

Introduction

Oppositional documentary in Britain has been overlooked by scholars of film and media for much of the past twenty-five years. The last book-length study to get anywhere near our current moment, for instance, was Margaret Dickinson's edited collection, *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (1999). Since then the field has been a quiet one, the single contribution being Petra Bauer and Dan Kidner's *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (2013). The latter is a valuable book, bringing together many key texts for which there was not space in Dickinson's volume, alongside two new essays and some interviews with those concerned, such as Ann Guedes of Cinema Action or Humphry Trevelyan of the Berwick Street Film Collective. As its subtitle suggests, however, *Working Together* focuses on the so-called 'golden age' (Kidner 2013: 18) of radical film in Britain – a moment that passed more than four decades ago.

In this chapter, I want to start to bring the record up to date by focusing on the contemporary landscape of British video-activism. Dickinson (1999: 83) ends her book by noting the emergence of Undercurrents as one of the groups producing oppositional video in the 1990s. Indeed, Undercurrents went on to become the most established video-activist¹ organisation in Britain in that decade (alongside others such as Despite TV and Conscious Cinema), releasing the tenth edition of its newsreel in 1999. Since that time, the development of digital technologies and the internet have resulted in the spectacular expansion of Britain's video-activist culture, such that the contemporary landscape of British video-activism is ostensibly unrecognisable from that of the 1990s. Nevertheless, that landscape not only contains some distinctly identifiable contours but, as I will show, the roots of much of today's video-activist culture lies in the 1990s. Contemporary video-activism cannot, therefore, be understood outside of that context. This chapter therefore has two principle aims. The first is to outline the contemporary landscape of video-activism in Britain, identifying the key organisations involved and mapping their relationships with one another across the field as a whole. The second aim is historical, in that I want to explore not only what constitutes Britain's contemporary video-activist culture but show how part of that culture has developed into its current state since 1990.

At present, video-activist culture can be divided into four categories: video-activist NGOs, access organisations, aggregators of oppositional media, and radical video-activists. Of course, the boundaries between these categories are fluid – different aspects of the same organisation can often be located in more than one category, for instance – yet they remain

¹ 'Video-activism' an ambiguous category, of course. Although in the 1990s 'video' was associated with magnetic tapes and VHS, today it is frequently used to describe moving images online. Here too 'video' refers both to analogue and digital formats, much as we continue to talk about 'films' even when not printed on celluloid. 'Video-activism' deserves more discussion than there is space for here. Suffice to say that, in this chapter at least, it refers to short films, typically in the form of radical newsreel but which also draw on traditions such from agit-prop to access television and remix.

useful markers with which to navigate the culture as a whole. The chapter begins with an overview of video-activist NGOs, access organisations and oppositional aggregators, before turning to the radical video-activists. Although these latter are likely to be of most interest to readers of a volume with ‘Marx’ in the title, to focus only on those organisations aligned with the radical left would give a skewed impression of contemporary video-activism: none of the organisations discussed in this chapter operate in isolation from one another and, as we will see, close relationships exist between many access organisations, oppositional aggregators and radical video-activists. Considering each as part of a broader landscape of video-activism is therefore crucial. There are at present five established radical video-activist groups in Britain: Undercurrents, SchMOVIES, visionOntv, Reel News and Camcorder Guerrillas. I will focus my attention on Undercurrents and SchMOVIES here, since these have the closest ties to the video-activist culture of the 1990s (SchMOVIES having developed out of Conscious Cinema), and as such are the most suitable organisations with which to stage both a recovery of the history of British video-activism since that time and begin outlining its contemporary shape today.²

Although this history is of course of interest to Marxists and others on the radical left, it is worth stating from the outset that neither Undercurrents nor SchMOVIES (nor any other radical video-activist organisation on the left today) necessarily make ‘Marxist’ films *per se* – indeed, anarchism is a more suitable ideological label for SchMOVIES and Undercurrents are probably best described as environmentalists, but both descriptors would likely be rejected by both organisations. That said, while I am not interested in claiming either Undercurrents or SchMOVIES for any particular ‘ism’, both produce films that would largely resonate with a Marxist audience and this chapter is a work of historical materialism in the sense that I want to explain two radical video-activist organisations in the present by analysing their historical development in light of changing economic and super-structural (technological, social, political) contexts. Marxism remains, after all, the most useful theoretical framework for thinking about the contradictions involved in what is, broadly speaking, anti-capitalist filmmaking in a capitalist context.

² Of the others, visionOntv is the youngest. Set-up in 2010 by two ex-Undercurrents members, Hamish Campbell and Richard Hering, visionOntv is a London-based aggregator dedicated to providing a platform for radical video-activism. Reel News, also based in London, was established in 2006, and releases a bi-monthly newsreel for the radical left. Camcorder Guerrillas, meanwhile, is based in Glasgow and emerged from an Indymedia Scotland initiative in 2003. Since then it has produced a range of high-quality short films on a variety of topics, from climate change and the Zapatistas to the Faslane Peace Camp.

Of course, in addition to these more established organisations there are also countless video-activists producing and distributing radical video-activism across the country. However, the reality is that much of this work, lacking funding or support, is sporadic, disorganised or poorly made (‘quality’ is subjective, of course, and lower production values can be an important part of the aesthetic identity of oppositional film. However, much video-activism also suffers from a lack of production skills, and this should be acknowledged where relevant). As a result, it tends to be swallowed in the sea of other moving images online (unless aggregated by visionOntv or one of the other organisations discussed below).

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),³ OWBT was established to ‘stimulate a greater range of television and radio programmes about the developing world’ (OWM 2012a). Since then it has diversified and expanded, and now funds a variety of video-activist initiatives, albeit ones still oriented predominantly towards first- or minority-world filmmakers covering humanitarian issues in the third or majority-world.⁴

OWTV emerged from OneWorld.net, an organisation founded in 1994 by two of OWBT’s directors, Anuradha Vittachi and Peter Armstrong.⁵ 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 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 OWM and OWTV 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 political critique found in the work of the radical video-activists or hosted by oppositional aggregators. Their emphasis tends to be on ‘objectivity’ and human rights rather than anti-capitalism or class struggle, and they are often closely aligned with the political establishment. OWM’s awards ceremony in 2011 featured Conservative MP and former oil trader turned minister of state for DfID, Alan Duncan, as the keynote speaker (OWM 2012c), for example.

While OWM and OWTV share this close relationship to government, the differences between them are also indicative of the blurred boundaries between different sectors of the video-activist landscape, with OWTV arguably functioning as an aggregator as much as a video-activist NGO. Despite their differences, however, the intimate relationship with

³ The IBA was succeeded by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) in 1991 and Ofcom in 2003.

⁴ OWM also looms large on the feature documentary industry, hosting sessions at Sheffield International Documentary Film Festival and listing Channel 4’s BRITDOC Foundation as one of its many partners.

⁵ Peter Armstrong is the father of the noted oppositional feature filmmaker, Franny Armstrong.

mainstream politics and big business – characteristic of video-activist NGOs – is the defining feature of both. Understanding the role of video-activist NGOs in the video-activist landscape overall, it is helpful to draw comparison with their counterparts in the field of oppositional feature documentary, the liberal-humanist strand of which shares this symbiotic relationship with the political and business establishment. As well as demonstrating the interwoven nature of the video-activist and feature documentary communities, these parallels help explain the largely reformist, conciliatory role of video-activist NGOs in the former. Since the mid-2000s, the liberal-humanist strand of oppositional feature documentary has become a distinct commercial sector within the film industry, complete with dedicated production and distribution companies, such as Dartmouth Films and Dogwoof, and funding organisations such as the Channel 4 BRITDOC Foundation.

Video-activist NGOs and the companies and filmmakers behind documentaries such as *Black Gold* (Nick and Marc Francis, UK/USA, 2006) or *The End of the Line* (Rupert Murray, UK, 2009) share broadly the same ideological orientation. Appealing to tolerance and conflict-free notions of ‘universal’ human characteristics, liberal-humanism ‘enshrines the autonomous and rational individual as the central unit of society’ (Carroll 1993: 124) and disavows the social and ideological structures those individuals inhabit. It is this ideology that allows video-activist NGOs like OWTV to count Vodafone – one of the principle corporations involved in tax evasion in the UK – among its corporate partners and funding organisations such as BRITDOC to broker partnerships between documentary filmmakers and WAL-MART – ‘one of the most ruthless employers in the world’ (Corporate Watch 2004). Thus, while the video-activism and feature documentaries these organisations produce can be influential tools with which to draw attention to pressing social and political problems, their liberal-humanist inability to grasp the social and economic structures underpinning them means they shy away from challenging the fundamental inequalities in control and ownership of resources that give rise to many of those problems in the first place. As a result, they frequently suggest solutions that are fundamentally compatible with the status quo, such as political lobbying or ethical consumerism.

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 oppositional video-activism. However, equipping disadvantaged or marginalised groups with the skills and experience to represent themselves is a fundamentally radical act. One often finds, therefore, that access organisations not only 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. Again then, we can see how the categories dividing video-activist culture are porous. Spill Media, for instance, is a social enterprise production company based in Swansea that combines more lucrative marketing and promotional work with 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 radical video-activists. 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 better-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 more overtly political films, often around themes of climate change and sustainability (InsightShare 2012a).

Closer analysis of the historical trajectories of these organisations also reveals both the extent to which contemporary video-activist culture is built on relationships formed in the 1990s, and how much the organisations involved overlap. The founders of InsightShare, Nick and Chris Lunch, were in close touch with Undercurrents when it was based in Oxford, for instance, and regularly attended video-activist gatherings at The Locket, a series of weekends held throughout the 1990s at the family home of Zoe Young, a video-activist with the Brighton-based organisation, Conscious Cinema. These weekends were a significant contribution to oppositional film culture in the 1990s, providing opportunities for coordination, networking, critique and so on, and the list of filmmakers who attended them reads like a roll-call of video-activist filmmakers at this time, (Young 2011: 5). More recently, in June 2012, InsightShare, along with Mick Fuzz and other participants from the Transmission network (see below), many of whom also worked closely with Undercurrents and Conscious Cinema in the 1990s, were among twelve organisations from around the world to attend the ‘video4change Retreat and Sprint’, a gathering co-hosted by EngageMedia, a video-activist collective based in Australia and Indonesia (but with connections to British video-activist culture again via Undercurrents),⁶ and WITNESS, the international video-activist NGO based in the US (Cinco 2013). Although there is not space here to give these histories the attention they deserve, unearthing them is important. Not only do they demonstrate the existence of a lively, internationalist video-activist culture in Britain since the 1990s, but they make clear the genealogical links that exist between what appears to be today’s unfathomably fast-moving digital video-activist landscape and previous radical film cultures.

Oppositional Aggregators

With vast numbers of individuals and groups producing video-activism in the digital era, 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 and so on. As the quantity of online

⁶ Anna Helm of EngageMedia 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).

content increases, aggregation is becoming an ever more crucial part of oppositional media organisation. This is one of the reasons for the decline of Indymedia, the international network of oppositional media organisations established to provide independent coverage of the anti-summit protest in Seattle in 1999. Developed prior to the kinds of social-networking we see online today, most Indymedia Centres (IMCs) are based on the principle of open publishing rather than aggregation. According to activists at Indymedia London (which closed down after thirteen years in October 2012):

Since that time the internet and the way people use it has changed dramatically. [Today] self-publishing is the norm... and the mass adoption of Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and third party curation and sharing tools has created new complex communities of interest [empowering] the production, organisation and distribution of content as never before. The main *raison d'être* for Indymedia's existence is no longer there. (IMC London 2013)

So, although many regional Indymedia centres remain active, aggregators such as BeTheMedia are increasingly common. Launched in 2011 by activists who split from Indymedia UK on the issue of aggregation (SchNEWS 2011), BeTheMedia aggregates video and other content from a range of sources, including several regional IMCs, oppositional radio and political and environmental organisations, and has become a prominent aggregator of oppositional media in Britain.

As the quote above suggests, YouTube and other corporate social media also provide platforms capable of aggregating oppositional video, and many video-activist organisations make extensive use of these platforms. Indeed, as well as providing useful platforms for video-activists, sites such as YouTube have also enabled left-wing political parties and organisations to become oppositional media aggregators. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP) both have designated YouTube channels hosting videos relevant to their work, for example, as do some branches of the Anarchist Federation and Solidarity Federation. Others, such as Counterfire, The Commune and the British and Irish region of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), embed YouTube videos on their own sites under designated video tabs. However, the use of corporate platforms for video-activism is hardly ideal. Aside from the contradictions involved in using capitalist media organisations to host anti-capitalist content, with one hundred hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute, finding ways to make video-activism stand out from the range of other content on the site is difficult (YouTube 2013).⁷ Video-activists and other organisations interested in oppositional media aggregation thus tend to use YouTube and similar platforms as a means of advertising their own site, or as an easy means of hosting videos which can then be embedded elsewhere. However, there have also been attempts to develop alternative aggregators which, like YouTube, aggregate video exclusively but which are more suited to the political interests of video-activism.

⁷ For a discussion of YouTube's failings with regards to political film see Juhasz (2008).

The Transmission network, an international group of video- and media-activists,⁸ is one such initiative whose stated aim is to develop ‘online video distribution tool[s] for social justice and media democracy’ (Transmission 2012). Another is the Miro Community project, a template video-aggregation site which emerged from the US-based Participatory Culture Foundation in 2010, and which allows its users to collect video from elsewhere on the web and curate it to suit their interests. This has seen some success, with the software currently used to power each of visionOntv’s five channels, access projects like Swansea Telly and other local video-activist initiatives such as The Merseyside Street Reporters Network (which visionOntv helped establish) and the Bristol Community Channel (set-up by iContact in 2011, another longstanding video-activist organisation with links to Undercurrents).

Aggregation is clearly a key part of the contemporary video-activist landscape, with the need to develop filtration and distribution tools increasing in-step with the amount of content online. However, this is an under-researched area and more work is needed if this sector of video-activist culture is to be understood. Who are the audiences these aggregators are reaching, for example? What are their size and demographics? Recent years have also seen an increase in organisations dedicated to exhibiting oppositional film, with organisations like the Bristol Radical Film Festival or the Manchester Film Coop, for example. If, as my experience with the former has shown, public screenings are a vital part of engendering the political engagement that oppositional film aims for, perhaps we should be exploring how aggregation and distribution strategies can be coordinated with those working in exhibition. These will remain open questions until such research takes place.

Undercurrents

Undercurrents’ widespread connections across the contemporary video-activist landscape are indicative of its established place in Britain’s oppositional film culture. Founded during the anti-roads protests in the early 1990s, Undercurrents’ newsreel capitalised on the convergence of this vibrant form of activism with the availability of low-cost camcorders and the refusal of the mainstream media to document it accurately (if at all) (Harding 1998: 83). As the direct-action movement of the 1990s spread, Undercurrents established a network of video-activists across the country (and further afield) whose work, once edited together into the newsreel, was distributed on VHS, via Royal Mail, to its network of subscribers. In this way, Undercurrents created the first successful nationwide oppositional newsreel in Britain.⁹ Dubbed ‘the news you don’t see on the news’ (Harding 1998: 88), Undercurrents’ videos combined politically committed reporting with irreverent satire of the police, politicians and the mainstream media, and gained widespread recognition and acclaim as a result.¹⁰

⁸ The Transmission network includes Mick Fuzz and Clearer Channel, the organisation he runs; EngageMedia; Zoe Young; visionOntv; *Mute*, the London-based magazine of radical culture and politics and others.

⁹ Of course, earlier precedents exist, beginning with those attempted by the workers’ film movements in the 1920s and 1930s (Hogenkamp 1986), but Undercurrents’ was the first newsreel to achieve anything like this level of success.

¹⁰ Indeed, the little academic attention British video-activism since 1990 has received has focused almost exclusively on Undercurrents’ newsreel period. Harding (1998) is one of the most useful

Undercurrents has adapted and developed a great deal as it has sought to survive the major technological and socio-political changes that have taken place since that time. These have included personnel and geographic changes as well as structural ones. Paul O'Connor is the only founding member left at Undercurrents, for example, which now consists of only two other full-time members,¹¹ and 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, it being a lot easier to get funding for charitable organisations (O'Connor 2011: 7). Perhaps the most significant change at Undercurrents, however, has been the development of a bilateral business model in which its radical projects are subsidised by commissions for more commercial activities and for its work as an access organisation. Again, not only is this development another instance of the blurred boundaries between radical groups and other parts of contemporary video-activist culture, but it also demonstrates the practical realities of oppositional filmmaking in a capitalist context: with paying audiences for radical video small and funding opportunities limited, this is one business model that allows for some measure of sustainability.

Access work constitutes a key part of Undercurrents' financial stability, and has seen the organisation develop 'a host of community media projects' since the mid-2000s (O'Connor 2011). As well as the Swansea Telly project mentioned above, others include projects like the 'Broad Horizons' initiative for female filmmakers (which released a DVD 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. Undercurrents' commissioned films also adopt a less outspoken approach to political issues. In 2006, for instance, Undercurrents was commissioned by the Community Channel to produce *Living in the Future: Ecovillage Pioneers* (Undercurrents, UK, 2006), an online series about attempts to develop a low-impact 'ecovillage' in the Welsh countryside. As with many of Undercurrents' more commercial activities – including *A-Z of Bushcraft* (Undercurrents, UK, 2009) or *On the Push: A Surfer's Guide to Climate Change* (Undercurrents, UK, 2009) – the films' themes are broadly aligned with Undercurrents' original environmentalist ethos. However, the oppositional stance of the newsreel has been discarded in favour of a more subtle approach designed to appeal to a wider audience base. *Living in the Future* begins with a brief history of the 1750 Enclosures Act and the displacement of working people from common land, for instance, 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.

resources. See also Heritage (2008), Atton and Hamilton (2008: 87-9), Atton (2003: 20; 2004: 42-3 and 2005: 22-3), and McIver (1997).

¹¹ Of the other three founders (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.

This is understandable given that these projects are intended to provide Undercurrents with the income it needs to survive. Indeed, making money from these kinds of films is not an easy task in the era of online video, and reaching a paying audience has required Undercurrents to place much of its work online for free, and then experiment with various participative pricing initiatives in which audiences decide for themselves what to pay for the work. Despite such a potentially risky strategy, according to O'Connor this 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)

While some might argue that the absence of overt political arguments in these videos is inadequate, the financial stability provided by these projects is what 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 in April 1999 was a collaboration with Bristol's iContact Video. Released in July that year, *J18: The Story the Media Ignored* (Undercurrents, UK, 1999) 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. Beginning with the satirical, Hollywood-style trailer made to publicise the event, *J18* maintains the humorous, tongue-in-cheek tone of the newsreel. Documenting the protest and those involved in it – from Samba musicians and Meat is Murder campaigners to masked black bloc activists and nervous looking bankers – the film also makes its own position on the topic clear. Along with intertitles such as 'Cap'italism *n. A system by which the few profit from the exploitation of the many*', the film includes condemnatory footage of armed riot police attacking crowds of peaceful, unarmed protestors, and celebratory scenes of property destruction, with upbeat folk music playing over footage of a badly damaged McDonald's outlet.

J18 is also indicative of the shifting technological context in which it was made, however, and which saw Undercurrents enter a period of uncertainty. A thirty minute video released on VHS, *J18* 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 video-activism online. As O'Connor explains,

Indymedia was out there and things were going online and you were thinking 'great, we're going to have videos on the web'. [But] video on the web didn't take off for another four, five years. 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 an online TV studio, Pirate TV. Little evidence remains of this ambitious and experimental project, a two-hour weekly webcast of an eclectic mix of video-activism and electronic 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. Thus 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.¹² Indeed, the low cost and highly reproducible nature of CD-ROM saw it become the format of choice for oppositional media activists in Britain and around the world (Campbell 2011: 3; Lovink and Schneider 2003: 1). Whilst experimenting with online video and CD-ROM, however, Undercurrents also continued with VHS productions, releasing *Undercurrents 10 3/4* (Undercurrents, UK, 2002) in another collaboration with iContact.

The title of this video is indicative of Undercurrents' uncertainty at a time in which, as well as being a period of technological change, the political context was also rapidly developing. In particular, by the end of the 1990s, many so-called 'single issue'¹³ campaigns from earlier in the decade had coalesced into the international anti(alter)-globalisation movement, in which capitalism and its key global institutions (especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organisation (WTO)), were explicitly targeted. Indeed, this shift was one of the primary reasons for the decline of Undercurrents' original newsreel. 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 [September 2000], Genoa [July 2001] 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, Undercurrents had continued producing films throughout this period, including a collaborative¹⁴ work on the anti-summit protest in the Czech Republic: *Revolting in Prague*:

¹² 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.

¹³ Characterising campaigns as 'single issue' can be misleading. Not only does it shroud the fact that issue specificity does not necessarily exclude awareness of the wider context in which struggles take place, but many 'single issue' campaigns cover a plethora of concerns. As George McKay has argued, 'the "single issue" of No More Roads includes topics like rural 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).

¹⁴ *Revolting in Prague* was the product of a variety of video-activists working at this time, including iContact, Mick Fuzz, Zoe Young, Anna Helme and Hamish Campbell (credited as Pirate TV).

IMF Protests 2000 (various, UK, 2000), and a film about the shifting technological context of the time and its ramifications for oppositional media: *Globalisation and the Media* (Undercurrents, UK, 2002). With no alternative distribution outlet, Undercurrents and iContact decided to release these longer films (twenty-six and twenty-one minutes respectively) along with two other shorter films as another compilation. Not wanting to resurrect the original newsreel, they decided to release the tape as *10 and ¾* rather than *Undercurrents 11* (O'Connor 2011: 5-6).

Undercurrents also attempted two other newsreel projects in the first half of the 2000s. The first was based on a project by the US-based satellite TV channel, Free Speech TV, which broadcast a weekly compilation of video-activism as the *Indymedia Newsreel*.¹⁵ 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* (Undercurrents, UK, 2002) 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 the ex-Undercurrents video-activist, Hamish Campbell (now of visionOntv), subsequent attempts suffered from low production values and ideological infighting and never materialised (2011: 3). Two years later, Undercurrents again attempted newsreel production, this time with the *Undercurrents News Network (UNN)* (Undercurrents, UK, 2004). However, although it was intended to be distributed regularly on DVD, only one issue was released before the project was abandoned. With Undercurrents undergoing personnel changes at the time and only O'Connor and Zoe Broughton able to work on the project, *UNN* took three months to produce. At a time when 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 this brief history shows, Undercurrents contemporary formation cannot be understood outside of the changing socio-economic, political and technological contexts in which it was operating. From the roads protests of the 1990s to the anti-capitalist movement at the turn of the century and the urgent environmental crises we face today, Undercurrents has consistently produced radical video-activism across a variety of audio-visual media, from VHS and CD-ROM to early web video in all its guises. Without the bilateral business model Undercurrents developed to subsidise its more radical endeavours, the organisation would not have survived to make them. Today, Undercurrents continues operating according to this model, producing commissions and running access activities to subsidise its more radical work, much of which has been produced in collaboration with visionOntv, the radical aggregator it helped develop in 2010.

SchMOVIES

Although SchMOVIES is a more recent addition to video-activist culture than Undercurrents, its history is also embedded in the video-activism of the 1990s. As with Undercurrents, then,

¹⁵ *Indymedia Newsreel* is an ongoing project in the US where it continues to be broadcast by Free Speech TV every Thursday.

to understand SchMOVIES' place in contemporary British video-activism one must first understand the video-activist culture of the 1990s from which the organisation developed. The video-activist 'unit' of the Brighton-based weekly radical newsletter, SchNEWS (Light 2008), SchMOVIES was set-up in 2004 when activist and SchNEWS journalist Paul Light stepped into the gap left by Conscious Cinema in the preceding decade. Since then SchMOVIES has 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 video-activist and oppositional filmmaking organisations in Britain. Unlike other contemporary radical video-activists groups, however, SchMOVIES is run single-handedly by Light from the studios of his commercial film production company, Bite Size Movies (BSM). So, although much of its video-activist work appears online soon after it is produced, SchMOVIES tends to release only one DVD compilation of video activism per year.¹⁶ This rate of production means it requires few resources to run, enabling Light to contribute the income from SchMOVIES to the publication of SchNEWS. Uniquely among contemporary video-activist groups, then, SchMOVIES is a video-activist subsidiary of another radical media project that it exists to support.

Of course, SchMOVIES can operate in this way because it can draw on the infrastructure of BSM, the commercial activities of which subsidise SchMOVIES' video-activism. Like the relationship between Undercurrents' commercial activities and its more radical video-activist work, BSM's films also lack the outspoken radicalism of SchMOVIES, albeit without losing focus on issues relevant to the political left. For example, BSM describes itself as a 'community and campaign-based' production company, and has produced a number of short films promoting community allotments or recycling projects (BSM 2012a). In 2009, it produced a series on 'green issues and services in the Sussex area' (BSM 2012b), while other recent projects include films for community engagement programmes and charitable groups focusing on drug and alcohol rehabilitation, family intervention support, and community health and well-being. BSM also operates as an access organisation, running a number of filmmaking courses throughout the year as well as 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, the relationship between BSM and SchMOVIES operates much like the commercial and oppositional sides of Undercurrents. However, there are also some key differences between SchMOVIES and Undercurrents which stem from their relationship in the 1990s and Light's alignment with SchNEWS and Conscious Cinema rather than Undercurrents.

Conscious Cinema was founded in Brighton in 1994 – the same year as Undercurrents – by Dylan Howitt, Johnny Cocking and Gibby Zobel. This marks the beginning of what were two incarnations of the collective.¹⁷ In this first period, from 1994 to 1997, Conscious

¹⁶ These are *SchMOVIES DVD Collection* (SchMOVIES, UK, 2005), *V For Video-activist* (SchMOVIES, UK, 2006), *Take Three* (SchMOVIES, UK, 2007), *Uncertified* (SchMOVIES, UK, 2008) and *Raiders of the Lost Archive, Vol. 1 and 2* (SchMOVIES, UK, 2008-2011). After a lull in recent years, in which Light has begun a family, a new SchMOVIES DVD is reportedly coming soon.

¹⁷ In the second period, from 1999 until 2003, Conscious Cinema was resurrected by Howitt and Zoe Young (present during the first stage of the group but not as active as she was in the second), but

Cinema functioned similarly to Undercurrents, producing a video-activist newsreel for the direct-action community on subjects ranging from anti-roads protests to Reclaim the Streets actions, struggles against privatisation, and so on.¹⁸ Whereas Undercurrents emerged from the anti-roads movement, however, Conscious Cinema was initially a response to the Criminal Justice Bill (CJB). With the anti-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. 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 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 provoked an urgent response from the communities it attacked. In Brighton, this emerged in the form of the Justice? campaign when activists opposed to the bill aptly squatted an abandoned court house, staging a variety of events and meetings there to draw attention to the bill. Conscious Cinema and SchNEWS were two of the oppositional media projects that developed from this campaign.

Originally from Poole, Light's political orientation was forged in the context of the Poll Tax, the anti-roads protests and the CJB. It was the latter 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 well as organising initiatives like the squatters' estate agents, SchLETS (SchNEWS 1996c), Light began writing for SchNEWS and working with Conscious Cinema, and the latter's approach to video-activism provided the model Light would later adopt for SchMOVIES. In order to mark the newsletter's tenth anniversary in 2004, SchNEWS organised a tour of the UK's direct-action 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* (SchMOVIES, UK, 2005)). 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, and SchMOVIES was born. 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

focused predominantly on feature documentary films, such as *Suits and Savages: Why the World Bank Won't Save the World* (Conscious Cinema, UK, 2000) and *Not This Time: The Story of the Simon Jones Memorial Campaign* (Conscious Cinema, UK, 2002).

¹⁸ Few original tapes from this initial period remain, however, and although a 'best of' was released in 1997 as *The Campfire Tapes: Tales From the Frontline, '94-97* (Conscious Cinema, UK, 1997), I have not been able to locate a copy.

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. Historically, then, the relationship between Undercurrents' and SchMOVIES is a close one, Undercurrents and Conscious Cinema being two of the most significant video-activist collectives in Britain in the 1990s.¹⁹

However, the relationship between the two organisations was, at first, somewhat strained. In fact, with Undercurrents perceived as 'the McDonalds of activist video' at that time, Young recalls that 'part of the reason for Conscious Cinema being Conscious Cinema was to have something that wasn't Undercurrents' (2011: 2). Indeed, Undercurrents were heavily criticised by sections of the direct-action movement in the latter half of the 1990s for practices that were deemed at odds with the values of that movement. In particular, these criticisms focused on those aspects of Undercurrents' practice that were judged compromisingly close to the mainstream media, such as its hierarchical operating structure and its policy of selling activists' footage to television news channels.²⁰ By contrast, Conscious Cinema was much more closely aligned with the anarchist-oriented culture of the 1990s direct-action movement, described by George McKay as 'DiY culture' (1998).

Typical of this culture was an absolute rejection of the commercial values and practices associated with capitalism. For example, Conscious Cinema did not charge for its videos but copied them onto second hand tapes bootlegged from London production houses and distributed them for free instead (Conscious Kev cited in SchNEWS 2004a: 43). Today, although Light sells DVDs of SchMOVIES' work, the proceeds from these go towards the publication of the SchNEWS, and BSM and SchMOVIES are kept strictly separate so as to underscore the fact that SchMOVIES is, like Conscious Cinema before it and SchNEWS²¹ today, a definitively unpaid, voluntary pursuit. Indeed, Light's desire to continue to run SchMOVIES according to this ethos is what gave rise to BSM in the first place, which Light describes as

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

¹⁹ Indeed, Undercurrents and SchMOVIES remain close today: the former accompanied SchNEWS on its 2004 tour, for instance, promoting the newly released *UNN*, and Light and O'Connor have plans for a collaborative project in the future (Light 20012: 1).

²⁰ Many of the various (and sometimes unjustified) criticisms of Undercurrents at this time can be found in the environmental activists' journal, *Do or Die* (Do or Die 1997).

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)

So, although his professional work is largely what enables SchMOVIES to continue as a video-activist organisation today, the desire to isolate the profit motive from activities motivated by passion and political conviction derives from the anarchist-oriented, DiY approach to media activism that Light inherited from SchNEWS and Conscious Cinema.

Another trait of the DiY approach is a belief in the centrality of action over how that action is organised. Epitomised in SchNEWS' tagline, 'a single act of defiance is worth more than a thousand words' – and adapted for *SchNEWS at Ten: The Movie* to read 'a single act of defiance is worth a thousand feet of film' – the primacy of action, of getting the films made, also characterises SchMOVIES' mode of production. So, although Light draws on footage from other video-activists, the post-production and distribution of that material is largely his responsibility. Unimpeded by the organisational labour of other groups, Light cites this independence as a key factor in enabling him to sustain his video-activist work. 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 (which also emphasises that it is 'run entirely by volunteers – no one gets paid, and no one is making any profit' (The Cowley Club 2012)). An emphasis on organising public screenings as a means of stimulating political engagement is another indicator of SchMOVIES' alignment with direct-action culture and its emphasis on action. Conscious Cinema's aim 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 to 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).

Conclusion

Exploring the respective historical trajectories of Undercurrents and SchMOVIES demonstrates the extent to which their current practices and positions in the contemporary video-activist landscape are bound up with the combination of socio-economic, technological and political forces in which they developed. Marxism offers the most useful set of theoretical tools with which to explore this development, and most Marxists would be

²¹ SchNEWS is also unambiguous about 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

broadly sympathetic to the work that Undercurrents and SchMOVIES produce. Yet a Marxist perspective on these organisations also illustrates the extent to which these are *not* Marxist organisations. This is strikingly evident from the almost total lack of any reference to class in both Undercurrents' and SchMOVIES' work. Again, this is indicative of the lack of class politics in the 1990s direct action scene more generally – class is also conspicuously absent from the supposedly anarchist critiques of Undercurrents during the 1990s. Exploring these critiques and the reasons for the absent class paradigm in this section of the radical left is beyond the scope of this chapter, but serves to illustrate again how these video-activist organisations are products of the particular set of historical and material conditions in which they developed.

Of course, Undercurrents and SchMOVIES are just two organisations in a contemporary video-activist landscape that is vastly different from the period in which they were established. Yet despite the transformation of that culture and the ever-expanding mass of content available online today, the structure of the contemporary video-activist landscape remains distinctly identifiable. As we have seen, although the distinctions between video-activist NGOs, access organisations, oppositional aggregators and radical video-activists are porous – with numerous connections existing across the field as a whole and different groups combining different practices in distinct ways – the categories themselves remain useful markers with which to begin mapping the field and understanding the role of the more radical groups within it. Furthermore, more recent additions to that landscape, such as Reel News (2006-), are much more explicitly class conscious, and operate very different business models to fund their work. Reel News is funded exclusively by donations and sales of and subscriptions to its newsreel, while Camcorder Guerrillas focuses on securing funding for its work, which is then organised and carried **out** by consensus. Yet these and other contemporary video-activist organisations also have roots in the 1990s and, like Undercurrents and SchMOVIES, also cannot be understood in abstraction from it. For example, Reel News was also shaped in the context of the anti-globalisation movement and its founder, Shaun Dey, cites Undercurrents and Conscious Cinema as 'trailblazers' of contemporary video-activism (Dey 2011: 10). In fact, far from the digital era marking a break with previous histories of radical British filmmaking, one could trace these genealogical links further back. Reel News' emphasis on class struggle has clear affinity with Cinema Action's approach (1968-1986), for example, while Camcorder Guerrillas' close relationship with the communities in which it works echoes that of Amber (1969-). visionOntv's efforts to foster 'the widest possible distribution of video for social change' (visionOntv, 2012) also resonates with previous attempts, such as those by The Other Cinema (1970-77) or the feminist group Circles (1979-1992).

Moreover, video-activism is just one part of the thriving contemporary culture of oppositional documentary in Britain. While companies such as BRITDOC and Dogwoof cater for the more liberal strand of oppositional documentary (unless handling the work of oppositional auteurs such as Ken Loach or John Pilger), swathes of more radical feature work also exists outside of the mainstream distribution and exhibition circuits. *Secret City* (Michael

subscriptions, benefit gigs and our readers' generosity to keep us afloat' (SchNEWS 2012).

Chanan and Lee Salter, UK, 2012), *Who Polices the Police?* (Ken Fero, UK, 2012) and *Riots Reframed* (Fahim Alam, UK, 2013) are just three recent examples. The artists' film and video community also includes filmmakers producing oppositional work, such as David Panos, Luke Fowler and the Otolith Group. As well as the films and filmmakers, we have also seen a groundswell in groups and organisations dedicated to showcasing politically radical film, spread across the country in cities from Bristol, Brighton and Leeds to Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester and London. So, although I've barely scratched the surface here, Britain's radical film culture is clearly alive and well, as are oppositional film cultures elsewhere. I hope this chapter, and the volume of which it is a part, contributes to the renewed study of radical film around the world. More than any others, these are the films that will contribute to the *radical* political, economic and environmental changes we so badly need.

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