

VIDEO:  
THE POLITICS OF CULTURE  
AND COMMUNITY



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THEORY AND PRACTICE

Portable video use has exploded worldwide. Since its appearance in the late 1960s video has become the medium of choice for larger and larger numbers of people. Community, gay, and feminist organizations; environmental and social advocacy groups; and mainstream and alternative political and cultural formations in North America, Europe, and the third world have made active use of video for information gathering, political agitation, and artistic experimentation. This has resulted in the distribution and dissemination of local and transnational debates and ideas across a wide spectrum of different contexts. There are a large number of assumptions governing this use of video, but perhaps the most important is that the electronic image can be an effective tool to *teach* and *inform* both practitioners and viewers. This is, in a sense, the philosophical and ideological basis upon which the video movement has built its credibility and which has encouraged the extraordinary growth in the production and distribution of a large variety of videotapes. Many of the best examples of political and artistic video production have developed out of the desire to transform images into useful arbiters of change and education. Underlying this process is the notion that electronic images will stop having a rarified and distant relationship to viewers, and instead, images will become the "site" of transformative activities. As a consequence, information changes into knowledge and knowledge transforms those who learn into activists in the communities of which they are a part.

Often, the impulse to use video for teaching and learning, for experimentation, and for the dissemination of political ideas relies on the electronic image in an untheorized fashion. In part, this is because of a profound antipathy to theory itself, but the underlying premise here is a devotion to, and a dependence upon, idealized notions of practice. The separation between theory and practice, the very idea of their separation, has hindered if not retarded the historical importance and effect of video within

both Western and non-Western cultures. Video production is seen as a craft. The creation of electronic images is as a result enframed by a variety of mystifications with respect to production, and one of the most important is that the camera as an instrument must be understood and learned about in much the same manner as one might learn how to draw or paint or use a still camera. In addition, there are a number of aesthetic assumptions with respect to images that are derived from the cinema, not the least of which is that electronic media generate moving pictures. There are professional standards derived from the history of cinema production (because both media make use of cameras) that have been imported in a wholesale fashion into video. The question is, How can all of these assumptions be examined *without* at least some theory? And why would one want to avoid enriching the critical and intellectual discourse that surrounds the use of video as a medium? As a practitioner myself, as an academic and a writer, I have found that the resistance to theory has in a general sense hobbled the growth and development of the video movement. But this resistance has a positive side as well, since what is often being looked for is a new way of conceptualizing practice, a dramatically different approach to audience and to viewing. So much of the political video movement depends on the creation of public contexts for discussion that there is a strong need to develop a more profound understanding of the grass roots, of the communities being addressed. It is also important to generate pedagogical models that will encourage open and honest exchange among participants in the production of videotapes as well as among the viewers who see them. But all of this will not shift the parameters of many present-day practices (and I will comment on them in this chapter) unless the artificial barriers that have been erected against theory are torn down. Many of the premises that have been used to justify the activities of various video groups and individuals are as "abstract" as any ivory tower theorizing. The paradox is that theory and practice inevitably inform each other, and it is only the narrowest of polemics that keeps them apart.

#### THE RIGHT TO COMMUNICATE

In southern or third world countries, video has been embraced in much the same manner as radio was for a previous generation, as a technology for training, education, organizing, information gathering, political agitation, and cultural preservation. Even more important, the appropriation of video has been seen as a key way for economically deprived communities to gain some measure of democratic control over information and communication sources now controlled either by the state or by multinational corporations. This grassroots activity has had a profound influence on the way in which very different communities in many parts of the world have thought about communications. At the same time, these activities are taking place within the context of societies that are undergoing profound change. The diasporic character and history of southern countries, the shifting terrain within which their communities now operate, and the politically and economically explosive situation they now find themselves in have provided fertile ground for the growth and development of new communications technologies.

These links between the old and the new, between societies in transition and communities undergoing a variety of complex changes, alter the landscape of meanings within which communications technologies operate. However one puts it (the shift from the modern to the postmodern, the movement from the colonial to the postcolonial), this hybridization has overwhelmed the more conventional critical, theoretical, and practical approaches that have been developed with respect to technologies such as video, television, and radio.

Access to communications technologies has been advocated as a constitutional right, to be written into the legal framework of all countries.<sup>1</sup> The MacBride Commission in 1980 called for "structural changes to equalize and balance the communication structure. Such balance is necessary, according to the proponents of the new order, if development—economically, politically, socially and culturally—is to be effectively promoted. This approach sees communication as the infrastructure of and precondition for economic growth, and thus, development."<sup>2</sup> I will argue that most of the *categories* in place for analyzing the efforts that have grown out of this suggestion, ranging from notions of participatory democracy to the horizontal nature of collective work with video to the various paradigms for understanding the role of mainstream media, have been very weak. There has been a lack of critical and evaluative work, although there are many descriptive efforts that end up justifying development work with communications technologies.<sup>3</sup> Even given this, the MacBride Commission Report was an important initiative and continues to exert tremendous influence because it suggested a paradigm shift in the political economy of communications in developing countries. The report also linked communications as a concept and as a practice to concrete notions of cultural development. It recognized and then enshrined the relationship between cultural and economic growth. It broadened the way communications was thought about, from the exchange of information to notions of the public sphere and democratic rights and freedoms.

The linkage between democracy and communications, however, incorporated ideas of citizenry, responsibility, and community from Western societies. This is an area that must be investigated with great care. Cultural specificity often precludes the simple transference of new technologies and ideas. More important, the evaluative, critical, and interpretive strategies that Western analysts use in relation to community and democracy have to be foregrounded. This is the only way to *prevent* assumptions of shared values from overwhelming local concerns and giving a strength to transnational ideas that end up duplicating neocolonial imperatives. As D. Barnlund suggests in an influential piece:

The intercultural dialogue we seek concerning ethical standards is compounded, finally, by our diverse concepts of the nature and potential of communication in mediating these ethical values. The rhetorical premises of the west—our belief in the value of rational discourse, our faith in the emergence of truth from competing arguments, our confidence in the values of collabo-

ration—do not enjoy universal respect. Setting aside for the moment those cultures which refuse to contribute to such a dialogue, there remain many others which claim an intuitive truth that is higher than reason, who reject collaboration [especially among equals], who are unimpressed with arguments and mistrustful of words.<sup>4</sup>

I consider Barnlund's comments to be crucial. In most cases the question of an ethical framework for new communications technologies must be located within this intercultural debate. I would extend his and my own comments concerning specificity to most work with video in community contexts, irrespective of location in the north or south.

#### EMPOWERMENT

Artists, particularly in the West but also in developing countries, have gravitated to video in part because of its low cost and also because the medium encourages experimentation with images. There are now hundreds of video centers, some independent, others run by universities and museums, all engaged in activities that have legitimated video as a preferred medium for a variety of creative and political endeavors. The advent of multimedia in the middle of the 1980s has increased the hybridization of video and computer technology and has brought a variety of information systems together, with even greater potential for experimentation and research. One of the central presuppositions of this activity in multimedia is that it enlarges the base of participants who use and watch video. This encourages the spread and democratization of media technologies. At another level, the advent of cheaper and cheaper camcorders with near professional results (especially with Hi-8) has encouraged the proliferation of informal networks of communication and exchange. An example of this is *Video News Service* in South Africa, which operates through the exchange and placement of videocassettes in small communities throughout South Africa. These cassettes have become a precious commodity as they are often proposed as the only source of alternative news for groups of people who have limited access to broadcast technology. Another example is Video SEWA, which operates in India and is a unique example of the grassroots applications of lowcast technologies in local communities: "Video SEWA is the video cooperative of the Self-Employed Women's Association, trade union of some 30,000 poor, self-employed women in Ahmedabad, India."<sup>5</sup> A further example at an institutional level is Vidéazimut, or the International Coalition for Audiovisuals for Development and Democracy (located in Montreal, Canada). This organization has grown dramatically over the last four years. It works on the premise that alternative sources of information will encourage dramatic cultural, personal, and political transformations in the societies and people who make use of new technologies (they are now actively pursuing satellite and broadcast media to enlarge the distribution base for their work). Vidéazimut is made up of well over twenty organizations worldwide, from Peru and Mozambique to India and Hong Kong. Each of these often represent regions rather than countries and have a

large number of smaller groups with whom they are associated. Vidéazimut has become a clearinghouse for the distribution of hundreds of videotapes shot by these groups.

There is a need to more fully explore why this type of investment is being made in video and whether it reflects an idealism for which the criteria of evaluation are often self-serving. The active implication of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in these efforts to spread the use of video must be analyzed as a Western phenomenon, very much related to notions of development, aid, and economic growth. Most of the NGOs in the field are supported by Western governments and aid organizations. They are managing video in much the same manner as they might approach a project on educating peasant farmers in the better use of their land. In other words, the medium is being treated as if it can serve the function of a formal and informal educational tool. In addition, video, like radio, is often described by NGOs as one of the most important vehicles for "giving a voice" to the disenfranchised.<sup>6</sup> The educational and pedagogical model in place here is derived from Paulo Freire and his work on the problems of literacy with South American peasants.<sup>7</sup>

The philosophy of "giving a voice" was recently critiqued in an editorial in the newsletter *Interadio*, which is produced by the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (also an NGO):

More than any other mass communication medium, radio is accessible, affordable and easily appropriated by groups of people whose demands have traditionally been ignored by the mainstream media. Many marginalized groups are turning to community radio as a forum for expression, by-passing the corporate and state media rather than fighting to access them. Community radio often speaks of the need "to have a voice" and of the necessity of establishing community stations as independent voices. Community radio has also become known as the "voice of the voiceless" in many parts of the world. However, while the term voiceless may well refer to those who have traditionally been denied access to the media, labelling community radio as the voice of the voiceless demeans the very essence of community radio. The phrase voiceless overlooks centuries of oral tradition which preceded radio technology (traditions which are especially strong in Asia, Africa and among indigenous populations). It can also be interpreted as implying that people do not have a voice in their communities and in their everyday lives unless they have some kind of access to the media.<sup>8</sup>

This is an important caution but the issues it raises are generally overlooked, if not overwhelmed by the ongoing need to keep producing videotapes and radio shows. In order to more fully understand how traditional cultures interact with new technologies, the communities affected would have to "educate" the outsiders who bring the technology with them. The general claim made by video activists is that this in fact happens. It is to Lisa Vinebohm's credit that she questions those claims. But how does the history



of a culture foreign to those who visit it with the intent of introducing video become both culturally and discursively visible? At one level the distinctions in operation here between the inside and the outside, between the local and international, seem to have been undermined, if not overcome, by the rapid spread of communications technologies themselves. The result is that few societies are now without some experience of video, television, and radio. The various distinctions of "otherness" that have guided the introduction of video have changed almost entirely. What results are social contexts in which communities have developed sophisticated media strategies at an aesthetic and political level, often far removed from the concerns of the NGO groups who bring the media with them. This suggests that the kind of work that has to be done will take the politically astute video practitioner and activist into the realm of the interdisciplinary, as he or she engages with cultural, sociological, ethnographic, and political analyses of the community. But will these analyses and overviews be able to respond to the transformations that are taking place?

There is even more to the notion of voice than what Vinebohm suggests. One of the main assumptions of community video is that of empowerment. Voice stands in for all of the processes that supposedly lead to enhanced notions of community control of information and knowledge: "Dialogue is at the very heart of community access television. For this is a medium that is (or is supposed to be) interactive, user-defined and operating horizontally. A sharp contrast indeed to the centralized, one-way, top-down flow pattern of conventional media. This alternative communications system . . . has enormous potential to liberate the public from the controlled flow of information, experience and thought."<sup>9</sup> This quote summarizes many of the concerns of the alternative video movement in both the south and the north. Aside from the conventional bow to the hegemonic influences of mass media (which foregrounds the notion of dominance, control, and the efforts to generate a democratic response), there is the key thought of liberation from control, the opening up of hitherto closed spaces of experience, and the unveiling of different ways of thinking. Goldberg is referring to the entire process of community control, although she rarely defines the meaning of "community," and to the resulting sense she has that people, once empowered in the use of the medium, will gain a new understanding of their own viewpoints on the world, if not of their politics. How does the experience of images create the open-endedness that Kim Goldberg proposes? This is such an important issue and it is so profoundly bound up with notions of education and change that the models in use for the process she supports would need far more explanation than she provides: "Like the medical treatments of the barefoot doctors, community television was a shared tool belonging to a community of equals. However, in the community TV model, the distinction between 'doctor' and 'patient' breaks down. The medium becomes a tool of community self-healing."<sup>10</sup> How does the medium become a tool of self-healing? Empowerment begins with the presumption that something is missing either in the community or in people's lives. The intervention of the videomakers, accompanied by the use of the medium on the part of "ordinary" people, supposedly leads to shifts in identity and claims of self-determination.

Do all of the contingent factors that govern the production of meaning in a video contribute to the sense that meaningful exchanges can take place? What blockages are there to learning? Is the concept of horizontal participation an idealized projection on the part of the community workers who use video?

In asking these questions from a negative rather than a positive standpoint, I in no way want to belittle or even underestimate the importance of community efforts to use video. Rather, more time needs to be spent on the issues of empowerment, participation, democratic control, and communication. Although these terms are used in an almost continuous fashion to construct the discourse surrounding video politics, they remain a bit too flexible and are loosely adapted to fit into the constraints of each situation. I believe, given the fundamentally intercultural nature of many of the productions now circulating, that these issues must be dealt with in much more detail if there is to be a more profound understanding of the political implications of the work. Yet, I also believe that after nearly twenty-five years of effort, the utopian presumptions underlying the use of video in a variety of different communities have not been evaluated in great depth. To what degree are communities likely to evaluate a technology that, from the outset, potentially reconfigures their own modes of communication? To what degree have the proponents of this technology brought a critique of the medium with them? How well have we understood video from within our own cultures? This, it seems to me, is a crucial question. There are many possible and different interpretive and analytical approaches that could be taken with respect to video, but these would involve the type of theorization that practitioners often avoid. The critical literature on video is at best slim. If our own culture has been so hesitant in the development of video theory and criticism, then what impact does this have on the movement of the technology into other social and cultural contexts?

Part of the problem I have faced in researching the organizations involved in using and promoting video is that so much of what is being made is treated as information in the most ephemeral sense of that word. Although there is some discussion of aesthetics and form, the discourse is generally quite limited, in part because there seems to be no critical vocabulary with which to examine and analyze the material produced. Videotapes circulate and are shown to audiences, but the evaluations that follow are short-lived and rarely followed up. In addition, the arguments that have been developed to describe and analyze the production of community or political videotapes don't often concern themselves with questions of *how* or whether images communicate meaning, or to what degree analytical tools are in place for explaining the various relationships between different forms of cultural production and their reception and use by viewers. This resistance to theory and to critical practices suffuses, perhaps even dominates, the video movement. Can a video stand on its own? Can the "message" be transparently clear, even if the audience the video is addressing supposedly shares the premises of the communication? The videotapes depend upon the electronic image to do the work of revealing, if not creating, discursive spaces within which questions of identity and self can be addressed and as a result of which action can be undertaken. But can the

image play that role without a creative pedagogical strategy that extends far beyond the boundaries of the image? How can that strategy be enacted without a careful reflection on the history of the medium, on its aesthetic characteristics and formal properties, and on the previous uses that have been made of images in all media?

#### ALTERNATIVITY

Some of these problems were addressed in a recent article by Kelly Anderson and Annie Goldson, "Alternating Currents: Alternative Television inside and outside of the Academy."<sup>11</sup> The authors bemoan the lack of contact between academics and video practitioners. They make the claim that there is very little interest on the part of theorists to examine the history and development of alternative media in the United States as well as elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> Although they clearly underestimate the work that has been done, they pinpoint a serious gap in the thinking about community and alternative media. There is an underlying moral imperative to the notion of alternativity that locates critique and analysis within a framework of oppositions to nearly all aspects of mainstream culture. (Examples of this approach can be found in the work of Paper Tiger Television and Deep Dish, both in New York.) This becomes the centerpiece of an evaluative strategy that is then applied to the videotapes produced in a community context. There is an ambiguous conservatism to this strategy and an underlying conformity to the statements about culture and ideology.

To what extent, then, is there some clarity with respect to the idea of alternativity? Anderson and Goldson suggest a number of different approaches. Their first assumption is that alternative television that is community based has a "precarious though binding relationship to the dominant economy of media production."<sup>13</sup> This refers to the various strategies that alternative producers and practitioners, as well as community workers, engage in with respect to funding and the acquisition of resources and equipment. The subject is a fascinating one because it is at the root of an economic activity rarely, if ever, measured. A number of objections could be raised here to the suggestion that we are dealing with alternative production processes. The first is that lowcasting now makes use of increasingly sophisticated equipment. Although not as costly as conventional broadcast technology, the investment can be considerable. Second, any effort to go beyond the immediate availability of basic resources involves grant requests to government or local agencies, corporations, or foundations. This issue has been debated before, and the argument is always that public or private aid pollutes, if not skews, the political track of advocacy that governs so much of the production at the community level. Yet, what seems to be at stake here is precisely the idealizations of the "alternative," which sees itself as outside the very institutions to which it is beholden. This is a circuitous route, full of potholes, but the most important point to keep in mind is that the terrain of practice opened up by relying on an alternativity trying to operate outside the conventional economic constraints that any technology imposes may be extremely limited.



Yet this could become a more dialogic process, and it could be more sensitive and aware of the institutional nexus within which it must operate, if there weren't such a strong dependence on the central idea of a dominant culture and on ideological control. There is no question that monopolies from Time Warner to News Corporation control the marketplace, and recent moves toward consolidation on the part of telephone and cable companies in the United States presage even more complex, although not necessarily uniformly similar, worldwide corporations. This is indisputable. But the terrain of communication, the place within which meanings as such are exchanged, interpreted, worked upon, is within the very communities that video activists want to politicize. If the model of dominance were to operate at the level, and with the intensity, suggested by the oppositional relationship between mainstream and alternative, then the very people who inhabit those communities would themselves not be accessible (nor, perhaps, would they even be interested in seeing anything different).

In part, this is because there are so many aspects to a community's activities that traverse the boundaries between what is acceptable and what is not, so much heterogeneity to the relationship between institutions and people, that questions of power and how to address the powerful cannot be answered from within the hazy traditions promulgated and supported by the easy dichotomy of alternative and mainstream. In some respects this opposition carries the same weight as the superstructure/base opposition, which did so much to undermine creative, theoretical, and critical work on culture from within the Marxist tradition. There is a simplicity to the opposition that cannot be sustained any longer. It is perhaps more necessary than ever to unmask the weaknesses of an approach that cannot account for desire, pleasure, and the contradictory politics of incorporation, which, it must be remembered, can be simultaneously experimental and co-opted. A large number of distinctions should be introduced which will reinvigorate the meaning of all kinds of media practices, without locking them into an intellectually convenient oppositional structure. This can only be done by recognizing how heterogeneous the work of the media is, how it is possible for a film like *Wayne's World* to present an analysis and critique of community cable television and be, at one and the same time, irreverent and part of the mainstream, a moneymaker and a joke on American cultural values.

#### THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Lili Berko has suggested that the advent of the portapak in the late 1960s broke the hold of broadcast television on the technology of electronic images:

The coupling of the portable videotape recorder [porta-pak] with the advent of the videocassette offered artists and social activists alike an opportunity to participate in the production of images that were to shape their culture. The most revolutionary aspect of the porta-pak was its mobility. Through the

porta-pak, television production was not locked into a studio and the confines of the codes of such mediated experience. Through video, the mystique of production was shattered and the streets became equally important sites of textual inscription. Video soon became the vehicle through which the social world could be easily documented, the vehicle which would record the voices and the images of the Newark riots, or a Mardi Gras celebration; as such it proclaimed the public sphere to be its own.<sup>14</sup>

The trajectory of influences and changes launched by portable video certainly foregrounded the need for a reevaluation of the way in which mainstream broadcasters operated. For the first time, a radically different model of televisual practices was suggested by the lowcast process. A dialectic was created between two differing conceptions of the public sphere. On the one side were the networks and on the other was a new breed of videomaker devoted to local forms of expression and rooted in a specific community. It took many years for the networks to recognize the widespread effects of lowcast technologies not only on viewers and practitioners but on the ways in which our culture thinks about the circulation of knowledge and images.

Berko's analysis of the shift to the public sphere, of the reclaiming of a territory lost to mainstream media, stands at the juncture of an analytic space that has defined an entire generation of writers and practitioners. There are few texts or articles on video that have not made the claim for this break (which resonates with the symbolism of the sixties and is represented by the work of Nam June Paik and Michael Shamberg),<sup>15</sup> and most have made it with reference to the history of mainstream media. Much remains unexamined in this choice of approach. The most important point is that the analytical framework for the study of television at that time was in its infancy. In fact, there were very few departments of film studies in universities, let alone departments of media or cultural studies. There were, however, a number of crucial "sites" where media were analyzed, and for the most part they were dependent on communications theory as it had evolved from the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> I make this point because the attitude toward mainstream television and the public sphere that underlies Berko's approach is based on a hegemonic view of the role of the media, with the result that portapak activity is analyzed as if the practice of image creation was itself a sufficient, if not utopian, reclamation of lost territory. This occupation of a new space was seen as a political act with an immediate impact upon the environments and people in which video was used and shown. Yet the absence of contexts for the analysis of mainstream media in the late 1960s (which was in part a result of the "newness" of television itself) suggests that the initial shift to a populist view of portable television technology was based on a fragmentary and often reductive presumption about mass forms of entertainment and learning. This oppositional framework continues to be the premise for much of present-day video practice and theory, which still does not grapple clearly with the problems of audience, performance, and learning with regard to media production at the local, national, and international level. There is, therefore, a measure of continuity to the debate, a his-

torical underpinning to the contrasting attitudes that have been taken toward media technologies that address both large and small audiences. How have the various definitions of impact and change that underpin notions of grassroots activity and democratic access been used to give credibility to the use of video both in the community and as an artistic tool?

It is estimated that there are about four hundred groups working in popular video in South America, with a predominant number, two hundred, working in Brazil. Luiz Fernando Santoro, who is a professor at the University of São Paulo, has commented upon this phenomenon with the statement that for the most part these groups make use of video in three ways: "Historically, there have been three distinct moments in video work: the first was the use of video to share information within the movement (video as a self-organizational tool); the second, video used as counter-information (video as a tool for constructing discourse within the movement); and the third, present moment, where video is used to present an alternative view of the world to the collectivity at large."<sup>17</sup>

With respect to the first category Santoro uses, how is information shared? What are the public and private "locations" within which richly endowed discursive formations can and do develop? This is of course a question of pedagogy, of learning, a question of how important political issues can be raised and then discussed, if not acted upon. Within the utopian ideals of the video movement, the notion of sharing information reflects a desire to jump-start the learning process and also a desire to create open contexts for communication and exchange. As well, the presumption is that by making video in local contexts, the images will reflect the genuine needs of the people who participate and, as a consequence, formerly closed channels of communication will be opened.

Video is promoted by Santoro as perhaps the best way of democratizing processes of communication and providing access to the media, particularly for those presently excluded from power or conventional networks for the production and exchange of information. Underlying Santoro's third point about presenting local interests to the broader world community is the notion that video has become a tool to reach larger and larger numbers of people. Yet this will mean that video has changed from a lowcast medium to a broadcast medium. If this is true (and I am not convinced it is), then the underlying impulses I have been describing will have shifted. This means that the perceived need to reach more and more people will change both the aesthetic approach and fundamental assumptions about the technology. It will further professionalize what up till now has been informal, and, as Santoro puts it, "the accent is on making more complete programmes in order to get them broadcast."<sup>18</sup> The premature movement into broadcasting may not happen with the rapidity suggested by Santoro. Even if it does, all the questions of communication, learning, and social change will remain. Clearly, the desire here is to broaden the base within which important political and cultural statements can be made. Yet the problem is that the "public" Santoro wants to reach remains an imaginary construction that may to some degree refer to real indi-

viduals, but that for the most part suggests a context of experience that cannot be validated. The tension between public and private forms of knowledge and experience is played out at a contradictory level within the framework of video production. As notions of the public sphere broaden to include more and more communities, the heterogeneity of the videotapes being made could decrease. In many southern countries videotapes are used to make education more accessible to large numbers of people. Examples abound from the most basic (images that show people how to make use of clean water supplies) to more complex forms of education (how to develop communal structures for economic growth and diversification). The videotapes are meant to fit into the formal and informal networks of learning already in place. But who makes these videotapes? Where do the assumptions of learning and education come from? How are cultural differences dealt with? In fact, how are the issues of intercultural communication integrated into the videotapes, since they presumably would be used by a wide variety of people with different interests?

These are questions that are usually answered with the assertion that local people know and control the relevance of the videotapes. If they are adequately informed and involved, then the results will be seen as relevant and will perhaps have an even more profound influence on the community as a whole. But this remains a supposition, because the history of educational video in the north would suggest that learning from video is a complex task. Without delving into this issue at the moment, it is not very clear how people learn from images or even whether they do. That is not to suggest that viewers don't learn, but that the criteria of evaluation remain vague and more attached to an imputed content than anything else.

The approaches here range from the formal to the informal. For example, Vidéazimut has run workshops in video production in a variety of different countries. These workshops are community based and are intended to provide local people with the tools they need to both understand and make videotapes. Most of the workshops are run on questions of technique (how to make videotapes, how to use the equipment, and so on), invoking a pedagogy that is rarely examined, and when it is, the evaluation is usually based on vague notions of empowerment through the use of video. In a sense Vidéazimut faces a conundrum well known to ethnographers and anthropologists. Outside observers and participants with the best of intentions and the most rigorous notions of the local, or the indigenous, are nevertheless *not* part of the communities with which they get involved. This obviously has an impact on the pedagogical methods that are chosen for training purposes, but an examination of the literature produced to date shows little awareness of those problems, which are fundamentally intercultural in character. How can critical methods of training be developed with respect to video? Is the terminology wrong to begin with here? What are the historical origins underlying the assumption that to learn a technology, you have to be trained in it? Are we dealing with craft-oriented approaches here, and what are the implications of that for critical analysis?



Yet although those contradictions seem to be a major characteristic of the use of video, I must also stress the positive side. Some of the preliminary research I have done on video-oriented projects, such as the Integrated Rural Project in Education, Health, and Family Planning (in the Honduras), suggests that with limited tools and cheap technology, video has been useful in opening up hitherto untapped energies for learning and debate. In this instance video and sound cassettes were used to provoke discussion on issues of central concern for the health and welfare of Hondurans living in small impoverished villages. This encouraged an open exchange of ideas, and the participants began to make tapes of their own and exchange them with other villages. Similar projects in Kenya, Senegal, and Bolivia point toward the potential strengths of this movement. Another major effort is the Village Video Network, cosponsored by the United Nations University and Martha Stuart Communications (now called Communication for Change). The network is nonprofit and has many participants from a number of African and Asian countries. "Women are a primary target and beneficiary of Village Video Network activities and women's groups (such as the Self-Employed Women's Association of Ahmedabad, India) are active participants in the workshops and exchanges made possible by the network."<sup>19</sup>

The German Foundation for International Development has been involved in a large number of projects in the south. They held a series of seminars on community communications between 1986 and 1990. A report on the seminars was written up in *Group Media Journal*, published in Munich. Manfred Oepen invokes three categories to describe a new paradigm for the use of media in the community: "They have gone from information diffusion *for* people to information seeking *by* and *with* people. Here, problem and practice-related information is generated through local or regional community processes and fed into existing media networks horizontally and vertically, to inform both central decision makers and community groups respectively." Oepen goes on to describe three key concepts of community communication: "access, participation and self-management."<sup>20</sup>

Those three aims were also the foundation upon which the Challenge for Change program was developed at the National Film Board of Canada (NFB).<sup>21</sup> In the late 1960s and early 1970s Challenge for Change was created to engage with processes of social change through the use of video and film. Broadly speaking, the desire to use the medium as an instrument for an activist relationship to Canadian society grew out of the recognition that the NFB, as well as politically committed cultural workers, needed to be involved in more than the production of films or videotapes. They needed to connect with, and better understand, the audiences and communities they were addressing. The aim was to extend the process of creation and production from an institutional nexus into a decentralized model, based on an idealized version of community involvement:



Films can teach, they can explain and they can move people to great depths of emotion. Having done all of these things, is it possible for films to move people to action? There is no question for most social scientists that carefully constructed communications, films for instance, can produce changes in attitudes, in those who adequately receive the communication. The use of adequately is of course a conscious one in that we know that people tend to misperceive that which they hear and see, and go through fairly complicated strategies of selective attention and selective perception.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the audience became an obsession at the NFB, with specific people at the institution assigned to develop polling methods and questionnaires for distribution to the populace at large. After certain films or videotapes were shown on television, for example, the Film Board phoned people at random to see if they had watched and to pose questions if viewers said they were prepared to participate. The premise of this community-oriented work was pedagogical, political, and cultural, and it influenced an entire generation of activists devoted to the use of visual media for political purposes. The issue of connectivity to the viewer, to the community—the issue of the relationship between production and distributions—is what distinguished the efforts of the NFB from many similar organizations elsewhere. The traditions developed during the heyday of the Challenge for Change period were improved upon in the late seventies when the board decentralized and opened up a series of regional centers across Canada in an effort to build closer ties to the communities it was serving.

The idealism of Challenge for Change was based on notions of democratic access, the rallying call for anyone seriously interested in promoting the use of video in the community. The history of that period has not yet been written in great detail; suffice it to say that one of the most interesting aspects yet to be explored will be the relationship between the social work movement in Quebec in the early 1960s and the accelerated movement toward media use for educational purposes. The level of advocacy in both education and social work was very sophisticated, with tie-ins to provincial government departments and local municipalities. The use of video for the purposes of empowerment was embedded in a particular political context and surrounded by debates within Quebecois culture about the role of the media in culture and education. The specificity of the situation affected not only the videotapes being made but also the institutions that promoted them. The claims of that period and the video activism that followed were not as easily transferable to other contexts as was presumed at the time. In fact, it is startling to read the anecdotal comments about Challenge for Change by modern-day proponents of community video,<sup>23</sup> the decontextualized analyses of the films that were made, and the lack of understanding about the history of the National Film Board—in particular that many of the films were the site of conflicts between the English and French sections of the NFB [which had a definitive impact on what the film board meant by community].

Rick Moore, who wrote *Canada's Challenge for Change: Documentary*

*Film and Video as an Exercise of Power through the Production of Cultural Reality*,<sup>24</sup> quotes one of the members of Challenge for Change: "All across Canada (often with the help of Challenge for Change), citizens are picking up half-inch VTR cameras and learning to speak through them."<sup>25</sup> Moore then goes on to say:

The assessment was not an exaggeration, geographically speaking. Challenge for Change had begun numerous projects across the country in which the primary emphasis was citizen access. Over twenty-three major projects were eventually completed, some in urban areas such as Vancouver, Halifax and Toronto. Some were done in rural areas such as Drumheller, Alberta. In many of these communities, Challenge for Change staff took on new titles. For example, "directors" were no longer directors, but "media counsellors" in charge of helping the local citizens use the media most effectively.<sup>26</sup>

Guided by a vague concept of change, firmly believing in the potential of video as a technology to empower people to "talk to each other," engaged in the legitimation of a public sphere with a hierarchy of discourses that workers at Challenge for Change rarely examined, the program nevertheless produced many important experiments in the field of community video. But the operative word here is experiment, and in some senses people and their communities became the site within which many different ideas of democratic involvement were tested. The problem is that the targets for these experiments were as much the members of the community as the image itself—the creation and construction of meaning within the confines of an electronic medium. And the often-expressed analysis of workers at Challenge for Change was that no other form of communication adequately responded to the needs of the people, as they understood them. But this is a confusion of levels. Experimenting on the image, testing its effectiveness with regard to change, is already fraught with contradiction. Applying these ideas to the relationship between the image and the spectator, the image and the community, just confuses the issues even more.

If it appears that I am referring to a historical situation that may not be relevant anymore, here is what Deirdre Boyle has to say: "Nearly 30 years since the video portapak launched an independent television movement in the United States, a new generation of video activists has taken up the video camcorder as a tool, a weapon, and a witness. Although the rhetoric of guerrilla television may seem dated today, its utopian goal of using video to challenge the information infrastructure in America is more timely than ever and at last practicable. Today's video activism is the fulfillment of a radical 1960's dream of making 'people's television.'" Boyle goes on to talk about the three components of video activism as they have coalesced in the nineties: "To be a tool, a weapon and a witness."<sup>27</sup> These three categories are as constitutive now as they were in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their longevity is framed by the concept of empowerment. Yet an examination of the literature and research that has been produced in relation to video reveals very little evolution or depth with regard to empowerment

as a *process*. Terms like *democratization* and *control by the community* appear over and over again, but these are assumed from within the activities of portable video use. There is not enough research about audience, about the ways in which video images work as devices of communication, if at all, or about questions that relate issues of representation to empowerment.<sup>28</sup>

Care must be taken in discussing the *effects* of portable technologies upon users and viewers. The evaluative tools we have for examining how these technologies have been appropriated, and then understood, cannot simply be reduced to an instance of the technology itself. While it is true that hundreds of groups started to use video in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that by *itself* does not suggest much about the aesthetic or political uses that were made of the medium. It will be important to account more fully for the difficulties that are posed in analyzing the subjective relationship that practitioners and viewers develop with video images. Is it true that advocacy video changes the ways in which people both analyze and act upon the social contexts of which they are a part? There is little but anecdotal evidence to suggest what these changes are actually about, to what degree and with what depth viewers and/or communities work upon the images they watch or create. This is as much a methodological problem as it is a theoretical and practical one. All the various problems of conflating class, ethnicity, color, and gender come to the fore here, in a notion of community that seems to rise above the contradictions and conflicts that are a part of any community's history.

#### HISTORY/TECHNOLOGY/COMMUNITY

By now it should be evident that I am concerned with the relationship between the history of video and popular and academic assumptions about how that technology can be used and responded to. I am also concerned with presumptions of impact and various hypotheses about change as they are refracted through the shifting parameters of technological growth and innovation. To what degree, for example, does the appearance of video coincide with the desire to link home photography with television? Does this explain the rapid acceptance of the medium by many different sectors of our society? Do the camcorder and the palmcorder presage a historical shift in the way in which electronic images will be watched, understood, and created? If we go back to Sony's invention of the half-inch black-and-white portapak, will we be able to delineate the social, cultural, and economic factors that contextualized the appearance of this new technology and its rapid acceptance by artists, news organizations, and community activists?

In retrospect it now seems clear that Sony was setting the stage for the VCR, having made the judgment that spectators would eventually want to control their own viewing patterns and also place their faith in the electronic image, in much the same way they had with photographs.<sup>29</sup> What led Sony to this hypothesis and is it valid? Why was the Sony Corporation able to anticipate this? Why did an American firm, the Ampex Corporation, which had invented video recorders in 1955 ten years before Sony

introduced the portapak, not grab the opportunity in the same way? Why did the JVC Company in Japan choose the VHS format over Betamax (a superior technology) and thus quickly marginalize Sony's role in the first years of VCR development, even though Sony had been in the forefront some years earlier? Those are questions that this essay will not be able to answer, but they are part of a history that needs to be developed in any discussion of video if we are to broaden our understanding of technological change and the role of video in cultural development.

There is a "history" that can perhaps account for the new circuits of communication put in place by the advent of video. In particular one would have to develop an analysis of the implications of more and more people of vastly different backgrounds becoming comfortable with video as a device in the home. We would have to explore the link between the technology as a structure of possibilities in the political arena and its location within a postmodern context in which new kinds of histories (public and private) are being created in rather nonlinear ways. At first blush, it appears as if video permits a massive set of variables to be introduced into a world of endless disjunctures, where there is no clear or level playing field for the construction and maintenance of specific meanings. Yet it may be the case that as more and more electronic images are created for very specific contexts, the fragmentation will allow for an interchangeable flux of meanings to be sustained by hitherto undescribed modes of linkage.

The often-expressed desire of video activists to bring the people in the communities they work with together for the purposes of change and social cohesion is situated in a concept of community that is both naive and untheorized. Aside from the difficulties of gaining access to the rather complex and multilayered aspects of community life, the very notion of community is based on a denial of difference and on a vague conception of conflict resolution. As Iris Marion Young has put it: "The ideal of community, finally, totalizes and detemporalizes its conception of social life by setting up an opposition between authentic and inauthentic social relations. It also detemporalizes its understanding of social change by positing the desired society as the complete negation of existing society."<sup>30</sup>

Young goes on to talk about the efforts of political activists to radicalize and politicize the communities they work in. She claims that the notion of face-to-face relations "seeks a model of social relations that are not mediated by space and time distancing. In radically opposing the inauthentic social relations of alienated society with the authentic social relations of community, moreover, it detemporalizes the process of social change into a static before and after structure."<sup>31</sup> The implications of these claims for political work in the community with video are quite dramatic. They suggest that the assumptions of involvement and participation that video activists so vigorously pursued may have contributed to a static model of human relations, from which it was difficult, if not impossible, to build new paradigms of political and cultural activity.

The desire to bring people together around the practice of making videotapes has an initial ring of authenticity to it. In the literature of community video, there

seems to be an almost apocalyptic result that is generated when the technology is introduced and then used. The effect is doubled when the images are shown back to the community, with the explicit presumption being that images provide a mirror that would otherwise not be available. Within this environment, the topography of ideas one uses to clarify or support political media activities needs to be carefully thought out. Although often discredited both from within and outside academic circles, the high culture/low culture dichotomy remains at the center of presumptions about what works as political communication and what doesn't. It seems clear that the arguments presently in place for the activity of viewing are strung out along a thin border between conflicting conceptions of passivity and nonpassivity. This dichotomy cannot account for televisual viewing, so we need an entirely different model. I bring this up because in the context of the arguments that have been developed around the legitimacy of video as a political tool, it is television, and by extension all of popular culture, that is the site of a lack, an absence that the community use of video or video advocacy will somehow fill. It is in the context of this notion of a loss of power to the mainstream media and to the consequences of technological innovation that the notion of empowerment draws its strength. Yet the question of empowerment cannot be answered from within the negative parameters of an opposition that promotes such a mechanical model of communication and exchange. So perhaps the very idea of empowerment as it has been theorized up until now needs to draw upon different sources that incorporate many *more* forms of cultural activity and that accept the diversity of needs, desires, and political priorities that communities, groups, or individuals encourage, create, and respond to.

Underlying the approach taken by the community video movement is a rationalist ideology of communication, centered on ideas of citizenship, identity, and empowerment through participatory, media-based activities. In fact, there is a need to move beyond generalized metaphors of the media to perhaps address the following question as it is posed by Nicholas Garnham: "Can we identify cultural forms or types of media practice that favor the formation of democratic identities and others which undermine such identities?"<sup>32</sup>

In one respect this seems like a naive question. In another respect it is at the core of the political assumptions that both guide and frame the use of video as a pedagogical tool. Although these points are not articulated by the institutions that have become the most important purveyors of video (and I should add other new technologies, in particular the computer), there is an assumed link between media practice and the public sphere. The premise is that images will contribute to the growth of social movements—viewers will also fit what they see into what they think about both with respect to their own identities and their sense of themselves as public and private personae (the contribution they can make to the social context in which they live). This notion of a "public subjectivity," a term articulated by Benjamin Lee, is essentially proposed as a holistic practice that moves citizenship beyond the narrow parameters of the community or nation-state.<sup>33</sup> In this respect public subjectivity comes to stand for a public sphere and a public culture that stretches far beyond the physical and psychologi-



cal boundaries of the community as we presently define it. It also stands for strategies of spectatorship that are dependent on intercultural and therefore more hybridized conceptions of what works as communication and what doesn't. The appropriation of video leads to forms of cultural expression that mix many different aspects of historically *differentiated* types of information. The problem is, to what degree can these histories be accessed when their specificity is both overwhelmed and diluted by the movement of ideas across many, often distinctive, cultures in one country or many countries? What are the attractions of different publics for the videotapes presented to them? To what degree and with what depth can public spaces be constructed where the videotapes can be evaluated? Can viewers gain access to their own and their neighbors' experiences of media images? Even more important, since so much of the viewing of electronic images is bound up with desire (the desire to know, sometimes combined with, and other times offset, by the desire to be entertained) and since the discursive articulation of desire is neither easy nor, generally speaking, public (and may even be antithetical to the culture involved), what kind of access can we gain to the way viewers learn from, and experience, video images?

It may be that Garnham's question merely reinforces the idea that instrumental forms of communication can be constructed to promote political involvement and change. Surely the time has come to alter, if not recreate, this kind of argument. I have found that some gay and feminist writers and videomakers have moved beyond the restrictive boundaries of instrumentality. (In particular, I would like to cite the extraordinary work of Sadie Benning.) Video advocacy, particularly in southern countries, is in deep trouble. Community video has rarely moved beyond the initial parameters of debate that established the movement. The time has come to examine these closed systems of thought and discourse and reflect on why they have played such a dominant role in grassroots work with video and why they have been used as the foundation upon which so-called alternative media institutions have been built. If the heterogeneity of "community" and the richness of the "local" can engage with the genuinely important shifts of emphasis represented by video and other emerging technologies of communication, then it may just be possible to redefine the meaning and breadth of alternativity at the creative, political, theoretical, and discursive levels. It may also be possible to rethink the history of visual technologies and their role in the development of idealistic notions of change. Technology has changed the role of the image in most societies. This may be the time to take a step back and examine the implications of such a major shift for cultures in the north and south.

## NOTES



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- <sup>1</sup> See the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (the MacBride Commission), *Many Voices, One World* (London: Kogan Page, 1980), and *World Communication Report* (Paris: UNESCO, 1989). The latter lists a long series of reports that have come out of various countries and constituencies.
- <sup>2</sup> Hamid Mowlana and Laurie J. Wilson, *The Passing of Modernity: Communication and the Transformation of Society* (New York: Longman, 1990), 58.
- <sup>3</sup> See in particular Sara Stuart, "Access to Media: Placing Video in the Hands of the People," *Media Development* 36, no. 4 (1989): 42-45, and Chinyere Stella Okunna, "Communication for Self-reliance among Rural Women in Nigeria," *Media Development* 39, no. 1 (1992): 46-49.
- <sup>4</sup> D. Barnlund, "The Cross-Cultural Arena: An Ethical Void," in *Ethical Perspectives and Critical Issues in Intercultural Communication*, ed. N.C. Asuncion-Landé (Annandale, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1979), 8-13, cited in Jeffrey C. Ady, "Cultural Relativism and Global Equity in Media Access: A Challenge to Idealism through the 1990s," paper presented at the Sixth MacBride Roundtable, Honolulu, 20-23 January 1994, 10-11.
- <sup>5</sup> Stuart, "Access to Media," 45.
- <sup>6</sup> See Ad Boeren, "Getting Involved: Communication for Participatory Development," and Manfred Oepen, "Traditional and Group Media Utilization in Indonesia," both in *The Empowerment of Culture: Development Communication and Popular Media*, ed. Ad Boeren and Kes Epskamp (The Hague: Centre for the Study of Education in Developing Countries, 1992), 47-60, 61-78.
- <sup>7</sup> Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).
- <sup>8</sup> Lisa Vinebohm, "The Power of Voice," *Interadio* 5, no. 2 (1993): 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Kim Goldberg, *The Barefoot Channel: Community Television as a Tool for Social Change* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1990), 6.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>11</sup> Kelly Anderson and Annie Goldson, "Alternative Television inside and outside of the Academy," *Social Text* 35 (Summer 1993): 56-71.
- <sup>12</sup> The authors seem not to be aware of the work of John Downing, whose *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1984) attempts precisely to link historical and theoretical concerns with practical experience. Various monographs such as Francis J. Berrigan, *Community Communications: The Role of Community Media in Development* (Paris: UNESCO, 1979), and Francis J. Berrigan, ed., *Access: Some Western Models of Community Media* (Paris: UNESCO, 1977); short articles such as, Terence Turner, "Visual Media: Cultural Politics, and Anthropological Practice: Some Implications of Recent Uses of Film and Video among the Kayapo of Brazil," *Commission on Visual Anthropology Review*, Spring 1990; and the work coming out of the *Group Media Journal* in Germany reflect an ongoing concern to grapple with the various issues that arise out of alternative use of the media. Also see Roy Armes, *On Video* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
- <sup>13</sup> Anderson and Goldson, "Alternative Television," 59.
- <sup>14</sup> Lili Berko, "Video: In Search of a Discourse," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 10, no. 4 (1989): 289-307.
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Shamberg, *Guerrilla Television* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1990).
- <sup>16</sup> Two of the most important were the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania and the School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.
- <sup>17</sup> Sylvia Roy and Nancy Thede, "An Interview with Luiz Fernando Santoro," *Clips* (a publication of *Vidéazimut*, Montreal, Quebec), May 1992, 3.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>19</sup> Hamid Mowlana and Laurie J. Wilson, *The Passing of Modernity: Communication and the Transformation of Society* (New York: Longman, 1990), 142.
- <sup>20</sup> Manfred Oepen, "Communicating with the Grassroots: A Practice-oriented Seminar Series," in *Group Media Journal* 9, no. 3 (1990): 4.

- <sup>21</sup> For additional information on Challenge for Change, see Ron Burnett, "Video/Film: From Communication to Community," in *Video in the Changing World*, ed. Nancy Thede and Alain Ambrosi (New York and Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991), 54-60.
- <sup>22</sup> Dorothy Todd Hénaut, "Editorial," *Challenge for Change Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1970): 3.
- <sup>23</sup> See a number of the essays in Thede and Ambrosi, eds., *Video in the Changing World* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1991).
- <sup>24</sup> Rick Moore, "Canada's Challenge for Change: Documentary Film and Video as an Exercise of Power through the Production of Cultural Reality" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1987). This is one of the few sustained efforts at an analysis of the relationship of the National Film Board to Challenge for Change.
- <sup>25</sup> Elisabeth Prinn, "Vive le Videographe," *Challenge for Change Newsletter*, no. 8 (Spring 1972): 18.
- <sup>26</sup> Moore, *Canada's Challenge*, 119.
- <sup>27</sup> Deirdre Boyle, "From Portapak to Camcorder: A Brief History of Guerrilla Television," *Journal of Film and Video* 44, nos. 1-2 (1992): 67, 78.
- <sup>28</sup> These questions are addressed, albeit all too briefly, by Lili Berko in "Video: In Search of a Discourse," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 10, no. 4 (1989): 289-307.
- <sup>29</sup> Akio Morita, the founder and head of Sony, said of the VCR: "[It] will revolutionize television. It will change the concept of prime time so that *any* time can be prime time. Before the development of video recording, television was too fleeting. While it has been outstanding for conveying information, providing entertainment, and improving our culture, the sad fact exists that once a program is off the air it is gone forever for the T.V. viewer. Newspapers, magazines, and books can be read and kept for future reference. But this had not been so with T.V. programs seen in the home" (quoted in Nick Lyons, "The Age of Betamax," in *The Sony Vision* [New York: Crown, 1976], 211).
- <sup>30</sup> Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 302.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.
- <sup>32</sup> Nicholas Garnham, "The Mass Media, Cultural Identity, and the Public Sphere in the Modern World," *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 264.
- <sup>33</sup> Benjamin Lee, "Going Public," *Public Culture* 5, no. 2 (1993): 165-78.