

INDEPENDENT
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that was the 80s...

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...that was

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But the Arts Council's 1975 Serpentine Gallery Video Show, and the founding of London Video Access and other outfits (later to be called workshops), marked the rise of video as medium in its own right. By 1978, when VHS home video was introduced, GLAA (Greater London Arts Association) had been running VIDEO EXTRA magazine for a couple of years, and had researched and funded the first public access edit system, at Fantasy Factory. LVA was distributing art product, The Other Cinema political product.

In fact, the UK scene was about ten years behind the USA, where TV stations KQED, WNET and WGBH, plus The TV Lab, were regularly putting experimental video on air, and state and federal funding was substantial. In Quebec, VIDEOGRAPHE was distributing programmes to cable TV. In Europe, video was developing fast: in Germany, for instance, WDR was airing experimental film and video, while a very strong workshop movement was supporting feminist and other political causes. In Australia, the network of video access centres was already under threat of funding cutbacks!

In the UK, the 80s saw the rise and fall of video access. In the early part of the decade, the Independent Film makers Association had a field day. Through it, prominent film makers successfully lobbied Parliament to make Channel 4 include provisions for innovative and experimental programming. Fortunately, their more bizarre, socialist ideas, like banning goal pornography from sports reports, were ignored.

"The institutionalisation of access... turned into the formalising of training."



The Greater London Council woke up from a seemingly eternal slumber, and, with Channel 4, started throwing money around like there was no tomorrow. Video, film and every oddball, offbeat outfit scampered to the orchard to catch the falling apples. As a result many projects received funding that enabled them to buy equipment and employ staff, and the new wave of talent began to emerge.

The ACTT, which in 1980 had stated that no non-broadcast video workers would ever join, created the Workshop Declaration, so that cheap programming could be made by certain 'franchised' workshops without the rest of its members going on strike. (Peter Keighron described this in the last issue of *IM*, so I won't repeat it here.) These workshops, based on film makers, then absorbed the majority of C4's funding and moved across into video.

Non-franchised workshops which dealt in access were consequently marginalised, despite assurances from C4's Alan Fountain (possibly the world's most maligned commissioning editor) that the channel was interested in the activity rather than the product. Nonetheless, the flowering of film and video culture was a direct result of C4, and, to a lesser extent, the GLC.

When the GLC and other regional authorities were abolished in the mid-80s, the bubble burst. Less funded productions meant less guaranteed work for access workshops, and the Regional Arts Associations followed suit.

Simultaneously, a new buzzword hit the industry: Training. The institutionalisation of access, which in 1985 I thought I could see coming, turned into the formalising of training. Different words perhaps, but similar action, yet because the emphasis on training is industry-wide, it theoretically gives access workshops an opportunity to de-marginalise themselves if they can find the cash. And there lies the rub. Take the London Region as an example...

In 1988, the BFI (British Film Institute), LBGS (London Borough Grant Scheme) and GLA commissioned the controversial Southwood Report, whose conclusions were based on the assumption that the funders would continue to fund video and film. What actually happened is different.

The BFI, which got a substantial increase in government grant, reduced the budget of all debts by seven per cent, and hence grants. The apparent reason for this paradox, restructuring and internal capital costs, conveniently hides a whopping loss by its South Bank tourism subsidiaries, the NFT (National Film Theatre) and MOMI (the Museum of Moving Image). Rumours of mismanagement are, of course, quite untrue, etc.

LBGS, one of the GLC's successors, confined its funding to vocational training and now dispenses a measly £160,000 for the whole region. GLA has become the ultimate bureaucratised institution, whose dull accountants' plans are as unreadable as they are unrealistic. None of the three bodies has any money for capital equipment grants. The Southwood Report has not been much use, except to Southwood.

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Most groups that still exist - and a number of those that have vanished - have been put through the 'consultant's report' mangle. The idea is to make lots of consultants rich by explaining why groups cannot turn themselves into nice little corner-shop businesses, enabling the funders to cite 'objective' reasons for what they wanted to do anyway, ie- cut funding. Although this method is simply government policy passed down the arms-length hierarchy, it's also a face-saving substitute for straightforward behaviour and plain talking by the funders. It's corny as hell, and the sight of so many 'leftists' doing the government's bidding has a familiar ring.

Would there was a Jeremy Isaacs on the scene with the balls and prestige to tell them to stuff their policies up their own arts-holes. But the fact is, if they don't get the money, their cultural policies are of no further interest to practitioners on the ground.

So what about the 90s? You can forget about grant aid as a serious source of income. You can kiss goodbye to access as a legitimate activity supported by public tax money. You can forget 'art' and 'culture' as activities that generate official enthusiasm. And you can also forget the inverted racism, the loony left and all that liberal cant that typified the death throes of the GLC.

Instead, its back to private enterprise hustling your ideas in the market place, looking for openings, being an entrepreneur. Fortunately, TV and video have expanded enormously since the 70s, so there are many more opportunities for making and selling programmes. Likewise, equal opportunities policies have taken hold

in the mainstream and for disadvantaged people there will continue to be low cost ways to get trained, though arguably never enough of them.

What began for many of us as an exploration of alternative modes of using electronic media in the days before they became diffused throughout society, has been largely absorbed by the structures of society itself, with the institutionalisation and formality that goes with it. If you can grok it, then go with it.

Personally, I'm beginning to have other thoughts. It was as much fun going around the world for three months with a Video-8 camcorder as it was running an access facility for 10 years in Central London. Planetary issues have surfaced and need addressing and this is what's different now, for me.

The 90s should be very exciting now that the technology is so small that you can, literally, tuck your video in your backpack and go have adventures. What's more, with a bit of suss, this should also be a way of earning money. I met people in the US who are already putting Hi-8 to air, and not just for hot news. One day, British broadcasters will drop their pants and say: "Yeah. We can use it," but not before satellite TV has forced them to go for more and cheaper programming.

It's really encouraging that *Independent Media* has lasted all this time: I hope you can get through the current recession. Video culture is alive and well and most of it is independent, the only state of mind worth having. See you on the beach or at the barricades.

FACING THE FUTURE

the new uncertainty

Nick Hunt recently helped organise a conference at the Leicester Film & Video Festival to discuss the future possibilities of 'access', particularly in light of the changing patterns of funding and new developments in the film and video industries. Here he puts forward the arguments.

THE TERM 'ACCESS' HAS been coined in a number of spheres and has become a well used term in the Independent film and video sector. It has come to be seen by many as signifying the desires of disadvantaged and marginalised groups of people to be represented through audio visual media and, ultimately, to have a social and political voice in contemporary culture. The belief in need for access to film and video resources and distribution has been argued throughout the 70s and 80s by a growing movement of Independent film and video makers and cultural workers, with varying degrees of impact on the various media institutions. As we enter the 90s we face the greatest challenge to the development of the movement.

The economic basis for access has been premised on subsidised resources and grant-aid. This is in direct opposition to the social policies of the last ten years and, as the so called 'new reality' filters through to the

Independent sector, the basis from which its practices have developed are being called into question. Many organisations have suffered as a result of this, and funding has now been withdrawn from key organisations, such as the Women's Film and Television Network, the Independent Film, Video and Photography Association (IFVPA), and the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT).

We are now witnessing a major restructuring within Arts funding at all levels associated with film and video, along with a determined social policy to deregulate the broadcasting institutions and create a more market-led system. This is happening against a background of arguments challenging the notion of an Independent sector. For example, the Boyden Southwood Report, commissioned by Greater London Arts as a consultancy on film and video activity in London, described the sector as having set about a failed cultural project to established

a parallel film and video sector in opposition to the 'mainstream'.

The question has also been raised about the sector not having a coherent set of principles and ideas on which it bases its practices. Some people also recognise clear divisions between film & video, and on the basis of gender/race, while others see their practice extending across these divisions.

As the sector is undergoing significant changes the opportunities to debate these changes and map what exists have decreased. How will the sector represent itself in the 90s, what will be its sources of information and what networks will exist to promote its key ideas, such as access?

Nick Hunt is Executive Committee Member of the Independent Film, Video & Photography Association, and Marketing Officer at the Leicester Independent Film & Video Association (LIFVA). *IM* plans to have a fuller report in next month's issue.

VISIONS *of* HOPE

Andy Porter was a founder member of the West London Media Workshop, and then of the Irish Video Project. He has worked freelance in the independent sector, and is now a co-director of APT Film & Television, along with Tony Dowmunt & Paul Morrison. His optimism has not dampened over the years, and here offers some hope for the future.

I STARTED WORKING in what was then called 'Community Video' sixteen years ago. In the last year, I have been involved in making a documentary for Channel 4 about television and democracy - REMOTE CONTROL: TELEVISION & DEMOCRACY - and part of that has involved me in remaking my own history. I was surprised.

We had a particular vision then of a media future: naive, utopian and riding on the crest of a wave of community agitation and action, which was already becoming institutionalised, and, where it wasn't, was starting to die out.

The dream was of a communications system of free-flowing information: where people could make their own messages, and could communicate them vertically to the centres of power and horizontally to other groups in society, free from central control and mediation. Local production centres; democratic distribution systems. An Ursula Le Guin world of decentralised communication in a decentralised society. So, what has surprised me?

Firstly, that stripped of its romance and political innocence, some of the dream has become a reality. Most major towns and some smaller ones now have independent media facilities committed in part to giving voice to the media disenfranchised. There are Black workshops, Gay & Lesbian workshops, Women's workshops. There's training courses. There is the workshop agreement. There is Channel 4. All of them constrained by economics and politics, many of them fraught with contradictions. But they are there nevertheless.

The second thing that surprised me was how that vision could still excite me. Needing some coverage of the 'early days', we dug up Liberation Films' GETTING STARTED, a film about a community video experiment in Balham, South London. I approached it with trepidation, afraid that it would only confirm other people's prejudices (which now had become my own), that not only was this stuff boring, it was irrelevant too. And there it was: a bunch of hippy looking activists 'taking the Portapak to the people'. But then I got excited: people were sitting around in their front-room flat, watching the playback, making edit decisions, shaping a programme. Ordinary people if you like (by which I mean people that do not normally have access to the media) making television; actively engaged in production that both challenged the 'grip' of the professionals, and still suggests possibilities for the future.

This is not a clarion call to take up the Super-VHS and go forth, rather a plea to put democratic participation in media production back on our own and society's agenda. Why? Because as the political structures become more centralised and as media ownership becomes concentrated in fewer hands, it is necessary to defend and expand the space for the unheard, unrepresented voices, localities, regions, minorities.

Why too, because I sniff a change in the political climate, a suggestion that the equation of active citizenship with active consumption is beginning to pall. If active citizenship means anything it means an active participation in the politics of everyday life: as people are coming to realise, the air we breathe, the water we drink, our mobility in the world are political issues. We should add to this list the information systems upon which we all depend, which are vital to these issues and to which TV is central.

There is a debate going on about television around the Broadcasting Bill, but its agenda is limited (Quality TV versus Wall To Wall trash), its participants restricted to warring elites: the defenders of the status quo (mainly drawn from within the media) versus the new elite of money men. Absent from this debate is any consideration of how television could and should function in a democracy. And this at a point where we are in the middle of a second Industrial Revolution: the Information Revolution, in which the expansion of television outlets is playing its part.

I don't have any blueprints about how to challenge these ideological blinkers. Certainly at this point it is no good looking to the Labour Party, who are very good at rubbishing Murdoch, but who, when challenged to propose an alternative, can only hark back to the far-from-satisfactory status quo, and exhibit a complete lack of creative thinking when confronted with the new media. There is certainly a need for political media education here.

But I don't share the pessimism of many media commentators. The control of images and information will always be a site of struggle, because political power itself will always be contested. Gains may turn into losses, but new gains will be won. I have my own list of hopeful signs: Channel 4 commissioning a new access series, the continuing survival and adaption of the access principle in the BBC's Community Programme Unit, Dave Rushton's campaign (based in TU/TV in Edinburgh) to get local authorities to do deals with local TV stations over the creation of the genuinely local television services. Other people will have their own lists.

These may be marginal activities, drops in the ocean in the tidal wave of media production, but for me their significance goes beyond their size, because they contain within them a vision of a different kind of television production, and a different kind of society. And if you want to change things you need a vision.

REMOTE CONTROL was made by APT Film & Television, and was transmitted in April on C4. It was written by John Dovey, produced by Tony Dowmunt and directed by Andy Porter. It comes complete with an educational booklet and is available for hire/sale from Team Video (105 Canalot, 32 Kensal Road, London W10 5BN: 081-960 5536) or Albany Video (The Albany, Douglas Way, London SE8 4AG: 081-692 6322). **IM** will review of REMOTE CONTROL in July