activist films, the Guerrillavision triptych of shorts that constitute *Behind the Barricades* ('Big Rattle in Seattle', 'Capital's Ill: DK in DC', and 'Crowd Bites Wolf' (2000)), are among the most remarkable for their innovative form, outspoken militancy and connection to British video-activist culture.[16] Although activist documentary often makes use of comic tropes and techniques to ridicule the politics and media of the status quo, rarely do these have such a structuring effect on the films' form. *Behind the Barricades* explicitly parodies conventional forms of live news reporting, featuring a masked-up presenter who is clearly taking part in the protest. Favouring anarchist politics and Black bloc tactics, the host guides the audience through the battleground of

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[16] The third film, 'Crowd Bites Wolf', also features the truncheon-swipe footage.

Seattle's streets after the declaration of martial law, getting shot by rubber bullets in the process and shouting into the camera, 'Kate Adie eat your fucking heart out!'

This formal audacity is matched by the film's assured endorsement of violence as a valid response to the violence of the state. One of the most explicit moments is the sequence showing a confrontation between the Black bloc and riot police in Prague. As the films depicts protestors responding to water cannon with rocks and Molotov cocktails, a policeman's helmet is highlighted with a computer-generated target, as if in a videogame, just prior to its wearer being knocked down with a rock. Described as 'morally problematic' in one of the few references to this work in published research (Russell, 2007, 42),[17] this is among the most explicit endorsements of militant tactics in the history of British oppositional documentary, and perhaps goes some way towards explaining why the film, though acknowledged as a 'zero budget *tour de force'*, is relatively unknown. Described by Patrick Russell as 'an obscure anonymous collective' (42), those involved with the production evidently did not wish to be easily traceable and no names are included in films' credits. In fact, the film was produced by members of Conscious Cinema, the video-activist organisation based in Brighton, but proved so divisive that former members of the group are reluctant to discuss the work (Young, 2011, 4). Indeed, *Non-Violence for a Change* (2001), by former Undercurrents associates Zoe Broughton and Hugh Warwick, might be seen as a pacifist rejoinder to the Guerrillavision films.

As well as being one of the most prominent video-activist groups in the 1990s, Conscious Cinema also produced feature-length work in the early 2000s. After its initial period of activity in the early 1990s, Conscious Cinema was resurrected by Zoe Young, Dylan Howitt and Johnny Cocking later in the decade with the intention of making 'more upscale documentary films' (Young, 2011, 1). The major project for which they re-grouped became *Suits and Savages: Why the World Bank Won't Save the World* (2000), while Dylan Howitt also made *Voces Argentinas,* about the 2001 Argentine crisis, as a Conscious Cinema production in 2002. In the meantime the group also made *Not This Time* in 2000, which was later updated in 2002. While *Suits and Savages* and *Voces Argentinas* are important films in the Conscious Cinema catalogue, *Not This Time: The Story of the Simon Jones*

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[17] Which also cites George Monbiot's outraged description of it as a 'fetishisation of violence, a sadistic pornography of pain' (42).

Campaign (2002) is most revealing of the direction in which oppositional documentary in Brighton would travel under the guidance of Paul Light, the SchNEWS activist who stepped into the gap left by Conscious Cinema after their demise (see Chapter Two, and below).

Not This Time is an account of a SchNEWS writer and activist who was killed in 1998 on his first day as a labourer on Shoreham docks (Brooks, 2008). The film documents the campaign to get justice for Simon and expose the exploitation and corruption involved in the casualisation of labour which ultimately led to his death. As well as a tribute to Simon and an account of the campaign, the film is also an argument for direct action as a mode of resistance. Members of the campaign speak of their sadness and disillusionment that nothing was being done about the political and economic causes of Simon's death, but the film goes on to show their subsequent feelings of empowerment after the variety of actions the group took – including storming the headquarters of the Department for Trade and Industry and blocking London's Southwark Bridge – to get the case to court (all charges against the docks' bosses were nevertheless dropped). *Not This Time* is thus very much a precursor of the two feature films SchMOVIES would go on to make later in the decade after Conscious Cinema had come to an end, both of which also emphasise the benefits of direct action and the anarchist political tradition with which it is associated (see below).

Undercurrents also made a handful of feature projects in the early 2000s. In addition to their own anti-summit film, *J18* and their involvement in *Rebel Colours* as part of UK Indymedia, Undercurrents made *Greenham: The Making of a Monument* (2000). The film is a record of the original peace march in 1984, and consists of a mixture of archival footage with contemporary talking-heads of the women involved. The film then combines this historical struggle with a more recent one, as the women's attempts to commemorate the camp with a monument are met with objections by Conservative MP David Davies, who dismisses their protests as a 'failure', their views as 'wrong' and says everyone involved should go to jail.

J18 and *Greenham* were some[18] of the final feature-length activist documentaries Undercurrents would make as they entered a diverse yet uncertain period. As we saw in Chapter Two,

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[18] Undercurrents also produced another film, *Evolving Minds*, in 2003. Directed by Melissa Gunasena, a relative latecomer to the organisation, the film explores the politics of mental health.

Undercurrents were undergoing personnel changes at this time, and along with changing technological landscapes and the dramatically altered post 9/11 political climate, activist-oriented filmmakers were increasingly less likely to produce feature documentary. Consequently, 2002 marks the end of this period of activist documentary. With funding opportunities at least as limited as they were before the potential of video online, the apparent suitability of the internet for video-activism appeared to provide a cheaper and exciting alternative to feature production (though it only became a practical possibility by the middle of the decade). Furthermore, the longer production time of feature documentary was even less attractive in the face of the increasingly urgent need for oppositional filmmakers to oppose the war in Iraq.

Platform Films

Of the relatively few feature documentaries which opposed the war, Platform Film's *Not in My Name* (2002-4) trilogy constitutes the most sustained effort of the activist strand of oppositional filmmaking. As we saw in Chapter Three, after *Proud Arabs and Texan Oilmen* (1993), Platform entered a fallow period until *Outlaw War* (1999), about New Labour's bombing of Serbia, and the less outspoken series for BBC2, *Who Killed Mark Faulkner?* (2000). They returned to no-/low-budget activist documentary with *Not in My Name* (2002). Written by Tariq Ali and narrated by Jeremy Hardy, the film features a number of prominent figures from the anti-war movement and sets out the various arguments against the war. These arguments are signalled by inter-titles which ask, 'A war for a safer world?', 'A war for oil?' and so on, providing the film with a chapter-like structure suitable for use at organisational meetings and rallies. Produced by Reeves and his long-term colleague at Platform Films, Dennis Cullum, this is the most accomplished of the three films.

Not in My Name II: The Human Shields (2003) documents the 'Human Shield Action to Iraq' campaign, which saw thirty anti-war activists – led by former US marine, Ken O'Keefe – journey to Iraq in an attempt to use their presence in the country to make the bombing of Iraq 'untenable' (O'Keefe, 2002). Seemingly intended as a promotional piece for the campaign, the film is of more interest for the insight it provides into the ideological motivations of those involved. Ranging from

apparently genuine (albeit naive) internationalist pacifist solidarity to neo-colonial arrogance,[19] *Not in My Name II* in fact represents the disintegration of the human shield campaign, along with some of the most misguided aspects of the anti-war movement. *Not in My Name III: Why War? The Invasion of Iraq* (2004), gives more of an overview of the conflict, ranging from the history of western relations with Saddam and the US government's manipulation of 9/11 to the commercial interests of corporations such as Halliburton in the country's reconstruction.

Given the wealth of skill and experience involved in these films, the limitations of the trilogy are surprising. Many notable figures from British left-wing film culture are credited with involvement in the project, including Margaret Dickinson, Sylvia Harvey, Cahal McLoughlin and Ken Loach. None of these individuals feature on the production credits, however, suggesting their input was limited to financial or advisory roles. Also, although Reeves and Cullum worked on the production of the latter two films, directorial credits are given to Mark Relton, perhaps indicating that the former, more experienced members of the crew had a less than central role. Furthermore, although the films cite as their supporters TV Choice and the Independent Media Society, they clearly suffer from the budget restrictions that are to be expected for a film that so clearly aimed to go against the flow of the rest of the media in the run-up to war, and which would not adhere to notions of objectivity and impartiality. Finally, the very limited time-scale with which the films had to be produced and distributed in order to have any effect are also likely to have had an adverse affect.

Given these considerations, it is perhaps best to accord the *Not In My Name* trilogy Reeves' own designation of 'throwaway filmmaking': films not made for posterity but to inspire action at that moment (Reeves, 2010, 4). As he says, 'I just do it and then get on with the next one and then if it gets lost and forgotten then so be it' (2010, 4). This attitude has characterised much of his filmmaking, with only *The Miners' Campaign Tapes* accruing any significant critical attention thus far, despite his continued activity as a filmmaker on projects far superior to the *Not in My Name* films. Since 2005, many of these productions have been made in conjunction with the National Union of Rail, Maritime,

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[19] For example, one woman describes her exasperation at the way 'most Iraqis ... threw-up their hands and said "what can we do?"' when the invasion started, before explaining how her decision to become a human shield derived from her superior understanding of the power of individuals to prevent war.

and Transport Workers (RMT) which, with the increased funds available to the union under Bob Crow's leadership,[20] has funded some film production (Reeves, 2010).

Indeed, Platform have made a number of feature films for the RMT, including: *Rail Against Privatisation* (2005), documenting the union's campaign for nationalisation; *RMT: Your Union* (2006), a promotional film for members; and *No to EU: Yes to Democracy* (2009), about the left-wing alliance initiated by the union to contest the European elections and foreground the issue of workers' rights. In addition to these, Platform has also made *The Daily Miracle* (2010), a film documenting the production of the *Morning Star* newspaper, and 'Justice for the Shrewsbury Pickets' (2010), supporting their campaign. Aside from the latter's ten-minute running time, these projects are all around thirty minutes, though Platform have also produced longer work, such as *Only a Bookseller* (2010), a biography of the bookseller and labour activist Jack Firestein (1917-2004), and *Ninety Years of Struggle* (2012), a history of Britain's Communist Party (Communist Party, 2012).

Despite Platform remaining consistently active throughout the first decade of this century, it seems unconcerned with publicising its work, much of which is not widely known, let alone seen, even among the admittedly small audiences for films of the oppositional left. Platform Films has no website, its films are unavailable for purchase (unless, presumably, one happens across a stall at an event), and there is very little information available on this period in the organisation's history. While some of the films (both recent and older productions, as well as some of the Cinema Action films under Platform's care)[21] are available to view online at the RMT's online TV channel, RMT TV, this location is highly specialised and unlikely to receive visitors who do not already know what they are looking for. Nevertheless, the *Not in My Name* project aside, Platform Films have been producing oppositional documentary for the last three decades, and the limited availability of its work is unfortunate to say the least.

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[20] As of 2008, the RMT was the fastest growing union in Britain (RMT, 2008).
[21] Including *The People's Flag* series (Platform Films, 1987), and Cinema Action's *Fighting the Bill* (1970), *Arise Ye Workers* (1974) and *The Miners' Film* (1974-5).

SchMOVIES

In contrast to Platform's seemingly wilful obscurity, SchMOVIES has an established online presence, where its films are all available to download or purchase. Making the films available for free as well as offering audiences the chance to purchase them is demonstrative of the priority SchMOVIES gives to its films being seen over them making any money. As the tagline on the website says, these films are 'information for action': their primary aim is to inspire and incite others to get involved in the issues represented. The tagline's emphasis on 'action' is also indicative of SchMOVIES' ideological perspective, grounded in the traditions of anarchism and direct action discussed in Chapters One and Two. Indeed, of all the oppositional feature filmmakers currently active in Britain, SchMOVIES are among the most explicit about its ideological perspective.

Indeed, both *SchNEWS at Ten: The Movie* (2005) and *On the Verge* (2008) consistently foreground anarchist philosophy and tactics as the preferred way of doing things. For example, the first image of *On the Verge*, a film about the direct-action campaign to shut-down the Brighton-based arms manufacturer, EDO MBM, foregrounds the non-hierarchical organising structures common to anarchist groups. According to the inter-title with which the film opens, 'the Smash EDO Campaign has no formal structure and as such has no leaders or organisers'. The film goes on to document the group's background in the anti-war movement, in particular their disillusionment with more accepted forms of protest after the two million strong anti-war march in London in February 2003 were effectively 'ignored' (along with the many more millions marching on the same day in other cities around the world). As the film shows, from the beginning the group were determined to use direct-action tactics, and made this emphatically clear with their first action against EDO. While one group of activists occupied the roof of the factory, another erected a metal cage across the road outside and d-locked themselves by the neck on the inside. The action shut EDO down for the day, costing the company £200,000 (Smash EDO, 2007).

These kinds of tactics are celebrated throughout the film as the protestors find themselves confronting not only the arms trade but an increasingly violent police force determined to maintain the status quo. Indeed, as well as being an anti-war film, *On the Verge* also documents the shocking and often violent behaviour of the police and the importance and value of activists filming that behaviour.

As the film makes clear, activists filming the police – a practise known as inverse-surveillance or sousveillance (Mann et al, 2003) – can discourage the violent tendencies of the police and security guards or capture evidence of them. However, footage obtained from police and security services under the *Freedom of Information Act* (Great Britain, 2000) can also provide excellent raw material for oppositional filmmaking. For instance, police footage included in the film shows a police commander emphasising to his officers that the sanctity of EDO's building is paramount, not the lives of its employees or the activists.

Unsurprisingly given the negative representation of the police, *On the Verge* was subject to many attempts by the police to prevent the film being screened, with venues across the country threatened with legal action or the revocation of their entertainments licenses if the film was screened.[22] This kind of harassment is an experience shared by many activist-oriented filmmakers unconcerned with toning down their criticisms of the police or the state. For example, Ken Fero's *Injustice* (2001), about the shockingly high number of Black and Asian people to die while in police custody in Britain, was also subject to threats from the Police Federation and refused funding from television companies.[23] Needless to say, such campaigns of repression can ultimately work in the films' favour, providing a much-need source of publicity.

SchNEWS at Ten also foregrounds this mode of protest throughout. Indeed, since it was made to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the SchNEWS newsletter, its subject matter is the previous ten years of direct-action protest. Unfortunately, the foregrounding of anarchism as SchMOVIES' ideological reference point also occasionally results in separatist tendencies to denigrate other aspects of the political left, in particular the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The very first image of *SchNEWS at Ten*, for instance, consists of inter-titles which urge 'anyone thinking of joining the Socialist Workers Party or voting in the next election to watch this first' and includes references to the 'socialist tosser party'. While *On the Verge* does not include any similar references, the sectarian tendency is clearly present in the Smash EDO group as well, its spokesperson referring to the leaders

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[22] See Parsons (2008), Morris (2008) and SchNEWS (2009, 2008a and 2008b). SchMOVIES also made two mini-documentaries on the scandal: 'The Film the Police Tried to Ban' (2008) and 'Verging on the Ridiculous' (2008).

[23] See Bradshaw (2011 and 2001), Campbell (2002), Bright (2001), Cohen (2001) and Ramsay (2001).

of the Stop the War Coalition as 'a Trotskyist clique interested in little more than political careers, polite marches and the selling of newspapers' (Beckett, 2009).

Disdain for other aspects of the political left aside, *SchNEWS at Ten* is a landmark activist documentary that bears many characteristics of this kind of filmmaking and the modes of resistance it celebrates. One of these characteristics is the same self-deprecating, tongue-in-cheek humour that typifies the SchNEWS. As Chris Atton and James Hamilton have noted (2008, 89), this populist, tabloid style is related to the inclusive, do-it-yourself ethos of anarchist politics. Avoiding the seriousness of much intellectual political critique in favour of puns and double-entendres infuses radical politics with a humour that invites participation and inclusivity, values which suggest media production is not and should not be the preserve of an educated elite. The films' titles are a case in point. For example, *SchNEWS at Ten* recognises the tenth anniversary of the newsletter at the same time as it subverts and ridicules the flagship ITV news programme, *News at Ten*. *On the Verge* refers to the narrow strip of grass to which Smash EDO protestors were confined for the duration of the company's short-lived injunction against them, suggests the arms trade is beyond the brink of social acceptability, and points to EDO's willingness to operate at the margins of (and outside) the law. The seriousness of SchMOVIES' subject matter and the ideological commitment motivating the films' production thus contrast with their humorous rhetoric, itself motivated by commitments to inclusive, horizontal political values.

As with the wordplay in the films' titles, the dominant form of SchMOVIES' humour is irony, frequently expressed in sarcastic juxtapositions in what Bert Hogenkamp has called 'deadly parallels' (1986): strikingly contradictory or conflicting images which often destabilise their original meaning and foreground inequality or injustice. The opening credits of *SchNEWS at Ten* embody this strategy, describing the film as developed from 'an original idea by Michael Howard', the Conservative MP who introduced the Criminal Justice Act which SchNEWS was originally set-up to oppose. These subversive imitations of mainstream culture continue throughout SchMOVIES' films. Just as commercial films often begin with warnings against copyright infringement, *SchNEWS at Ten* ends with an ironic appeal to audiences not to infringe copyright because 'it harms the bottom line of very large corporations [and] they need the money'. Similarly, *On the Verge* closes with the sitcom-

style caption 'you have been watching', before running through a series of mug shots of police officers with accompanying descriptions: PC 'John "Sunshine" Avery', we are told, 'can be relied upon for classic examples of firm but bewildering policing'.

Comic juxtaposition also features early on, as the film establishes its narrative via another Conservative politician, Michael Portillo, whose speech is cut so as to deliver the film's historical intent. 'Let us teach our children the history of this remarkable country', he says, as the soundtrack builds with the archetypal rave music of 1990s group Underworld, and the image cuts to a montage of anti-roads protests, Reclaim the Streets actions, riots, parties and protests. Among the montage is a vox pop in which a man is asked if he has heard of the SchNEWS; ''course I bloody have', he replies. In contrast to what Portillo has in mind, the film suggests that that is the history of Britain worth knowing about, and SchNEWS is the way to find out about it.

Irony and self-deprecation also typify the references to anarchist politics. Rather than espouse the virtues of the philosophy straightforwardly, *SchNEWS at Ten* places itself in the anarchist tradition by citing the ridiculous portrayals of anarchism in the news media and politicians. Tony Blair's description of the anti-summit protestors as a 'travelling anarchist circus' is cited alongside the classic newsreader line, 'a minority of anarchists'. Self-deprecation is also a key feature of the vox-pop endorsements of SchNEWS. For instance, one features a woman who, when asked what she likes about the newsletter, answers that 'it gives us anarchists something to talk about'. In another, a man is asked if he thinks SchNEWS has had an influence beyond Brighton. He immediately answers 'yes', and pauses before suggesting the adjacent town of Worthing as an example.

Of course, rejecting authority requires that one avoids becoming authoritative oneself, and self-deprecation and humour is integral here, too. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the DVD case for *SchNEWS at Ten* includes the slogan, 'a single act of defiance is worth more than a thousand feet of film', and cites the quotation, 'people think it's more professional than it is' as one of the commending reviews on the back cover. Later in the film, a clip shows a member of the SchNEWS' collective taking questions during a SchNEWS roadshow. 'One more question on SchNEWS and then we'll move onto something more interesting', he says. This kind of self-deprecation deflects from the quality, professionalism and political efficacy of SchMOVIES, the purpose of which is at least

twofold. First, it presents their work in as accessible a light as possible, suggesting that filmmaking is an activity in which everyone can and should get involved. Second, it reinforces that notion that such filmmaking is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. The films are, as they say 'information for action'.

While the film documents the history of SchNEWS' development and briefly mentions the emergence of SchMOVIES in 2004 as the filmmaking side of the newsletter, it also features snippets from the early days of Conscious Cinema, as well as fragments from oppositional film culture before the CJA struggle which launched SchNEWS and Conscious Cinema. The film features footage from *Operation Solstice* (1991), Neil Goodwin and Mayassa Al-Malazi's film about the Battle of the Beanfield (see Chapter Three), for example, as well as numerous clips from Undercurrents' archive. This older footage situates SchNEWS as part of a much longer history of social struggle, the radical history the film is aiming to assert. Indeed, SchNEWS was initially founded only when the Justice? campaign received a solidarity visit from a Women Against Pit Closures group who, drawing on their experience of the miners' strike, made it clear to the campaign that they would be needing a newsletter (SchNEWS, 2004a, 36).

SchMOVIES' work also displays a number of telling connections to more contemporaneous oppositional filmmakers. For instance, as *SchNEWS at Ten* progresses chronologically, from the Liverpool dockers' dispute of 1995 to the anti-summit protests later in that decade and the start of the next, footage from Guerrillavision's controversial work is used to illustrate the conflicts in Prague. Moving on to the resistance to the war in Iraq, Jo Fielding is one of the talking-heads addressing the audience at the SchNEWS conference, advocating the virtues of direct action. Fielding is the principal character in Julia Guest's documentary, *Letter to the Prime Minister* (2005), which follows her journey into Iraq to work as a human rights observer. This film in turn features footage from Platform Films' *Not in My Name* series, and was edited by Richard Hering of visionOntv. Although *On the Verge* is composed largely of original material, being shot in SchMOVIES hometown of Brighton, it also features footage from Chris Atkins' *Taking Liberties* (2007), a film about the erosion of civil liberties under New Labour (see below). Footage from *Taking Liberties* of the now infamous case of

the coach-load of protestors detained by police and prevented from attending an anti-war rally (The Guardian, 2006) is used in *On the Verge* to illustrate the role of the police in preventing protest.

Connections like these can be found across the various strands of contemporary oppositional documentary, whether in video-activism or feature film. However, that they are more prominent among activist-oriented filmmakers and those operating outside or on the periphery of liberal-humanist filmmaking is indicative of the sense of community that exists among this strand in particular.[24] Unlike the liberal-humanist strand of oppositional documentary, activist-oriented oppositional filmmakers are less influenced by the commercial practices and values of the film industry. Their filmmaking is thus more straightforwardly motivated by political concerns, and practises like pooling footage and helping distribute and exhibit each other's films are therefore more easily accommodated.

In the final part of this chapter, I want to explore the rest of this culture in more detail. Again, making sense of this culture is a complex task: each production is unique, with its own personnel and contexts, and together they address a range of issues from a variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify two distinct groups or categories. The first consists of those filmmakers who also rely on grassroots, activist-oriented networks for the production, distribution and exhibition of their work, irrespective of whether they have been around for some time (like Platform and SchMOVIES) or are relatively recent. The second consists of those filmmakers who occupy a space between those activist-oriented networks and liberal-humanist culture of the mainstream film industry.

Grassroots Activist Filmmakers

Both Mark Saunders' company, Spectacle, and Ken Fero's Migrant Media produced activist-oriented work for Channel 4 in the 1990s, while Saunders' career as a video-activist goes back even earlier, with his work as Despite TV (see Chapter One). Both filmmakers have continued to produce activist-oriented work in the 2000s. Spectacle run training workshops and provide facilities to other

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[24] Cooperative working practises also exist between oppositional auteur filmmakers and this activist strand, though the latter is my only concern here. For example, John Pilger's work featured on both Undercurrents' newsreel feature on the Ploughshares (*Undercurrents 6*, (1996)) and Neil Goodwin's *Seeds of Hope* (1996), and Conscious Cinema contributed some of their work on *Suits and Savages* (2000) for Franny Armstrong's *Drowned Out* (2002).

'independent' filmmakers from their studio in Battersea (Spectacle, 2012), but also produce films of their own. These include long-term investigative projects, such as their exploration of the effects and legacy of the London Olympics on East London, questioning the interpretation of the term 'regeneration', and similar work on Eco Towns and Villages (Spectacle, 2012). They have also produced more conventional feature documentary, such as *Outside the Law: Stories from Guantanamo* (2009), about extraordinary rendition and secret prisons in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Continuing one of the cases examined in that film, *Shaker Aamer: A Decade of Injustice* (2011) marked the tenth anniversary of Battersea resident Shaker Aamer's incarceration in Guantanamo Bay. Most recently, Spectacle are crowd-funding a film commemorating the work of US anarchist and environmentalist, Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), *Bookchin on Bookchin* (forthcoming). Much of Ken Fero's efforts have gone into his work with the aforementioned *Injustice*, which he and his co-director, Tariq Mehmood, self-funded over a period of seven years. However, since then he has also produced a number of shorter works as well as radical activist-oriented feature films such as *Newspeak* (2011) and *Who Polices the Police?* (2012).

Other established oppositional filmmakers have also continued to produce activist-oriented work characterised by small-scale distribution and exhibition strategies but which frequently voice radical arguments. Margaret Dickinson has been involved with radical film culture in Britain since the mid-1960s (Dickinson, 1999, 7) and has been producing films fairly consistently ever since. Not all of these would be 'oppositional' in the same way as the other films discussed as such here, but many are, such as *City Swimmers* (2005), about a local campaign to save community swimming areas in London, or *Memories of a Future* (made in collaboration with Pepe Petos, 2007), about the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. Michael Chanan is another experienced oppositional filmmaker, having produced films since the 1980s. His latest work includes *A Chronicle of Protest* (Chanan, 2011) and *Three Short Films about Chile* (2011), about student protests in Britain and Chile respectively, and, with Lee Salter, a newcomer to oppositional documentary, *Secret City* (2012), about the City of London and its role as one of the central institutions in contemporary global capitalism. While John Jordan and Isabelle Fremeaux have not been making films as long as Dickinson or Chanan, they are also experienced oppositional filmmakers. While *Paths Through Utopia* (2011),

which explores different attempts at alternative ways of living, is their first film, they have done a range of other work with their organisation, The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination. Similarly, Mike Wayne and Deirdre O'Neill are also experienced filmmakers who have begun producing feature documentary in recent years, with *Listen to Venezuela* (2009) and *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (2012).

Filmmakers with less established histories as oppositional filmmakers have also produced similarly no-/low-budget films and, though limited to relatively low-key distribution and exhibition campaigns, they have made valuable contributions to the activist-oriented strand of Britain's radical film culture. Julia Guest's *Letter to the Prime Minister* is an example of such work, as is Dom Rotheroe's *The Coconut Revolution* (2000), about the struggle of the Bourgainville Islanders to establish their independence from mainland Papua New Guinea. *Outsiders: The Peace Convoy* (Martin Parry, 2006) aims to break stereotypes of Britain's traveller community, as does Frances Higson's *Rogues, Rascals and Runaways* (2002), both films that would fit in this category. More recent works include: *I Melt the Glass with My Forehead* (Joanna Callaghan and Martin McQuillan, 2011),[25] a film about the proposed increase of university tuition fees to £9000; *The Real Social Network* (Kitchen Sink Collective, 2011), about the student protests that emerged in response to those proposals and the role of social media in the protests; and *The Urbal Fix* (Tom Bliss, 2011), which explores the political, economic and social possibilities of so-called 'urbalism' (applying rural characteristics and qualities to urban areas).

While the more established filmmakers tend consistently to address explicitly political issues from radical perspectives, it should also be noted that some of these more recent filmmakers' work could be distinguished from the others by the inclusion of political perspectives which many on the activist left would find problematic. For instance, on one hand *The Coconut Revolution* provides a fascinating account of an armed insurrection ridding a country of environmentally destructive multinational mining corporations and successfully waging guerrilla warfare against an imperialist state. On the other hand, however, it also unquestioningly accepts the bizarre claims and superstitions

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[25] The title is from 'A Cloud in Trousers' (1915) by the Soviet Futurist poet and socialist, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and was scrawled on the pavement by student activists during the protests of 2010.

of the apparently self-appointed Christian leaders of the island, as well as the dangerous training methods of the chief guerrilla, which he proudly claims have injured many of his men.

Similarly, *I Melt the Glass with My Forehead* claims to be about 'about £9,000 tuition fees, how we got them, and what to do about it' (McQuilllan, 2012), but steers decidedly clear of any radical voices from the student movement in favour of elite talking-heads such as Tessa Blackstone and Rajay Naik. Blackstone is Vice Chancellor of Greenwich University and, despite being known as the 'Red Baroness' (Hughes, 1999), was the Minister for Education when Tony Blair's government introduced tuition fees in 1997. As the youngest panel member of the Browne Review Group that proposed the fee increase, Naik was appointed to represent students' views, yet he opens the film by defending the increase, arguing that there was huge 'pressure on public spending' and that they 'had to make a system which recognised those challenges and which reduced the amount government would be required to produce upfront'. Although the film purports to show what we can do about the tuition fee increases, these claims go unchallenged.

Finally, despite the opposition to 'unsustainable urban consumerism' (Bliss, 2011) that would undoubtedly be shared by many established radical filmmakers, the makers of *The Urbal Fix* are keen to distance themselves from any association with radical politics, declaring on their website that they 'have no history of socialist, anarchist or anti-globalisation/capitalist activism ... and now feel that the old left/right struggle is largely irrelevant' (Tom Bliss, 2011). So, while the strategies of funding, production and distribution, as well as their aesthetic style, might be similar to those more established radical activist filmmakers, their status as relative newcomers to the field and a tendency to include reformist or even reactionary political arguments could also be grounds for further categorisation.

Liberal-humanist Activist Filmmakers

The second group of filmmakers in the activist-oriented strand of oppositional feature documentary occupy a hazy space between the liberal-humanist films of BRITDOC, Dogwoof and Dartmouth Films and the more radical politics of grassroots activist filmmakers. Again, these films vary in their political perspectives but tend to combine commercially attractive qualities with more controversial political stances than the flagship films produced or distributed by BRITDOC, for instance. Jamie

King's series of *Steal This Film* documentaries (2006-) are good examples of this kind of production. Composed of two parts,[26] the series is a polemical endorsement of peer-to-peer technology and the social, political, economic and cultural benefits of the ability to freely share and experience cultural products. The films consist predominantly of talking-heads from The Pirate Bay and other advocates of file-sharing, such as Craig Baldwin and Yochai Benkler. Despite this rather unadventurous form, the speakers remain highly engaging and their innovative arguments are mirrored by its distribution model: *Steal This Film* is only available via free download from various file-sharing websites, and is now estimated to have reached 'in excess of 10 million people' (VODO).

Initially launched in collaboration with The Pirate Bay and a number of other sites, King has since partnered with BitTorrent to create VODO (short for Voluntary Donations) in 2009, a film distribution site based on peer-to-peer principles. This radical distribution model constitutes a fundamental challenge to what they call the old 'scarcity-powered' models (theatrical, DVD etc.), yet both the film and VODO were part-funded by BRITDOC. While BRITDOC obviously deserves credit for funding projects so clearly at odds with much of the organisation's other work (none of which is available on VODO and which absolutely relies upon copyright),[27] such support does not stem from altruism. *Steal This Film* and VODO constitute the justification behind BRITDOC's claim to be 'experimenting with new models of distribution' (BRITDOC, 2011c, 53), lending a progressive edge to the rest of their work which, as we have seen, is largely compatible with the status quo.

Steal This Film is just one example of this second group of oppositional documentary which constitutes the uneasy connection between grassroots activism and the liberal-humanist sector of the documentary film industry. Other films in this group include the abovementioned *Taking Liberties* (Chris Atkins, 2007), *In Prison My Whole Life* (Marc Evans, 2007), *Just Do It: A Tale of Modern Day Outlaws* (Emily James, 2011) and *You've Been Trumped* (Anthony Baxter, 2011). These are valuable

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[26] A third edition, known variously as the 'Trial', '2.5' or 'Spectral Edition', was released to coincide with the trial of The Pirate Bay in 2009, but it is largely a composite of the earlier films. A third film, *Steal This Film: The Movie* and another project entitled *The Oil of the 21st Century* are also mentioned on the series' website but little information is available on these. Given that King has just finished his first fiction series, *Dark Fibre* (2012), and is running the VODO project, it seems likely that these other projects are on hold for the time being.
[27] Chris Hird, managing director of Dartmouth Films and executive producer of *The End of the Line*, for instance, is entirely opposed to file-sharing activity and advocates prosecution for anyone caught sharing files illegally (personal exchange, 2011).

films which address important topics in ways variously aligned with the radical left, at the same time as they possess qualities which make them attractive and marketable commercial products as well. While this is obviously not a problem in itself, those qualities are frequently at odds with the values of radical or oppositional politics.

For example, *Taking Liberties* features a number of prominent activists and anti-war campaigners, and includes positive representations of the Smash EDO campaign and the Camp for Climate Action. However, it also represents Conservative MPs Boris Johnson and Ken Clarke as passionate proponents of democracy, and continues its homage to the Conservatives by representing Winston Churchill as a paragon of democracy and freedom tortured by his decision to introduce ID cards in World War 2. While the film does not pretend to objectivity with respect to showing 'both sides' of the argument, the positive representation of elements of the ruling class betrays a lack of ideological commitment palatable to the liberal-humanist limitations of the those sections of the film industry which profit from oppositional documentary.[28]

Similarly, *Just Do It* is a valuable representation of direct-action climate activists, but in appealing to its mainstream target audience the film patronises those who already possess an inkling of political awareness. Further, despite the laudable intention of undoing damaging misrepresentations of activist communities in the mainstream media, the film also unwittingly reproduces a number of those stereotypes. The eccentricities of Marina Pepper, for instance, one of the activists who features prominently in the film, makes for an entertaining character, but her matter of fact decision to move to the Isle of Wight to camp out in solidarity in front of the Vestas factory occupation is hardly an option open to everyone, and is one of many examples in the film of the distinction between activists and 'ordinary' people being reinforced. Baxter's film about Donald Trump's plans to build two luxury golf courses off the Aberdeenshire coast, meanwhile, is an intelligent and shocking account of Trump's arrogance and downright nastiness, and the environmental and social injustice his wealth allows him to commit. It does not, however, manage to establish the connections between this most

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[28] This also applies to his second film, *Star Suckers* (2009). Made just prior to the hackgate scandal (Atkins subsequently gave evidence at the Leveson Inquiry), the film effectively achieves its aim of exposing how tabloid newspapers 'routinely fabricated news and broke the law to deliver scoops' (Atkins, 2012, 25). It also, however, routinely ridicules members of the public in displays of directorial arrogance that distinguishes Atkins from activist-oriented filmmakers, especially those with any notion of working class solidarity.

recent outrage and the long history of systematic exploitation and displacement of the Scottish working class of which it is a part.[29] As a story of an evil individual and outsider wreaking havoc on a local community, the film has a conventional narrative structure perfectly suited to the commercial interests and ideals of the mainstream film industry.

Conclusion

This chapter has mapped the landscape of oppositional feature documentary in Britain since 2000. Although I have only discussed two of them here, contemporary oppositional documentary consists of three broadly distinct, though interrelated, strands, the most dominant of which is also the most recent. The liberal-humanist strand of documentary arose in the middle of the 2000s as aspects of the television and film industries responded to a gap in the market for socially and politically engaged filmmaking. As we saw in Chapter Three, for the first half of the 1990s radical feature documentary benefited significantly from the funding structures and exhibition platforms that had been established over the preceding decades. By the end of the 1990s that support was gone, eradicated by the wave of Thatcherite privatisation that began at the start of the previous decade. Taking its place in the middle of the 2000s, Channel 4's establishment of the BRITDOC Foundation appropriately represented a Blairite 'Third Way' approach to oppositional documentary funding. Combining funding from Channel 4 with that of charitable organisations and corporate sponsors, BRITDOC, along with Dartmouth Films and Dogwoof, have made this strand of oppositional documentary a viable sector of the commercial film industry. However, the films that result from it are far from the radical works Channel 4 was supporting in the 1990s. Instead, as we have seen, corporate support tends to result in branded documentaries which, necessarily in synch with corporate interests, do not stray far from reformist arguments or the liberal-humanist ideologies that underpin them. Indeed, as a result, the liberal-humanist strand of oppositional documentary often suggests solutions which would exacerbate the very problems to which it aims to draw attention.

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[29] See John McKenzie's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1974) for a much more cogent, politically militant and formally inventive representation of this history.

In contrast, the other strand of contemporary oppositional documentary I have discussed in this chapter continues to advocate the radical arguments that characterised activist-oriented feature documentary in the 1990s. Without the broadcast exhibition platform Channel 4 had previously provided, however, activist documentary has, since the latter half of that decade, been limited predominantly to networks of activists and those involved in the campaigns represented, and as such has received fairly modest circulation. That said, as I have shown, the activist strand constitutes a substantial sector of contemporary oppositional feature documentary. Although I have discussed only Platform Films and SchMOVIES in detail, they are just two groups among many others, which themselves can be sub-divided and categorised accordingly. However, such categories are always provisional and contingent, and filmmakers and the work they produce frequently overflow the boundaries with which one attempts to understand the field as a whole. Nevertheless, these boundaries and categorisations are a necessary first step towards mapping the vibrant British oppositional documentary culture that has been largely unrecognised for much of the last twenty-five years.

Conclusion

The body of work discussed in this thesis covers the last two decades of oppositional documentary in Britain. Despite being a lively and diverse part of British film culture, contemporary oppositional documentary has received a distinct lack of attention from scholars of film and media, the last book-length study being Margaret Dickinson's *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (1999). As a result, one of my principal research aims was simply to assert the continued existence of oppositional film culture in Britain, and reclaim it as subject worthy of study. The organisation of the thesis into the broad typological categories of video-activism and feature documentary, and the subdivision of these categories according to decade, stemmed from this initial goal.

Chapter One addressed video-activism in the 1990s. As we saw, at that time British video-activism consisted of three key organisations – Despite TV, Conscious Cinema and Undercurrents – yet of the little academic attention this topic has received, discussion has been limited almost exclusively to Undercurrents and to the newsreel it produced in the 1990s. As a result, Despite TV and Conscious Cinema have been practically effaced from the history of British video-activism. Not only has this prevented an adequate engagement with those organisations and the work they produced, but it also suggests that the video-activist culture of the 1990s was composed of Undercurrents alone. So, although Chapter One also focused predominantly on Undercurrents – as the dominant group in the 1990s – it also explored both Despite TV and Conscious Cinema, and showed that none of these groups can be properly understood in isolation from one another. This chapter also demonstrated the ways in which Undercurrents' success was a result of its own strategic approach to video-activism in the period, and unpicked the complex blend of ideological, political and material factors that both underpinned that approach and gave rise to subsequent criticisms of it later in the decade.

Chapter Two charted the video-activist landscape from 2000 to the present, and explored the ways in which transformations in the technological, political and social spheres have impacted upon contemporary video-activist culture. Largely as a result of digital technologies and the internet, one of the consequences of these transformations has been a dramatic expansion of the culture as a whole.

Indeed, contemporary video-activist culture now consists of a wide range of organisations with a variety of motivations, political perspectives and financial and material resources. Nevertheless, analysis of this culture has revealed that despite the range of groups it comprises – from video-activist NGOs, access organisations and oppositional aggregators to radical video-activist groups – numerous connections exist between them. Perhaps by virtue of their overt commitment to the politics of the radical left, the five most radical video-activist organisations currently operating in Britain – Undercurrents, visionOntv, SchMOVIES, Reel News and Camcorder Guerrillas – are particularly closely related to each other and to older video-activist cultures. That said, Chapter Two showed the distinct approaches these organisations have developed to the funding, production, distribution and exhibition of their work, in accordance with their respective aims, attitudes and resources. This chapter thus demonstrates the complexity, diversity and dynamism of Britain's contemporary video-activist culture, despite the continued lack of attention that culture has received in Film Studies and related disciplines.

As shown in Chapter Three, oppositional feature documentary in the 1990s consisted of two divergent strands. The first constituted work produced by activist-oriented filmmakers with no- or low-budgets who would often be a part of the communities or protest movements represented in the films. Despite the grass-roots status of these filmmakers and their work, this strand of oppositional documentary received extraordinary levels of exhibition in the first half of the 1990s by virtue of its regular television broadcast in various series on Channel 4. Although the commercialisation of the channel finally forced these series to end, this chapter showed that the activist-oriented strand of oppositional feature documentary nevertheless continued to be produced and distributed, albeit to much smaller audiences. The second strand of oppositional feature documentary in the 1990s – those films produced by oppositional auteur filmmakers – continued to receive television broadcast throughout the decade, though not in weekly slots dedicated to oppositional documentary. Focusing on the emergence of Franny Armstrong as one of Britain's most high-profile oppositional auteurs, this chapter showed how she successfully constructed an individual persona and filmmaking style that was suited to the commercial machinations of the film and television industries. As a result, despite an industrial context increasingly hostile to political filmmaking, Armstrong and other oppositional

auteurs in the 1990s managed to secure high-profile exhibition for films with overtly oppositional politics.

Turning to oppositional feature documentary since 2000, Chapter Four showed how the two distinct strands that characterised oppositional feature documentary in the 1990s have since been joined by a third. The liberal-humanist strand of oppositional feature documentary emerged in the mid-2000s with organisations such as the Channel 4 BRITDOC Foundation, Dogwoof and Dartmouth Films. With the institutional and industrial support structures for radical film that were set up in the late 1970s and early 1980s dismantled by the end of the 1990s, companies such as BRITDOC have developed new forms of funding for socially and politically engaged documentary. Focusing on BRITDOC, this chapter demonstrated that a significant aspect of the organisation's work involves brokering partnerships between filmmakers and corporations, and the relatively substantial funding these partnerships have secured has resulted in a number of high-profile films which have benefitted from high production values and substantial distribution campaigns. Indeed, the liberal-humanist strand of oppositional documentary is at present the most visible aspect of contemporary oppositional feature documentary. However, the films of this strand are far from the politically radical works of either low-budget, activist-oriented filmmakers or oppositional auteurs, two strands which, as this chapter showed, remain as much a part of contemporary oppositional feature documentary today as they were in the 1990s. Instead, the films in this third strand of oppositional documentary are best characterised as 'liberal-humanist', a political orientation marked by a preference for individual solutions to social problems, and limited to reformist arguments which are ultimately suited to the corporate-friendly status quo.

Organising the thesis into these four chapters has allowed me to map the last two decades of oppositional documentary in Britain without obscuring either the web of contemporary connections running throughout the culture as a whole or the ways in which more recent films and filmmakers are connected to older radical film cultures. However, while the thesis covers a great deal of ground, the contemporary landscape of oppositional documentary is a broad territory and the thesis inevitably accounts for only some of its initial contours. Much work remains to be done and, needless to say, subsequent research may well require very different organisational and methodological approaches to

those I have opted for here. Indeed, in imagining directions for future forays into oppositional filmmaking, it is useful to stretch the cartographic metaphor further, borrowing Dudley Andrew's argument that the multitude of academic approaches to world cinema are best conceived in terms of 'an atlas of *types* of maps' (2006, 19). Applied to radical film, the national, formal and chronological parameters of this thesis (that have resulted in a map of British video-activism and feature documentary from 1990 to 2013), could be used to chart oppositional documentary of other nationalities, forms and time-periods. Or they could be dispensed with altogether, in favour of others that foreground technological, political or aesthetic perspectives, or which focus on individual filmmakers, organisations or issues. At the very least, considering this thesis as just one map among a potential atlas of others is a useful way of bearing in mind just how much work remains to be done in this field.

For example, as noted in the Introduction, although the focus on British work is one of the most useful boundaries to the research, it has also prevented an engagement with any of the momentous movements for change beyond its borders that have captured the world's attention since I began research in 2009. From the wave of revolutionary movements in the Middle-East to resistance against austerity in the West, oppositional filmmakers overseas have produced swathes of work representing these struggles. Aside from the need to investigate international relationships between these filmmakers and those in Britain (Reel News has been especially active in developing connections with radical filmmakers in Spain and Greece, for example), these oppositional film cultures demand studies of their own, whether from national, political or aesthetic perspectives. Indeed, the individual filmmakers and organisations that constitute these cultures are themselves worthy of further investigation. For instance, two examples in North America which deserve attention from oppositional film scholars are Big Noise Films in New York and subMedia.tv in Vancouver, both of which have been attracting large, international audiences for overtly oppositional, even militant, filmmaking since the 1990s.

Even retaining the focus on British work, many fascinating oppositional filmmakers and organisations which I have only mentioned here deserve much more sustained attention. These include, for example, John Jordan and Isabelle Fremeaux's Laboratory of Insurrectionary

Imagination, the range of international filmmakers that constitute the Kitchen Sink Collective, Ken Fero's Migrant Media, Mark Saunders' Spectacle and filmmakers such as Zoe Broughton, Adam Curtis, Jamie King, and John Pilger, to name a few. Even some of those organisations that I have discussed in detail, such as BRITDOC, require additional investigation. Indeed, the size and resources of organisations such as BRITDOC and Dogwoof, or such video-activist NGOs as One World Media and OneWorld TV, render them suitable candidates for research projects on their own.

The relationships between these and other organisations and their respective places within the British film industry also remain to be properly understood. For example, Dartmouth Films, the production company that, as mentioned in Chapter Four, specialises in documentaries similar to those on BRITDOC's portfolio, has indeed collaborated with BRITDOC on a number of films. However, it has also produced decidedly more radical work, including that of oppositional auteurs such as John Pilger as well as filmmakers such as Emily James who occupy the space between the liberal-humanist strand and more activist-oriented documentary. More research into the relationships between these filmmakers and organisations is necessary if we are to properly understand the complex mix of personal, socio-political, technological and economic factors that give rise to these kinds of oppositional feature documentary.

Occasionally, films of the kind produced by BRITDOC and Dartmouth, or distributed by Dogwoof, will be broadcast on television as part of series such as the BBC's *Storyville* (2002-) or Channel 4's *Dispatches* (1987-). I have mostly limited my discussion of oppositional documentary on television to that broadcast on Channel 4 in the 1980s and 1990s since, as argued in Chapter Three, this was the last time that series dedicated (albeit unofficially) to oppositional documentary appeared on British television. However, the presence of oppositional documentary on contemporary television is also in need of detailed investigation, as is the relationship between conventional modes of investigative documentary and more radical forms of filmmaking.

While the intersection of radical film with television is one avenue for further research, the use of the internet by oppositional filmmakers is perhaps even more important. How successful are attempts to harness online communities to fund and distribute radical film? What form have these attempts taken and how are they shaping both filmmakers and audiences? For example, although there

was not space in Chapter Four to consider Franny Armstrong's *Age of Stupid* (2009), this film gained much publicity for its crowd-funding model, internationally co-ordinated premiere and decentralised distribution and exhibition campaigns. Yet how viable are these approaches for other, lesser known filmmakers? Furthermore, although a variety of platforms exist with which to facilitate these kinds of peer-to-peer interaction, from funding sites such as Indiegogo (2008-) and Sponsume (2010-) to distribution initiatives such as Distrify (2011-), few (if any) share or stem from the radical politics of oppositional filmmakers. Evaluating these developments and exploring their potential for left-wing film culture would be a sensible starting point for research in this area.

Television and the internet are clearly key sites of exhibition for any filmmaker, not least those with political pretensions. Yet the question of who constitutes the audience for oppositional filmmaking remains largely unknown. What exactly are the audience figures for these films, for example? What demographics are they reaching and why? How and why do audiences watch and discuss oppositional film? Comparative studies would also shed much light on the nature and scale of radical film culture. How many people see the work of oppositional auteurs compared to those films aggregated by visionOntv, for instance? What are the audience figures for an edition of Reel News compared to a film released by Dogwoof? In what ways do audiences at physical screenings differ from those watching oppositional film online? Developing methodologies for investigating these questions is a difficult but necessary next step if oppositional filmmakers are to make informed decisions about the distribution and exhibition strategies they choose to employ. Indeed, while one might assume that the ultimate goal of oppositional filmmakers is to aim for the widest possible distribution of their work, political films may well have more impact if targeted at smaller audiences of already committed activists.

If audiences for radical British film are anything like those involved in producing it, one can safely assume they consist primarily of white, straight men. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, despite the radical left supposedly being among those groups most conscious of and opposed to racial, sexual and gender inequality, in Britain (and, I daresay, elsewhere) oppositional film culture is composed overwhelmingly of heterosexual white men. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's (1986) notion of the 'homosocial' is useful for thinking through the gender and sexual oppression at the heart of this

culture (and can no doubt also be productively applied with regards to the exclusion of people of colour). That 'radical' film culture is as markedly homosocial as its mainstream counterpart is unsurprising to the extent that both derive from a society in which relations between men and women are riven by deep and structural inequality. However, understanding radical film culture *as* homosocial is a critical first step towards addressing gender inequality precisely because it identifies how, in patriarchal cultures, men's relations with other men reproduce male dominance. From this vantage point, the absence of women from oppositional documentary cannot be sidestepped as a problem for women nor dismissed as an abstract and immovable consequence of patriarchy. Instead, the homosocial describes how gender oppression is located within the very structures of routine male relationships.

This is not the same as claiming those relationships are homosexual. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is at pains to point out, the designation 'homosocial' is just as obviously distinct from 'homosexual' as it is related to it (1985, 1). Homosociality is distinct from homosexuality because the relationships it describes are not overtly sexual, but the concept also makes visible the continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual. Again, this is not to say that one necessarily leads to the other, but that there are clear and congruent interests between those men who love other men and those who spend most of their time employing, working, socialising and otherwise relating with other men. Indeed, the rigid distinction between 'hetero-' and 'homo-' that characterises much of Western culture, along with the fact that male homosocial bonding frequently occurs via an explicit and avowed rejection of homosexuality, is indicative of the close relationship between the two.

Of course, with the politics of the radical left supposedly as opposed to sexual and gender inequality as it is to racism, one is unlikely to find explicit expressions of homophobic or sexist ideas by those involved in its film culture. Yet the absence of women from that culture demonstrates its failure to identify or address the gender inequality within its own ranks. Understanding that absence as an exclusion derived from male homosociality is important if those involved are to acknowledge their (our) complicity in the problem and begin to address it. Similar arguments can also be made with regards to the exclusion of people of colour. Scrutinising the relationship between homosocial

bonding and the maintenance and transmittal of patriarchal power is another area in need of investigation, as is the relationship of these dynamics to hierarchies of race.

Finally, although this thesis has focused on the political avant-garde to the exclusion of its aesthetic equivalent, unearthing the intersection of these two tendencies is another important task for contemporary scholars of oppositional film. As stated in the Introduction, my exclusion of the aesthetic avant-garde is intended, in part, as a provocation to those filmmakers and theorists who claim as 'radical' films which place aesthetic innovation over political communication. Such claims, aided by the intellectual and cultural capital of those who make them, have seen the values and priorities of the aesthetic avant-garde become the benchmark of political film practice, in both the art gallery and academy alike, and as a result the very existence of the political avant-garde has been largely effaced. In the Introduction I accounted for theoretical context of this effacement, exploring the various ways in which, since the 1970s, Western political film theory has emphasised the aesthetic and marginalised the political, often in spite of those theorists in whose names that marginalisation took place. The fact that the majority of work discussed in this thesis is largely unknown in British Film Studies (let alone elsewhere) testifies to the same effect.

So, in reclaiming the political avant-garde as a valid and valuable part of British film culture, it has been necessary to insist on the political, rather than aesthetic, dimensions of the word 'radical', and to exclude those films which do not overtly advocate the politics of the radical left. However, as was also stated in the Introduction, this is not to disregard aesthetic questions as unimportant. Indeed, while the argument that 'there can be no radical film without radical form'[1] should be rejected, the politics of form remain essential to any radical film culture. Therefore, just as advocates of the aesthetic avant-garde have much to learn from the films and filmmakers explored here, so scholars and filmmakers of the political avant-garde will also benefit from increased exposure to those filmmakers of the art world who are genuinely committed to left-wing politics and whose work advocates its values. Only when the political avant-garde is finally given the recognition it deserves can these mutually beneficial processes of learning and exchange begin in earnest.

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[1] This argument was staged again in debates during the 2013 Bristol Radical Film Festival.

Filmography

Title	Filmmaker	Country	Year
The Stuart Hall Project	John Akomfrah	UK	2013
Secret City	Michael Chanan	UK	2013
The Happy Lands	Robert Rae/Theatre Workshop Scotland	UK	2013
Riots Reframed	Fahim Alam	UK	2013
The Spirit of '45	Ken Loach	UK	2013
Can't Pay Won't Pay! Solidarity with the People of Greece	Paul Hanes	UK	2012
Who Polices the Police	Ken Fero	UK	2012
The Condition of the Working Class in England	Mike Wayne and Dee O'Neill	UK	2012
Newspeak	Ken Fero	UK	2012
Ahead of the Game	AJ Rivers Nakasila and Marc Silver	UK	2012
Sylvia Pankhurst: Everything is Possible	WorldBytes Volunteers	UK	2011
All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace	Adam Curtis	UK	2011
Meet the Climate Sceptics	Rupert Murray	UK	2011
The Real Social Network	Isis Thompson, Srdan Keca, Ludo Fales	UK	2011
Chronicle of Protest	Michael Chanan	UK	2011
Paths Through Utopia	Isabelle Fremeaux and John Jordan	UK and France	2011
The Urbal Fix	Tom Bliss	UK	2011
Up in Smoke (formerly *Burning Needs*)	Adam Wakeling	UK	2011
You've Been Trumped	Anthony Baxter	UK	2011

Just Do It: A Tale of Modern Day Outlaws	Emily James	UK	2011
I Melt the Glass with My Forehead	Joanna Callahan & Martin McQuillan	UK	2011
The 9 Muses	John Akomfrah	UK	2010
The War You Don't See	Alan Lowery and John Pilger	UK	2010
Whose Conspiracy? Justice for the Shrewsbury Pickets	Chris Reeves	UK	2010
Only a Bookseller	Chris Reeves	UK	2010
The Daily Miracle	Chris Reeves	UK	2010
It Felt Like a Kiss	Adam Curtis	UK	2009
The Shock Doctrine	Matt Whitecross and Michael Winterbottom	UK	2009
Us Now	Ivo Gormley	UK	2009
The Age of Stupid	Franny Armstroong	UK	2009
The End of the Line	Rupert Murray	UK	2009
Outside the Law: Stories from Guantanamo	Polly Nash and Andy Worthington	UK	2009
Listen to Venezuela	Mike Wayne and Deidre O'Neill	UK	2009
The Road to Gaza	Paul Hanes	UK	2009
Viva Palestina	Paul Hanes	UK	2009
Folk America – This Land is Your Land	Jill Nichols	UK	2008
On the Verge	SchMOVIES	UK	2008
The Truth About Weapons of Mass Destruction	Paul Hanes	UK	2007
In Prison My Whole Life	Marc Evans	UK	2007
The War On Democracy	Christopher Martin and John Pilger	UK	2007

	Margaret Dickinson and Pepe		
Memories of a Future	Petos	UK/Spain	2007
The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom?	Adam Curtis	UK	2007
Taking Liberties	Chris Atkins	UK	2007
RMT: Your Union	Chris Reeves	UK	2006
The Road to Guantanamo	Matt Whitecross and Michael Winterbottom		2006
Steal This Film	Jamie King	UK	2006
Death of a President	Gabriel Range	UK	2006
Black Gold	Nick and Marc Francis	UK	2006
Outsiders: The Peace Convoy	UK	UK	2006
McLibel	Franny Armstrong	UK	2005
SchNEWS at Ten	SchMOVIES	UK	2005
Letter to the Prime Minister	Julia Guest	UK	2005
City Swimmers	Margaret Dickinson	UK	2005
Rail Against Privatisation	Chris Reeves	UK	2005
Death in Gaza	James Miller	UK	2004
Stealing a Nation	John Pilger and Sean Crotty	UK	2004
The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear (3 episodes)	Adam Curtis	UK	2004
Not in My Name III: Why War	Chris Reeves	UK	2004
Evolving Minds	Melissa Gunasena	UK	2003
Palestine is Still the Issue	Tony Stark and John Pilger	UK	2003
Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror	Steve Connelly and John Pilger	UK	2003
Not in My Name II: The Human Shields	Chris Reeves	UK	2003
Not in My Name I	Chris Reeves	UK	2002

Voces Argentinas	Dylan Howitt	UK	2002
Not This Time: The Story of the Simon Jones Memorial Campaign	Conscious Cinema	UK	2002
Baked Alaska	Franny Armstrong	UK	2002
The Luckiest Nut in the World	Emily James	UK	2002
The Century of Self	Adam Curtis	UK	2002
Drowned Out	Franny Armstrong	UK	2002
Roads, Rascals and Runaways	Frances Higson	UK	2002
Non-Violence For a Change	Zoe Broughton and Hugh Warwick	UK	2001
Injustice	Ken Fero	UK	2001
The Battle of Orgreave	Mike Figgis	UK	2001
The New Rulers of the World	Alan Lowery and John Pilger	UK	2001
A Brief History of Cuba in D-Minor	Emily James	UK	2000
Suits and Savages: Why the World Bank Won't Save the World	Zoe Young and Dylan Howitt	UK	2000
Greenham: The Making of a Monument	Hamish Campbell	UK	2000
the Coconut Revolution	Dom Rotheroe	UK	2000
J18: The First Global Protest Against Capitalism	Undercurrents and iContact	UK	2000
Behind the Barricades	GuerrillaVision	UK	2000
Rebel Colours: Prague 2000	UK Indymedia Centre	UK	2000
Who Killed Mark Faulkner?	Chris Reeves	UK	2000
Riots	John Akomfrah	UK	1999
Welcome to Australia	Alan Lowery and John Pilger	UK	1999
The Outlaw War	Chris Reeves	UK	1999
The Mayfair Set	Adam Curtis	UK	1999

Reclaim the Streets: The Movie	Agustin G. de Quiljano	UK	1998
McLibel	Franny Armstrong	UK	1998
Listen to Us	Mark Saunders	UK	1998
Apartheid Did Not Die	Alan Lowery and John Pilger	UK	1998
It's a Dog's Life	Zoe Broughton	UK	1997
Breaking the Mirror: The Murdoch Effect	David Munro and John Pilger	UK	1997
Exodus: Movement of Jah People	Mark Saunders	UK	1996
Seeds of Hope: Women Disarming for Peace and Justice	Neil Goodwin	UK	1996
The Living Dead	Adam Curtis	UK	1995
Life in the Fast Lane: The Story of the No M11 Campaign	Neil Goodwin	UK	1995
Justice for Joy	Ken Fero	UK	1995
Storming Sarajevo	Desert Storm Soundsystem	UK	1995
Life Can Be Wonderful	Martin Smith and Shelagh Brady	UK	1994
Tracking Down Maggie: The Unofficial Biography of Margaret Thatcher	Nick Broomfield	UK	1994
Death of a Nation: The Timor Conspiracy	David Munro and John Pilger	UK	1994
Tasting Freedom	Ken Fero	UK	1994
Seven Songs for Malcolm X	John Akomfrah	UK	1993
Proud Arabs and Texas Oilmen	Chris Reeves	UK	1993
The Truth Lies in Rostock	Siobhan Cleary and Mark Saunders	UK	1993
Animal Acts	Gemunu De Silva	UK	1993
Between Times	Marc Karlin	UK	1993
After the Storm	Ken Fero	UK	1992

Pandora's Box	Adam Curtis	UK	1992
Pack Up the Troubles	Cahal McLoughlin and Lin Solomon	UK	1991
Who Needs a Heart?	John Akomfrah	UK	1991
Britain's Black Legacy	Ken Fero	UK	1991
The Thatcher Factor	Norma Percy, Hugo Young?	UK	1991
Mysteries of July	Reece Auguiste	UK	1991
Operation Solstice	Gareth Morris and Neil Goodwin	UK	1991
Rites	Penny Dedman	UK	1990
The Battle of Trafalgar	Mark Saunders	UK	1990

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