
Video Rising: Remarks on Video, Activism and the Web

By Michael Chanan

I joined the ranks of the video bloggers with a [series](#) posted on the *New Statesman* website in the early months of 2011. (1) The videos can also be [seen](#) at my blog [Putney Debater](#). Following a few earlier experiments in short videos for the web in video diary style, I had a clear instinct when I started going out to film the upsurge in student protests in the UK in December 2010 about what to do and how to do it. I remembered Glauber Rocha's formula for Cinema Novo in Brazil—to go and make films with a camera in the hand and an idea in the head. The selection of events was serendipitous. My plans were minimalist and responsive to the events (the movement expanded until half a million people demonstrated in London on March 26, 2011, the last [episode of the series](#)). I filmed things that I could get to easily by public transport (except one day in South London when a colleague from the University came along, and drove us around in his car). On more than one occasion other colleagues or students did additional filming. For several months I didn't think about the theory of the thing but got on with the job.

Looking back raises various questions. For one thing, I call myself a video blogger but it's a term without a precise meaning. The point of calling something a blog is to flag it as the work of an individual, but like written blogs, video blogs cover a huge range of subjects, styles, genres, and purposes. (Moreover, the web produces a highly problematic version of individual identity, an abstracted form of voice which can all too easily be fabricated: corporate blogs are written by professional copy writers; there are companies nowadays that run Facebook pages for their clients.) For myself, I think of the video blog more as a form of documentary than citizen journalism, because of the work of editing each episode. But in that case, it's quite different from conventional television documentary in its mode of production: the labour process is quite distinct — the blogger doesn't have a budget handed down to them, and doesn't work with a crew (only the help of friends).

This is not a topic that figures in academic film studies, which is not premised on practical knowledge of film production (and has little appreciation of production practices beyond the Hollywood studio system). The labour process of the individual video blogger contrasts starkly with the conventional mode of documentary production, but it also differs from the more egalitarian collective practices of politicised film-making thirty or forty years ago (including the workshop movement in the

UK in the 80s). Both methods involved small crews and a given, although flexible division of labour, combining technical specialism with creative feedback and collaboration. The video blogger, thanks to digital technology, is able effectively to work alone at all jobs at all stages of production. This gets very close to the concept of the ‘caméra-stylo’ introduced in the late 1940s by the French avant-garde film-maker Alexandre Astruc: the idea of the camera as a tool to write with—indeed twice over, first when you shoot and then when you write the film on the timeline. But this solitude also becomes a liability, because it deprives you of the creative feedback that goes with the teamwork of a crew. Added to which, when you work alone you also tend to work unsocial hours and to take as long as it needs to do the job without bothering to count the minutes. In short, the regime you work is the epitome of free aesthetic labour. I don’t mean the managerialist notion that workers should look good and behave nicely, but the Marxist concept of creative labour, which is not subject to the external constraints imposed on regular labour by the conditions of employment; of which Marx himself once wrote, ‘Really free labour, the composing of music for example, is at the same time damned serious and demands the greatest effort.’ (2)

The tax authorities call it freelance, but this kind of labour is essentially unquantifiable: there is no rule that says how long it should take to write a song or a poem, let alone shoot and edit a video. Indeed the artist who lives from their work knows that there’s no determinable relation to the exchange value, if any, eventually earned. The video blogger doesn’t even think of earning anything. This is also ‘free labour’ in a new sense: the donation of those who supply the social media with content, off whose backs, in their hundred of millions, enormous profits are made by feeding them paid advertisements. (3) Nevertheless, this independence, which the video blogger shares with various other kinds of web videographer, is the basis for the expression of countercultural voices which are either ignored or stereotyped by the mainstream but here acquire the status of free authors. Often these voices are politically unformed, some are subcultural expressions of tribal ideologies. The web tends to multiply and magnify existing tendencies and trends in the body social, and thus becomes a space of implicit ideological confrontation (not to mention narcissistic exhibitionism). Nevertheless, these confrontations, skirmishes, even battles, are carried out in the virtual first person. Video clips are circulated by individual digital subjects posting their links here and there, often pseudonymously. The effect is (if I can be allowed the word) to ‘personalise’ the message. What you understand about the video you get to by following a link depends on who sent it to you and how. It’s like putting quote marks around it. Irony abounds. But the emphasis on voice may also embolden the video blogger, who must work to grab and sustain the viewer’s atomised and distracted attention. (There is a big difference between page loads and completed viewings.)

The character of video authorship has a history which reaches back through underground and expanded cinema in the 1960s and 70s to the rise of the workers' film movements between the two world wars, both of them, like the experimental cinema of the 1920s, prime sites of free aesthetic labour. This history was always separate from commercial cinema, whose costliness placed it in the hands of monopolists and the studio system, which imposed formal controls over the labour process (aided and abetted by the trade unions). Here, aesthetic labour was regulated by time sheets and schedules. If directors who imposed themselves in this system came to be identified by young idealistic film critics in France after the Second World War as auteurs, the true authors of cinema, film theorists of the next generation would explicate the ways in which authorship might be shared (you have to take into account the cinematographer, the editor, the producer, etc.) or even ascribed to the studio itself. These explications have their counterpart in legal documents (and copyright provisions). As quarrels over credits demonstrate, the labour process that stands behind such authorship is always shared. It precludes the individualised character that on the other hand is privileged by video, because the videographer is now able to engage in the same individual form of aesthetic labour as the writer, the poet, the painter, the composer.

In the process, however, a new kind of aesthetic practice emerges, as video reveals a potential for alternative uses outside television and corporate publicity, and is taken up by new kinds of users who evolve their own forms of teamwork. One arena is education, where anthropologists have used it for ethnographic documentation, medics for teaching, social workers for health and sex education (not to mention local photographers, who started offering neighbourhood customers videos as well as photos of all the usual family events). But it has also become an agent of parallel cultural production in the hands of a new generation of activists, who take it up as a new form of speech in the open spaces of civil society. A Brazilian video activist told an interviewer, in 1992, "The social movements appropriated the medium before the professionals." (4) Here, video spreads beyond the exclusive province of professionalism, and begins to become a common competence, like riding a bicycle or driving.

In this way, the well-known formula suggested by Bill Nichols for the classic documentary, "I speak to you about them", is transformed into "I (or we) speak to you about me (or us)", or even "We speak to each other about ourselves". There is inevitably a utopian streak in it when this transformation is collective. It would fulfill the task envisaged by the Cuban cineaste Julio García Espinosa in a key manifesto of 1970, "For an Imperfect Cinema" (*Por un cine imperfecto*), where he spoke of the need to break with 'culture' as the property of social elites, and 'popular

culture' as commodities on the market, and discover instead "the conditions which will enable spectators to transform themselves into agents — not merely more active spectators, but genuine co-authors." (5)

Endnotes:

(1) Online at: http://www.newstatesman.com/writers/michael_chanan.

(2) Karl Marx, "Labour as Sacrifice or Self-Realization," in *Grundrisse*, 124. Quoted in Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Versus Work*, online at: <http://www.artandwork.us/2009/11/art-versus-work>.

(3) See, for example, Steffen Böhm et.al., 'The Value of Marx: Free Labour, Rent and 'Primitive' Accumulation in Facebook', Working Paper, 2012, [online here](#).

(4) Alberto López, quoted Brian Goldfarb, "Local Television and Community Politics in Brazil" in Chon Noriega, ed., *Visible Nations, Latin American Cinema and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 263-284, 278.

(5) Julio García Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema," in Michael Chanan, ed., *Twenty-five Years of the New Latin American Cinema* (London: BFI and Channel Four, 1983), pp.28-33, 30.

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