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## CHAPTER FIVE

# MAINTAINING A *CRITICAL EYE*: THE POLITICAL AVANT-GARDE ON CHANNEL 4 IN THE 1990S

STEVE PRESENCE

Channel 4's Independent Film and Video Department (IFVD) was broadcasting politically radical documentary throughout the first half of the 1990s as part of its *Critical Eye* series (1990-4). In this chapter, I want to draw attention to that series and explore some of the reasons for its absence from the historical record, as *Critical Eye* is part of a much wider tradition of oppositional documentary in Britain, of which the last twenty-five years have received almost no historical or cultural recognition.

The last book-length study of oppositional British film culture was Margaret Dickinson's *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-90* (1999). As a result, a survey of current research on the topic could be forgiven for thinking that a politicised documentary film culture in Britain was all but non-existent. However, on the contrary, Britain has a lively and diverse culture of radical documentary filmmaking, albeit one that has undergone significant changes as it has adapted to the major technological, socio-economic and political developments that have taken place since 1990. Indeed, *Critical Eye* is a useful point of comparison for measuring the impact of those developments on British broadcasting. The low-budget, activist-oriented documentary it broadcast for the first half of the 1990s is unthinkable from the standpoint of contemporary television, in which documentary is governed almost entirely by the strictures of so-called "objectivity", a concept which today more often than not describes a commitment to the status quo. Recovering the kinds of alternative broadcast histories of which *Critical Eye* is a part is thus all the more important, if only to remind ourselves that television is capable of a much more challenging and meaningful contribution to society than is suggested by the majority of programming today.

1 In fact, as we will see, part of the reason *Critical Eye* has not received  
 2 the attention it deserves has to do with the changing context of British  
 3 broadcasting in the early 1990s. When it launched in November 1982,  
 4 Channel 4—in particular the IFVD—broke new ground in public-service  
 5 television, broadcasting community programmes and low-budget drama  
 6 alongside “world cinema” and politically and aesthetically experimental  
 7 work. Unfortunately, state support for this kind of cultural diversity—  
 8 finally achieved after decades of campaigning (Harvey 1994)—was  
 9 anathema to the neoliberal ideologies of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative  
 10 government and by the end of the 1980s the commercialisation of Channel  
 11 4 was well underway. This process took time to complete, however, and  
 12 was in fact not concluded until the middle of the next decade.  
 13 Nevertheless, discussions of radicalism on the channel understandably  
 14 focus their attention on the 1980s, with the unfortunate result that the  
 15 astonishing array of oppositional documentary shown in the first half of  
 16 the 1990s is obscured.

17 However, discussions of radicalism on Channel 4 in the 1980s are also  
 18 revealing of another, more troubling explanation for the lack of attention  
 19 paid to oppositional documentary on the channel in the 1990s, the  
 20 explanation of which depends upon a problematic yet necessary distinction  
 21 between the “aesthetic avant-garde” and the “political avant-garde.” In this  
 22 chapter at least, oppositional documentary is synonymous with the political  
 23 avant-garde: an explicitly partisan and committed kind of filmmaking in  
 24 which the need for aesthetic innovation is subordinate to the  
 25 communication of political ideas. Distinct from the political avant-garde  
 26 but related to it, the aesthetic avant-garde denotes a body of work more  
 27 commonly referred to today as “film and video art”<sup>1</sup> or “artists’ film and  
 28 video”.<sup>2</sup> As the name suggests, this kind of filmmaking is more  
 29 preoccupied with issues of aesthetics, and produces films which address  
 30 aesthetic questions as well as political ones. As well as focusing on the  
 31 1980s, discussions of radicalism on Channel 4 also focus (almost without  
 32 exception) on the aesthetic avant-garde. As we will see, the presence of the  
 33 political avant-garde on the channel in the 1980s is all but effaced as a  
 34 result.

35 This disproportionate attention to the aesthetic avant-garde is the  
 36 legacy of a trend dominant in political film theory since the 1970s. As a  
 37 result of this trend, the values and priorities of the aesthetic avant-garde  
 38 have become the benchmark of political film practice, such that the

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<sup>1</sup> See Knight (1996), Elewes (2004) or Comer (2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Curtis (2007), Danino and Mazière (2003) or Rees (1999).

1 existence of the political avant-garde has been eclipsed altogether. That  
 2 the last quarter of a century of radical British documentary is virtually  
 3 undocumented is testament to this effect, of which the absence of *Critical*  
 4 *Eye* from Channel 4's history is but a small part. However, distinguishing  
 5 between the aesthetic and political avant-garde is a provocative (though by  
 6 no means original) move, especially since there is not space here to  
 7 discuss the history of debates regarding politics and aesthetics that has led  
 8 me to it.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, my argument cannot be understood outside of this  
 9 context, and will itself go some way towards confirming my claim that the  
 10 privileging of the aesthetic over the political avant-garde has all but  
 11 eradicated awareness of the latter. Such a claim is likely to elicit criticism  
 12 on a number of fronts, however, so I want to begin with a few caveats.

13 First, differentiating the political from the aesthetic avant-garde is  
 14 likely to be accused of reproducing a false dichotomy between aesthetics  
 15 and politics, or misunderstanding the dialectical relationship between a  
 16 film's content and the form in which it is represented. In some respects,  
 17 this is a justifiable criticism. Aesthetic questions are, of course, also  
 18 political ones—the means with which one represents always shapes what  
 19 is represented—and political filmmakers should, at the very least, be  
 20 sensitive to the political implications of film language. That said, at  
 21 present, films that foreground aesthetics over and above politics are  
 22 frequently described as “radical”, while others which explicitly address,  
 23 promote and critique radical politics have that status denied them.  
 24 Asserting the existence of the political avant-garde is thus a necessary  
 25 corrective to the privileging of the aesthetic avant-garde that already  
 26 exists. Second, I do not wish to patronise those of the aesthetic avant-garde  
 27 who are genuinely engaged with radical politics, and I have no interest in  
 28 reproducing what Esther Leslie has called (albeit in a slightly different  
 29 context) a “phoney war” between artists working in popular forms and  
 30 those more interested in aesthetic innovation (2002, v). Nevertheless,  
 31 documentary works of the political avant-garde have been ignored and  
 32 dismissed by guardians of the aesthetic avant-garde for too long.

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s these debates took place predominantly in the journal *Screen*, but also featured in others such as *After Image*, *Framework* and *Cinema Rising*. Some of the key writings are collected in Dickinson (1999), others are reprinted in Neale and Eaton (1981). “Screen theory”, as it has become known (Kuhn, 2009, 4), reworked in particular the Brecht-Lukács debate over realism in the 1930s, the key texts of which are collected in Taylor (2007). In the 1980s these debates were re-invigorated by Third cinema and the emergence of a number of politically and aesthetically motivated Black film collectives in Britain (see Mercer 1988).

1 Identifying this imbalance and arguing against it is the first step towards  
 2 rectifying it and developing a more effective, holistic radical film culture.

3 With that in mind, the rest of this chapter is divided into three sections.  
 4 The first explores the excessive emphasis on the aesthetic avant-garde on  
 5 Channel 4 in the 1980s. As we will see, not only has this effaced the  
 6 presence of both aesthetic and political radicalism in the 1990s, it has also  
 7 eclipsed the fact that the political avant-garde was as much a part of a  
 8 series hitherto celebrated almost exclusively for their (its?) aesthetic  
 9 radicalism. The second section explores the political avant-garde on  
 10 Channel 4 in the 1990s. Though my focus is on *Critical Eye*, I will show  
 11 how this was in fact far from the only source of political radicalism on the  
 12 channel in this period. Finally, the third section constitutes a close analysis  
 13 of the documentary with which *Critical Eye* was launched: Despite TV's  
 14 *The Battle of Trafalgar* (1990). Not only is this indicative of the  
 15 extraordinary work broadcast on the series, it also demonstrates that, while  
 16 the political avant-garde might not be as formally inventive as its aesthetic  
 17 equivalent, neither is it aesthetically conservative. Indeed, these films are  
 18 formally unconventional precisely because they explicitly calibrate their  
 19 aesthetic strategies for use as tools of political communication, aware that  
 20 political art must "speak not to some self-regarding artistic elite, but to  
 21 people" (Brecht 2003, 209).

## 22 **The two avant-gardes on Channel 4 in the 1980s**

23 Discussions of radicalism on Channel 4 invariably focus on the 1980s,  
 24 with the IFVD and its series, *The Eleventh Hour* (1982-9), frequently  
 25 singled out as representative of the period.<sup>4</sup> That this decade, department  
 26 and series are among the most common topics of this research is  
 27 understandable. First, Channel 4's first decade (mostly contained in the

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

1 1980s) is widely recognised as its most “radical” (Kerr 2008, 323).  
 2 According to Rod Stoneman, for instance, “the first decade of Channel 4  
 3 constitutes a considerable experiment with experiment—the largest body  
 4 of avant-garde work shown on network television, encountering its widest  
 5 audiences, anywhere, ever” (1996, 295).

6 The IFVD, meanwhile, was set-up largely as a result of the  
 7 Independent Filmmakers’ Association’s (IFA)<sup>5</sup> campaign to ensure that  
 8 the radical work the sector had been producing for the preceding two  
 9 decades was properly represented on the channel. As such, it was the  
 10 IFVD which most frequently screened (politically and aesthetically) avant-  
 11 garde work. Prior to the launch of Channel 4, the IFA’s negotiations with  
 12 Jeremy Isaacs, the channel’s founding chief executive, led to the formation  
 13 of the IFVD and the appointment of Alan Fountain as its Commissioning  
 14 Editor (Dickinson 1999, 58). A member of the IFA himself, Fountain  
 15 hired two other IFA members as his Deputy Commissioning Editors, Rod  
 16 Stoneman and Caroline Spry, and together they produced *The Eleventh  
 17 Hour* as the department’s flagship series.

18 The classification of the 1980s as Channel 4’s radical decade can also  
 19 be explained by virtue of the fact that many of the changes that signalled  
 20 the end of this period can be located around the turn of the decade and the  
 21 channel’s tenth birthday in November 1992. Isaacs was replaced with the  
 22 more commercially-oriented Michael Grade in 1987, and the following  
 23 year the government’s White Paper, *Broadcasting in the 1990s:  
 24 Competition, Choice and Quality* (Hansard 1988), recommended the de-  
 25 regulation of the industry and the transformation of Channel 4’s funding  
 26 structure. *The Eleventh Hour* was shelved in 1989 and, by 1990, other  
 27 series from the 1980s that had featured similar work had also come to an  
 28 end.<sup>6</sup> That year also saw the government’s White Paper enshrined in law  
 29 in the Broadcasting Act 1990 (Corner et al 1994, 6), which eventually led

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<sup>5</sup> Set-up in 1974 to promote the principles of ‘independent’ filmmaking and campaign for funding and support from relevant bodies (Dickinson 2003), the importance of the IFA in this period is hard to overestimate. As well as lobbying for a space on Channel 4 they also spearheaded the campaign for the Workshop Agreement (1984), a deal between the film workers’ union (ACCT), the BFI and Channel 4 which secured unionised wages for those recognised as conforming to “workshop” practises (ACCT 1984). This was a crucial source of support for the sector and, though far from perfect, was an unprecedented achievement which has not been replicated since. See Lovell (1990) and Stoneman (1992 and 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Other Channel 4 series which also broadcast the aesthetic avant-garde include *Visions* (1982-85), *Alter-Image* (1983), *Ghosts in the Machine* (1986), *Ghosts 2* (1988) and *TV Dante* (1987-90).

1 to the crucial moment in 1993 when the channel became responsible for  
 2 selling its own advertising. Previously, Channel 4 had been funded by a  
 3 levy on the commercially run ITV channels, in exchange for which they  
 4 received the right to sell advertisements in their regions on the fourth  
 5 channel. Making the channel responsible for its own advertising forced it  
 6 to compete with the other commercial channels for revenue. Thus Channel  
 7 4 was itself “obliged to commercialise” (Andrews 2011, 218). In practice,  
 8 as Andrews says, this meant “abandoning the types of programme, such as  
 9 *The Eleventh Hour*, which that could be expected to appeal only to tiny  
 10 audiences” (218).

11 From this perspective then, the characterisation of the 1980s as  
 12 Channel 4’s radical phase and the 1990s as marking its shift to “a tabloid  
 13 agenda” (Malik 2002, 51) is reasonable. However, although the events  
 14 marking that shift were taking place from the late 1980s onwards, their  
 15 impact did not manifest itself in the schedules immediately. While none of  
 16 the series broadcasting avant-garde work in the 1980s continued into the  
 17 1990s, others took their place. As Al Rees (2007) argues, artists’ film and  
 18 video continued to appear on Channel 4 “through into the next decade”  
 19 (146) with series like *TV Interventions* (1990), *The Dazzling Image* (1990  
 20 and 1992) and *Midnight Underground* (1993-7).<sup>7</sup> Indeed, according to  
 21 Rees “cash-crop culture finally caught up with the visual arts sector” only  
 22 in 1995, when Stuart Cosgrove took over as Channel 4’s Head of  
 23 Independent Commissioning (160).

24 Just as 1995 marks the end point for platforms dedicated to the  
 25 aesthetic avant-garde on Channel 4, the broadcast of oppositional  
 26 documentary on the channel also continued until the middle of the 1990s.  
 27 However, despite the fact that radicalism on Channel 4 in the 1980s is  
 28 discussed almost exclusively in terms of the aesthetic avant-garde, the  
 29 political avant-garde was as much a part of that radicalism as its aesthetic  
 30 equivalent. Indeed, this combination of formal and political radicalism is  
 31 unsurprising given that the independent film sector the IFVD was intended  
 32 to serve itself consisted of both the aesthetic and the political avant-garde.  
 33 According to Sylvia Harvey (1982a), for instance, the IFA represented  
 34 both experimental filmmakers interested in “aesthetic and formal  
 35 radicalism” as well as others “whose goals were more socially, politically

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<sup>7</sup> Other channels also featured platforms for the aesthetic avant-garde in the 1990s, such as *White Noise* (BBC2, 1990), *Eleven O’Clock High* (1995, Carlton) or *The Late Show* (BBC2, 1990-94). See Flaxton (1996), Walker (1993) and Curtis (2007). That these other platforms were following Channel 4’s lead is noted in, for example, Stoneman (1996, 294).

1 or community oriented”, and who “made films for the labour movement,  
 2 the women’s movement, the anti-racist movement and other campaigns”  
 3 (160). Rees (2007) notes the same distinction, describing the IFA’s  
 4 membership as composed of both “artist filmmakers” as well as “social-  
 5 political filmmakers” (148). This combination of emphases is even less  
 6 surprising when one considers that the IFVD’s Commissioning Editors  
 7 were part of this milieu. Fountain describes his view of cinema as politics  
 8 as one in which, for example, “television [was] a site of ideological  
 9 struggle” (quoted in Downmunt 2007, 248). According to Stoneman (2011),  
 10 meanwhile, the IFVD had

11 a sort of unstated agenda ... to push the boundaries of politics, to  
 12 experiment, to have a basic 68er agenda which would be some mixture of  
 13 class, gender, race, anti-imperialism, generally libertarian stuff really  
 14 although we didn’t use that word. (4)

15 Clearly, the IFVD was motivated by political concerns at least as much as  
 16 it was concerned with aesthetic experimentation.

17 So although it is frequently cited as the aesthetic avant-garde’s  
 18 televisual high-point, *The Eleventh Hour* showed a combination of  
 19 aesthetically *and* politically radical work. This combination occasionally  
 20 existed in single films, of course, such as *So That You Can Live (for*  
 21 *Shirley)* (Cinema Action 1982), *Amy!* (Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey  
 22 1980) or *The Filleting Machine* (Amber 1981), but it was more common  
 23 for the aesthetic avant-garde to be broadcast alongside the political avant-  
 24 garde. *The Eleventh Hour*’s series of “Profiles” (1983) on filmmakers like  
 25 Margaret Tait, Jeff Keen and Malcolm LeGrice, or collections of  
 26 experimental work on video and super-eight for instance,<sup>8</sup> were broadcast  
 27 alongside oppositional documentaries like *The Women of the Rhondda*  
 28 (The London Women’s Film Group 1973), *The Miners’ Film* (Cinema  
 29 Action 1974), *The Cause of Ireland* (Platform Films 1983), *Rocking the*  
 30 *Boat* (Cinema Action 1983), *Welcome to the Spiv Economy* (Newsreel  
 31 Collective 1986), *The Peoples’ Flag* (Platform Films 1987), and *Biko:*  
 32 *Breaking the Silence* (Edwina Spicer 1987). While these focused on issues  
 33 in the UK, *The Eleventh Hour* also broadcast other oppositional  
 34 documentaries addressing radical politics overseas, such as the mini-series,  
 35 *The New Cinema of Latin America* (Michael Chanan, 1983), *The Bronx: A*  
 36 *Cry for Help* (Brent Owens 1987) or *My Son Che: A Family Portrait by*  
 37 *Don Ernesto Guevara* (Fernando Birri 1987).

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<sup>8</sup> In series such as *Video 1, 2, and 3* (1985), or *Super Eight 1 and 2* (1986).

1 Furthermore, *The Eleventh Hour* was not the only platform for the  
 2 political avant-garde in the 1980s. The other series the IFVD produced  
 3 was *People to People* (1983-9), which broadcast an extraordinary range of  
 4 oppositional documentary, including *Byker* (Amber, 1983), *Coal Not*  
 5 *Dole: Miners United* (Banner Film and TV, 1984), *Struggles for the Black*  
 6 *Community* (Colin Prescod 1984), *We Owned and Ran* (Banner Film and  
 7 TV 1985), *Hell to Pay* (Anne Cottringer 1988) and *Dockers* (John  
 8 Goddard 1988), to name but a few. Nevertheless, aside from work written  
 9 by members of the department themselves this series is scarcely  
 10 acknowledged in the channel's history precisely because it lacked the  
 11 presence of formally aesthetic work. In acknowledging that the IFVD  
 12 "showed the stuff with the best claim to meet Parliament's command that  
 13 we encourage innovation and experiment", for instance, Jeremy Isaacs  
 14 argued that without it

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

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

### 23 **The political avant-garde in the 1990s**

24 The output of the political avant-garde on Channel 4 in the 1990s has  
 25 received similarly scant attention. *Critical Eye* was arguably the primary  
 26 platform for oppositional documentary in this period, but the IFVD also  
 27 produced a number of other neglected series. *Out* (1989-91), for instance,  
 28 was dedicated to gay and lesbian programming and showed films like *Lust*  
 29 *and Liberation* (Clare Bevan 1989), *After Stonewall* (John Scagliotti  
 30 1989), *Looking for Langston* (Isaac Julien 1990), *Comrades in Arms*  
 31 (Mayavision 1990) and *Over Our Dead Bodies* (Stuart Marshall 1991).  
 32 Although *Global Image* (1992-1994) consisted mostly of radical work  
 33 from overseas, it also broadcast Marc Karlin's *Utopias* (1988), about  
 34 seven different version of socialism, and *Life Can be Wonderful* (Martin  
 35 Smith and Shelagh Brady 1994), about British communist filmmaker and  
 36 distributor, Stanley Foreman. Channel 4's *Guide for Producers*,  
 37 meanwhile, describes the IFVD's *First Sex* (1994-5) as "a feminist and



1 women's issue series" and *War Cries* (1995-6) as "a strand for social and  
2 polemical films" (Channel 4 1994, n.p.).

3 This extraordinary array of politically radical documentary is  
4 practically absent from the historical record. Aside from brief references in  
5 Harvey (1994, 122) and Stoneman (1996, 289 and 1992, 140), *Critical*  
6 *Eye*, for instance, is missing from the history of oppositional film in  
7 Britain. More general histories of Channel 4, such as Hobson (2008) or  
8 Brown (2007), hardly recognise the presence of oppositional film on the  
9 channel at all, in either the 1980s or the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the conference  
10 marking Channel 4's twenty-fifth anniversary in 2007 included only one  
11 paper explicitly addressing the channel's relationship with radical film,  
12 and this was Stoneman reflecting on the radicalism of the channel's "early  
13 years" (Stoneman 2007). Writing in *Screen's* dossier on the conference,  
14 Paul Kerr (2008) notes that there was "little or nothing ... about politics or  
15 policy", and that, although there were panels on race and sexuality, class  
16 was conspicuously absent (318).

17 This absence of attention is partly a result of the political avant-garde  
18 being increasingly unwelcome on Channel 4 from the late 1980s onwards.  
19 However, it also derives from the legacy of anti-illusionist film theory that  
20 dominated debates about aesthetic and politics in the cinema in the 1970s  
21 and 1980s. These arguments deserve more attention than I have time for  
22 here, but suffice to say that, as Robert Stam has argued, the overriding  
23 consequence was that radical film theorists "came to regard reflexivity as a  
24 political obligation" (226). Deemed lacking of the modernist qualities  
25 subsequently required for political art to qualify for scholarly  
26 investigation, the political avant-garde on Channel 4 in the 1990s has been  
27 all but ignored. This is also in spite of the fact that *Critical Eye* was  
28 reaching larger audiences than experimental work had ever had access, by  
29 virtue of the fact that it was broadcast in a 9pm slot. Despite their best  
30 efforts (Fountain quoted in Dowmunt 2007, 251), the IFVD had never  
31 succeeded in breaking the aesthetic avant-garde out from the "tundra of  
32 the schedules" (Stoneman 1996, 290), with *The Eleventh Hour* stuck at  
33 11pm, *Midnight Underground* at 12am, and so on. Of course, *Critical Eye*  
34 was permitted the earlier slot largely because it was deemed to adopt a

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<sup>9</sup> Hobson (2008) briefly mentions Fountain twice, once in the context of *The Eleventh Hour* (75) and once in a list of executives involved in the Channel 4 Campaign Group (an initiative intended to protect the channel from the privatisation involved in the 1990 Broadcast Act) (167). Brown (2007) affords one mention each to Fountain and Spry, the former in a list of Commissioning Editors (47), and the latter in the context of a *Daily Mail* article criticising a programme she commissioned, *Dyke TV* (175).

1 more conservative aesthetic approach, yet the aesthetics of films shown on  
 2 *Critical Eye* were hardly conservative. According to Caroline Spry, for  
 3 instance,

4 the late '80s early '90s was when we started to do more supposedly  
 5 mainstream, populist stuff than had been in *The Eleventh Hour*. So  
 6 *Critical Eye* came in there in the 9 o'clock slot [but] we tried to do things  
 7 that would bring some of the politics and aesthetics of *The Eleventh Hour*  
 8 into the more mainstream slots. (2011, 2)

9 Compared to the experimental work shown on *The Eleventh Hour* the  
 10 formal qualities of the films broadcast on *Critical Eye* were indeed closer  
 11 to the conventional standards of mainstream documentary. However, as  
 12 Spry says, it was the IFVD's explicit intention to incorporate some  
 13 political and aesthetic radicalism into the mainstream schedule, and the  
 14 formal qualities of the films they produced are far more complex than  
 15 conventional documentary aesthetics. Indeed, the series showed work by  
 16 filmmakers known for innovative formal approaches, such as Reece  
 17 Auguiste's *Mysteries of July* (1991) or Marc Karlin's *Between Times*  
 18 (1993). However, these filmmakers are already well known precisely  
 19 because they are deemed to combine their politics with a sufficient level of  
 20 formal innovation in their work. So, in the final part of the chapter I want  
 21 to argue that the aesthetic strategies of much lesser known filmmakers of  
 22 the political avant-garde are also worthy of attention, despite the absence  
 23 of reflexive tropes as conventionally conceived.

## 24 **Despite TV's The Battle of Trafalgar**

25 Despite TV was a London-based anarchist film collective founded by  
 26 Mark Saunders in 1981. Like other access groups at that time, such as  
 27 Oval House or Albany Video, Despite TV was set-up to facilitate  
 28 community video production, serving the boroughs of Tower Hamlets,  
 29 Hackney and Newham. Unlike those other access workshops, however,  
 30 Despite TV operated according to a constitution explicitly based on  
 31 anarchist philosophy. Consensus-based decision-making underpinned all  
 32 organisation and editorial decisions, and the group practised role-rotation  
 33 and other strategies designed to encourage democratic and non-  
 34 hierarchical working processes (Saunders 2011).

35 Unfortunately this principled internal structure also excluded Despite  
 36 TV from the funding opportunities provided by the Workshop Agreement,  
 37 the terms and conditions of which did not allow for the large numbers of  
 38 people involved in the group (on average around ten but up to as many as

1 twenty). According to Saunders, the Agreement was insufficiently flexible  
 2 to ensure equal wages for every member and was thus rejected by the  
 3 group as a whole, wage hierarchies being incompatible with their non-  
 4 hierarchical ethos (2011, 10). Thus, while other access groups (such as  
 5 Albany) became franchised Channel 4 workshops, Despite TV did not, and  
 6 the resulting financial instability contributed to their eventual demise.  
 7 Nevertheless, their non-hierarchical mode of production proved an  
 8 efficient one even without workshop funding, and Despite TV released  
 9 fifteen videos from 1984 to 1993. Most of these were video-activist  
 10 newsreels: compilations of short films on local political issues, often  
 11 alongside videos of local bands or other cultural activities and topics.  
 12 However, Despite TV also produced a handful of feature documentaries,  
 13 including *The Battle of Trafalgar*.

14 This was the film which launched the first of *Critical Eye*'s five  
 15 seasons of oppositional documentary. The "battle" of the film's title is the  
 16 Poll Tax riot that took place in central London on Saturday 31 March  
 17 1990. Broadcast six months later on 18 September, the film sets out to  
 18 contest the dominant version of the day's events as told by the police,  
 19 media and government. This objective is clearly established in the opening  
 20 sequence, a montage composed of numerous accounts of the riot in the  
 21 mainstream media. From the incessant repetition of the word "trouble" to  
 22 clichéd statements blaming "the minority of anarchists who regularly  
 23 hijack protests", the sequence foregrounds the language with which the  
 24 media frames the protestors as the cause of the riot and the police as  
 25 innocent victims caught in the line of duty. Their refusal to deviate from  
 26 this interpretation is articulated most dramatically when the image track  
 27 shows a group of mounted police officers galloping into, and then over, a  
 28 fleeing woman, while the voice-over declares that "the violence was  
 29 caused by about 3000 among them".<sup>10</sup>

30 Following this montage the film states its intention to challenge this  
 31 interpretation of events. Cutting to a close-up of a woman's silhouetted  
 32 face in profile, she explains that "Despite TV was present at the event. Our  
 33 experience was dramatically different from that portrayed by television  
 34 news". As she speaks, the lighting of the shot increases and the silhouette  
 35 effect is eradicated, fully illuminating the speaker as she turns to face the  
 36 camera. This lighting effect expresses the film's sentiment, literally  
 37 shedding light on the narrator as she promises to reveal an alternative  
 38 interpretation of the riot. Addressing the audience directly, she reminds us

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<sup>10</sup> Later, this footage is repeated with another reporter explaining that, "with the guilty mingling deliberately with the innocent, such injuries are inevitable".

1 that, like all television programmes, their film has been edited, but she  
 2 insists that the events shown are in chronological order. Unlike modernist  
 3 reflexivity, this reference to the film's construction is intended to re-affirm  
 4 rather than de-stabilise *The Battle of Trafalgar's* truth-claim. This kind of  
 5 self-referentiality is typical of the political avant-garde. Despite TV are too  
 6 concerned with the political consequences of the riot's representation in  
 7 the media to focus on ontological distinctions between reality and its  
 8 representation. Thus the text references itself to underscore the filmmakers'  
 9 sincerity, not to arouse the audience's suspicions of the filmic apparatus.

10 The opening sequence also functions to introduce the over-riding  
 11 structure and form of the film. Divided into three sections, the first  
 12 establishes the chronology of the day and substantiates claims that it was  
 13 in fact the police who antagonised the protestors. The second and third  
 14 sections of the film explore the consequences of the day, focusing  
 15 respectively on the response of the media and police and arguing that the  
 16 violence on the behalf of the protestors constituted "common defence"  
 17 against an armoured, baton-wielding police force. Continuing with the  
 18 form in which the female narrator first appeared, the film frequently  
 19 features its talking-heads in profile on the left-hand side of the frame,  
 20 discussing their experiences as the footage of the events in question plays  
 21 on the remainder of the screen. As with the reference to the editing process  
 22 in the film's introduction, this composition complements Despite TV's  
 23 intention to contest the dominant version of events. As the talking-heads of  
 24 the protestors recall their experiences, the footage of the events being  
 25 discussed forms an audio-visual testimony, authenticating much of what  
 26 they say and powerfully contesting the claims of the media and the police.

27 Aesthetic strategies emphasising synchronicity in the protestors'  
 28 perspective are all the more powerful when used alongside strategies that  
 29 suggest contradiction in the official version of events. As with the example  
 30 of mounted police trampling the woman while the accompanying voice-  
 31 over blames the protestors, this is frequently done by contrasting sound  
 32 with image. At other times contradictions are articulated in a single visual  
 33 composition. For instance, the police allegation that "the crowd were  
 34 getting fairly determined in their efforts to remove the double row of  
 35 barriers in Whitehall" is unfurled across the screen in large white font,  
 36 while the image beneath it clearly shows police officers removing the  
 37 barriers themselves. The distinction between the two versions of events is  
 38 further reinforced by emphasising the opposition between the police and  
 39 the protestors. One sequence, for instance, uses CGI to visualise the route  
 40 of the march and demonstrate the way in which police split the crowd,  
 41 creating panic and forcing a bottle-neck to form at Trafalgar Square. If

1 conventional documentary draws factual capital from the objective  
2 connotations of maps and diagrams, here these tropes articulate the openly  
3 subjective argument of the film. The protestors are represented as white  
4 circles, suggesting unity and cohesiveness, while the police are symbolised  
5 as truncheons and horses, indicating a repressive function.

6 While these aesthetic strategies emphasise the intervention on the part  
7 of the filmmakers, others profess to articulate the protestors' version of  
8 events more directly. The film frequently supports its argument with  
9 footage of protestors speaking directly into the camera during the riot  
10 itself, for instance. One man, evidently shaken having fled a police cavalry  
11 charge in which he was separated from his family, speaks directly into the  
12 camera as he articulates his anger and frustration with the police. Moments  
13 later another incredulous protestor points for the camera as it whip-pans  
14 down the street to capture a squad car speeding through the crowd. "You  
15 got that, yeah?" he says to the cameraperson, "I fucking hope so".  
16 However, while these sequences do not suggest artifice on the part of the  
17 filmmaker in the same way as the CGI sequences, they do implicitly draw  
18 attention to the role of the filmmakers. Again, unlike the reflexivity of the  
19 anti-illusionist mode, this kind of self-referentiality creates a powerful  
20 sense of insider knowledge which, as well as justifying the film's  
21 argument, also stresses the vital importance of oppositional filmmaking  
22 itself.

23 Indeed, this is one of the film's overriding themes, present throughout  
24 in footage which, shot from the protestors' point of view, is evidently not  
25 taken by the mainstream news media. Another cavalry charge is depicted  
26 from in the midst of the crowd being charged, for instance. The sense of  
27 danger and panic created by mounted policemen towering above the  
28 camera is striking, intensified when one of the policemen lashes out with  
29 his baton, carving an arc across the frame as he strikes just to the right of  
30 the cameraperson. Footage like this is repeated throughout the film,  
31 aligning the audience with the protestors and offering a taste of the reality  
32 of police violence for those on the receiving end of it. It also, however,  
33 emphasises the distinction between a mainstream media that reports on  
34 events from a distance and an oppositional media willing to speak from a  
35 position of direct experience—and be attacked for doing so. Indeed,  
36 oppositional filmmakers were not only liable to attack from the police.  
37 While the increased availability of camcorder technology in the 1990s  
38 benefitted video-activist culture enormously (Harding 1998), it also led to  
39 heightened suspicions of audio-visual media and sections of the activist  
40 community adopted a zero-tolerance approach to recording technology in  
41 general (Do or Die 1998). The implicit theme of the importance of

1 oppositional media—and its difference from mainstream media—thus  
 2 becomes an explicit one at the end of the film. As Michael Mansfield QC  
 3 (one of the few professional talking-heads in the film), discusses the  
 4 importance of distinguishing “independent” cameras from their  
 5 mainstream counterpart, his speech is illustrated with a cut-away of a  
 6 protestor smashing a billiard ball into Despite TV’s camera lens. This  
 7 experience was not uncommon among video-activists in the 1990s  
 8 (Harding 1998, 92-3), who were often attacked by protestors unable or  
 9 unwilling to differentiate between them and the mainstream media. This  
 10 distinction is therefore something the film is at pains to make clear, the  
 11 narrator prefacing the film’s conclusion by reminding the audience that “if  
 12 people had not taken their own cameras this story would not have been  
 13 told”.

## 14 Conclusion

15 As this analysis has shown, *The Battle of Trafalgar* is far from the average  
 16 television documentary. Committed to the argument it is trying to stage,  
 17 the filmmakers readily acknowledge that their position is not an impartial  
 18 one. This is not the same as misrepresenting the truth, of course, despite  
 19 the fact that “neutrality” and “disinterest” have become the markers of  
 20 contemporary “quality” journalism. Indeed, filmmakers of the aesthetic  
 21 and the political avant-garde would be more likely to argue that the very  
 22 notion of objectivity denies the fact that subjectivity is inherent in any act  
 23 of representation. From this perspective, claiming independence or  
 24 neutrality is either naive or intellectually dishonest, a denial of the  
 25 ideological values and beliefs that are always already present. Leaving  
 26 aside philosophical reservations about the possibility of objectivity,  
 27 oppositional filmmakers would argue that it is not a quality to which one  
 28 should aspire in a world rife with inequality. It is this political  
 29 commitment from which *The Battle of Trafalgar*’s interest as an aesthetic  
 30 object in part derives. Unconcerned with affecting neutrality, the film  
 31 attempts to utilise all the tools at its disposal to make its argument as  
 32 forcefully as possible. In this way it not only stages a biting critique of the  
 33 mainstream media and its complicity with the police, but also radically  
 34 undermines the very notion of neutrality as a precondition for legitimate  
 35 investigative journalism.

36 *The Battle of Trafalgar* belongs to an entire culture of politically  
 37 radical documentary filmmaking in Britain which for the last twenty-five  
 38 years has been almost completely overlooked by scholars of film and  
 39 media. While there are a variety of reasons for this lack of attention, the

1 lion's share of the responsibility lies with the anti-illusionist film theory of  
 2 the 1970s and 1980s. It is as a result of this body of work that, in the  
 3 academy and art gallery alike, radical politics are all too often acceptable  
 4 only if they come dressed in the formal attire of the aesthetic avant-garde.  
 5 Anything else tends to be ignored or held at arms' length, dismissed as  
 6 "community work" or "activist film". While I have not had the space to  
 7 develop this argument here, I hope that my discussion of the political  
 8 avant-garde on Channel 4 has been a sufficient indication of its validity.  
 9 As we have seen, discussions of radicalism on the channel in the 1990s are  
 10 virtually non-existent, while radicalism on the channel in the 1980s—  
 11 widely acknowledged as one of the most radical periods in television  
 12 history—is discussed almost exclusively in terms of the aesthetic avant-  
 13 garde. Without denying the importance of the latter, the exaltation of  
 14 formally experimental work has all but erased the very existence of the  
 15 political avant-garde. Recovering this history is essential if we are to keep  
 16 pace with the ways in which cinema, still one of the most powerful forms  
 17 of communication in existence, continues to be used as a political tool  
 18 today.

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