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A context for collecting the new media

Tjebbe van Tijen

At the turning of the year 1992 I received the program and manifesto for the Next 5 Minutes Conference in Paradiso. As professional collector of documents by and about social movements for the International Institute of Social History, the list of videos to be shown caught my attention immediately. This was an excellent opportunity to realize something for which I had been trying already for some time, to make an international sample collection of products from the movement of new independent video makers. In the collection of my department were already examples like a complete set of a samizdat video journal from Czechoslovakia and video tapes from the Hungarian and Yugoslavian cultural opposition in the mid-eighties. Recordings of pirate television emissions on the Amsterdam cable system (Vrije Keyzer TV/Rabotnik TV) in the beginning of the eighties and the complete archive of the video group that sprang from this, Video Persgroep Amsterdam, are also part of the collection at the International Institute of Social History.

My experience during another recent conference on the role of video and television 'The media are with us' [1], held in Budapest in April 1990, made me especially aware of the difficulties involved in collecting this kind of material. The video material shown there consisted of recordings of the historical TV transmissions in Rumania itself and comparisons with coverage of the same event elsewhere in the world from France and Spain to Japan and the United States. There was also video footage and some documentaries of the same event by professionals and amateurs from different countries and commentary by those directly involved in the live broadcasts from Bucharest and the handling of these events by international television networks. The conference was a unique opportunity to compare how the showing of the same event (the fall of the Ceaucescu regime) on television can have quite different meanings in other contexts. Hailed in the beginning as a revolution set in motion by television, it soon was seen in a different perspective as the 'pyama revolution' where most people stayed passively at home day and night glued to their television set. As Villém Flusser said during the conference "the effect of the information revolution consists of the fact that we have to stay at home when we want to be informed".

The video material shown during the conference in Budapest by the different speakers came from all parts in the world, and was taken 'home' again afterwards. There were at that moment no opportunities to make copies and so constitute a permanent collection for further reference and research. I was also not able than to make arrangements for the forming of such a collection and to tackle all the possible copyright barriers involved in such an undertaking. Afterwards the organizers of the conference, Keiko Sei, Suzanne Meszoly, Laszlo Beke and Janos Sugar, made a publication with a selection of the lectures [2] While rereading this book I found some observations which linked the impact of the Romanian television events in a nice way to much earlier developments in the media, like a statement by the Rumanian art historian Magda Carneci: "...during the Rumanian revolution television for a moment became innocent again: it was only the medium for an elementary human need, to communicate and to participate directly with others in the theatre of the world". The Austrian media artist Richard Kriese points to the creative clumsiness and spontaneity which links the world wide

broadcasting of the Romanian television events to the first experiments of 'guerrilla television' and 'community video' twenty years before: "what the Western world has seen, was what they could have seen with the media artists of the sixties and seventies long before".

My associations go even further back. When I did receive the program and policy statements for the Next 5 Minutes Conference I associated the manifesto like tone and the mix of art and politics directly with earlier movements such as the underground filmmakers and their co-operatives in the mid-sixties and the impulses from the French 68 movement where the film camera was declared a weapon and a critical attitude towards the monopolistic state radio and television led to the forming of the États Généraux du Cinéma Française (Estates General of the French Cinema) a short lived Cupertino of radical filmmakers who propagated a different use of film and the media. These movements were experimenting with form, content and distribution of their medium. They made alternative 'newsreels' and 'cinéma-tracts' (cinema pamphlets) reporting on current political and cultural events and started to exchange them internationally. In the beginning of the seventies there were radical film co-operatives in at least 10 countries ranging from the United States to Austria, The Netherlands, Italy and Japan.

It is also a decade in which the clubs of cinephiles, which existed since the thirties, split up into ones that were only interested in cinema as art and others that wanted to emphasize the political function of the medium. In many cases these clubs were no longer satisfied with being just passive consumers and went into making their own films and setting up distribution channels for them, as happened with the Dutch Cineclub. Outlets for these new cinema products were more often meeting halls and student and youth clubs than the traditional stage of the medium, the cinema. The wave of occupations in the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies of schools, universities and factories, created a new stage for cinema. Films of other actions were shown to the assembled occupants as example and afterwards the content was to be discussed often with attendance of representants of the action shown in the film. Film was a slow medium, costly and laborious to produce, so even the simplest products of the alternative cinema movement were mostly ready too late to function during the events themselves.

Television was of course long since reporting on a daily basis, though seldom directly, but for a critical person at that time its content could only be met with contempt. Television was a bastion of ruling class interests that at the best could be surrounded in a symbolic way, as happened with the massive demonstrations, 'opération Jericho', outside the building of state radio and television ORTF in Paris in June 1968, after the police had evicted striking employees of the ORTF who were pleading for reforms from the studios and offices they had occupied.

The most common attitude at the time was to reject the mass media and to focus on what was called 'counter information', 'contra-informazione', 'Gegeninformation', building ones 'own' information network. Now and then an awareness of the possibilities the big channels would flare up. Abbie Hoffman in 1968, in his manual for revolutionaries of those days 'Steal this book', had a short subsection 'Guerrilla Television' in which he launched the idea of "breaking into broadcast-tv signals with your own transmitter", but he failed to explain how it technically should be done. In Western Europe there was very little thinking about the potential of the new information technology, McLuhan was widely quoted, but more used to support a existing negative attitude towards the new media, especially in 'progressive' left circles. With this anti-technology attitude the imagination didn't go much further than the technical knowledge. So when proposals were made it was mostly for the use of pirate radio. This is clearly expressed by the French Situationist movement that in a manifesto about 'New forms of struggle against

politics and art' in 1967 speak about 'Guerrilla in the mass media', say it is "an extremely important form of struggle", but they come up with little more than the example of "Argentineans who seized the control deck of a giant neon sign' in Buenos Aires and "broadcast their own recommendations to society at large on it". The manifesto continues with "Anyone who was thinking of having a crack at radio or TV studios had better get a move on as it won't be long before they're actually guarded by the army" [3]. Practically the Situationist then propose to go into pirate radio and they gave an example of the use of pirate radio in Denmark.

In the following years there are many examples both in Eastern Europe (Czechoslovakia) and Western Europe of the use of pirate radio, a low cost technology (then mostly Medium Wave), that can be easily homemade. The potential of the use of video at the end of the sixties is seldom mentioned, although the introduction of the portable, and more or less affordable video recorder (Sony Porta Pack) was already in 1967. Video was mainly seen as 'a toy for the rich'.

Although the equipment came from Japan it was mostly through the Unites States and Canada that information on the use and potential of video was trickling to Europe. First of all through the channels of the counter, or underground culture, especially the lose scheme for the exchange of independent magazines, the Underground Press Syndicate, with its participating members in twenty different countries. There was a more positive attitude in the alternative movement in America in regard to technology, it could also be a liberating tool, engineers and visionaries like Buckminster Fuller were frequently quoted in the movements magazines and even anarchist over there were not afraid of it, like could be read in the influential article of Murray Bookchin, first published in 1968 'Towards a liberatory technology' [4]. An attitude also expressed in the publication of the Whole Earth Catalogue in 1969, a mail order catalogue which gave "access to tools" from books (understanding whole systems) to tents and canoes (nomadics) and portable video equipment (communications).

It were also Americans who brought the first video equipment to Europe, like Jack Moore who, after a long 'stop over' in London where he was involved in the underground magazine IT and the Arts Laboratory of Jim Haynes in the mid-sixties, landed in Amsterdam in the early seventies, giving the following statement to a local youth paper: "Video is the new medium. It was born at a time that the underground was taking shape. That's why video and underground are each other's brothers". At the time Jack Moore did not see the structures of alternative film as very useful: "Film is old, made by old people, expansive, complicated, it makes the division by film makers, technicians and the public. The young underground film makers are in fact revitalizing the image of old people and commercially exploiting firms" [5]. Moore established different bases for the use of video in the Netherlands, eventually with the help of government subsidies, among others in the cultural centre the Melkweg in Amsterdam.

In the beginning the use of video in the Europe remained very much in the realm of alternative culture and the arts and was much less influential in the political sphere. This of course was due to the limitations of the media at the time: a small number of available reel tape machines which in most cases could only be attached to a normal tv-set and thus limiting the audience, later with the spreading of video players the difficulty of different standards used in different countries and often within a single country. Also main stream television stations would bar the first independent video products from the air not just because of their content, but also because of their supposedly 'unacceptable' low image quality, that could not compete with the more costly higher standards used by official tv.

"Amplifying an idea is easy when the social space is ready for it, impossible when it's not", is a conclusion reached in the book 'Guerrilla Television', published in 1971 by a former employee of the Time publishing company, Michael Shamberg together with Raindance Corporation, the counter culture analogue to the Rand Corporation. The book is split up in two parts, one a reflection on the implications of the new media for society, the other part a practical manual with examples of past and ongoing projects. All ideas that now, after twenty years, start to materialize are already there: 'community video', 'video theatre, a 'media bus' (Ant Farm), using central antenna systems in apartment buildings, video in meditation and therapy, setting up of a videocassette network, use of cable television. The authors saw all this as a "techno-evolution" which would in the end help "to restore media ecological balance to TV". The way they thought this was best done was by "re-structuring communication channels, not capturing existing ones". The magazine 'Radical Software' published in the same period is another visionary source full of ideas which deserves to be republished now.

There are also a few reflections on and practical proposals for the new media in Western Europe. Hans Magnus Enzenberger publishes in 1970 his article 'Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien' (construction kit for a media theory) [6] building on the ideas about the medium radio Bertolt Brecht was formulating in the early thirties, proposing an emancipatory use of the media with decentralized programs, each receiver potentially being a sender, interaction, feedback from the audience and collective production [7]. Enzenberger was mainly directing himself to the West German New Left who saw the new electronic media, television video and computer, only as instruments for guarding, manipulation and control by the ruling class and did stick to their traditional media, leaflets and magazines.

In Italy it is Roberto Faenza who after a stay of two years in the United States writes the book 'Senza chiedere permesso; come rivoluzionare l'informazione' (without asking permission; how to revolutionize information), published in 1973 by Feltrinelli and translated in a few other languages. The author wants to "unmask the authoritarian use of the mass media and to accelerate the taking over of these by the masses" Although the cover of the book showed a long haired person equipped with a shotgun and a portable video camera Faenza did not envisage revolutionary action like occupying television studios. The other extreme, to participate in the existing structures of the media and to try to change them from within is also rejected by him. Faenza wants to use video on grass root level in schools, factories, hospitals, in the street and by local cable networks. He speaks about "horizontal communication" whereby the "receiver of the news also can pass on news himself".

"Theories of the 68-ers, all snow from yesterday?", is a question asked by the Medienwerkstatt Freiburg in the introduction to their new videotape rental catalogue in 1987. They belong to a third generation of video activists, starting in the end of the seventies with their social base in the squatters, youth and grass root cultural movement. At that moment they still stick to the importance of the use of video with direct contacts and discussion in public meetings to exchange experiences, a position that is clarified in the catalogue by a quotation from Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge: "Public opinion has only user value when in it social experience is organized" [8]. The media collective asks itself what the meaning of the experiences mediated in their videos is "in a time in which living experience is more and more replaced by second hand media experience". They don't see a solution in "still more television, still more channels, cable, satellites"[9].

Something must have changed in the past 6 years, because the Medienwerkstatt Freiburg is one of the participants in the Next 5 Minutes conference in the beginning of 1993 in Amsterdam

where the use of official cable television, national networks and satellite television is no longer taboo and openly discussed. Wolfgang Stickel, member of the Freiburg media collective sums up what changed in West Germany (and not only there) in his study on the history of the video movement in the seventies and eighties, published in 1991: "It started with the relative openness of television for political and social problems that before were only covered by the video groups, furthermore the action groups nowadays prefer to be shown on television and expect more from that than from a faithful video film that find its public only with difficulty" [10]. Stickel also describes how more and more video activist professionalize their activities and find their way in the official tv-structure. Parallels with the printed press evolving from alternative to establishment are apparent. Developments which do not necessarily mean that in that process all creativity and social engagement have been lost.

Twenty years before this development was already seen by the authors of the 'Guerrilla Television' book: "...a culture like Media-America which survives on free flow of data can't really suppress centres of creative information". The Next 5 Minutes conference has showed several examples of video and television productions that proved that point. Bas Raijmakers speaks in his text 'On tactical television', much more cautiously about "cracks appearing in the monolith tv-world" that need to be exploited and enlarged. A quote from the book 'Video visions, a medium discovers itself' by Jonathan Price first published in 1972 will serve to see this caution in a historical perspective: "By 2001 what we look at now will seem crude, vulgar, incompetent, the way the first movies seem to us now. Why didn't these artists understand what the medium really demands? audiences will cry out. Why didn't these teachers use more of the capabilities of the medium to teach? Yet some ancients, some academics, some curators of the past, will defend us. They will say we opened up a medium that changed the way people see, talk, communicate." [11]

Notes

1 "The media are with us" a slogan inspired by the calls in the streets of Bucharest "armate e cu noi" (the army is with us).

2 *Von der Burokratie zur Telekratie, Rumanien im Fernsehen, Ein Symposium aus Budapest*, editor Keiko Sei, Merve Verlag, Berlin, 1990.

3 "Internationale Situationniste", issue 11, a manifesto by Rene Vignet. Quoted from *The incomplete work of the Situationist International*, edited by Christopher Gray, Free Fall Publications, London, 1974.

4 Originally published in the magazine *Anarchos* in New York and shortly afterwards in the magazine *Anarchy*, issue 78 in London. The article still carries the pseudonym Lewis Herber, that Bookchin was using at that time.

5 In the Dutch magazine *Jeugd en samenleving* (youth and society), issue 4, Amsterdam, 1971.

6 In the German magazine *Kursbuch*, issue 20, Berlin, 1970.

7 For an excellent detailed description see *Zur Geschichte der Videobewegung; politisch orientierte Medienarbeit mit Video in den 70-er und 80-er Jahren* by Wolfgang Stichel from Medienwerkstatt Freiburg, published by the author, Freiburg, 1991.

8 From their book *Offentlichkeit und Erfahrung; zur Organisationsanalyse von burgerlicher und proletarischer Offentlichkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, 1972.

9 *Videofront; Verleikatalog der Medienwerkstatt Freiburg*, erweiterte Auflage, 1987.

10 Wolfgang Stichel, op.cit.

11 The book has been published in 1977, but used previously published articles. The quotes comes from an article "Video pioneers" in "Harpers Magazine", june 1972.