Night of the Broadcast Clones

The Politics of Video Training

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"Always fight against orthodoxy – particularly your own"

The clones shuffle listlessly across the field. They stare, slackjawed, into the viewfinders of their camcorders. No life is reflected in the one visible eye, sunk deep within darkened eye sockets. Other than the shuffling, the only visible signs of life are twitching thumbs, which in unison quiver and hit record/pause buttons mounted on the camcorders. There is no thought, only mindless repetition of procedures based on rules established long ago.They move toward me, and aim their cameras at me. I hear the electronic whir of countless zoom lenses, and know the identical image is being reproduced in all viewfinders. Their lenses capture me; I am caged within a prison of electron chips, transistors and capacitors. I feel my resistance drain, replaced with an unnatural calm. My right brain slowly ossifies, while my left brain is filled with the power and security of conformity. I understand now – there is only one way of seeing reality, only one way of shooting it. The television I have watched all my life contains "the" correct manner of interpreting this world...it is all so very clear now. Why should I be concerned if this reinforces the status quo? Why had I fought this? I slowly raise my camcorder to my shoulder. My right thumb begins to twitch uncontrollably, hitting the record button at each specific silent cue . . . with all the others.

The clones turn from me, and continue slowly across the field, in search of the unconverted. I shuffle sluggishly with them. Many seem familiar...they look like those that taught me video in school and commercial broadcast television...they look like those whom I have trained in video production...and their trainees ...and theirs...

Now we all share a common creed toward both video and existence itself: There is no life, there is only routine. We are the clones.

It is a nightmare. We have established an alternative system of distributing programs via cable; we have attempted to ensure that the content of our programs captures the debates and controversies within our communities. But we continue to be trapped within the culture and mindset of commercial broadcast television. We train people to use video equipment to paint a picture of their world, but the techniques we use to show them how to visualize and how to paint originated from the dominant media. Is it any wonder many of the programs on community television (CTV) look like imitations of broadcast productions?

An example might help define the problem: At a judging of finalists in the NFLCP's "Hometown USA" video competition a few years ago, judges noted that many of the professional entries, while they were very technically polished, didn't really "touch" the viewer. On the other hand, many of the non-professional entries were not as clean technically, but genuinely spoke to the heart of the viewer. What did this mean? Had the style of broadcast production–"objective," "unemotional," where content is not as important as technical form–been adopted by many professional access staffs? On the other hand, didn't the non-professional successes indicate that some training programs were successfully showing new producers how to express their ideas in creative, new formats?

My thoughts here are based on discussions over the years with people from a variety of relationships with CTV; readings from academic and other literature; and personal experiences within universities, commercial and non-commercial television and radio, and community cable television.[1] To summarize, there is a sense that it is time for CTV to become less naive and more aware of its relationship to, and involvement with, power and politics.

Participation is a politcal concept that has evolved globally within tribes, villages, and religious communities. Our desire to empower people through participation in media is yet another manifestation of age old concepts: to help people organize and mobilize themselves to shape their own social environments. This is the political essence of public access and, by extension, the foundation of CTV training programs.

For example, the social concepts underlying access itself are laden with struggles between social groups. Take the "warm fuzzy"of "participation–it's not some notion that was born along with CTV. Participation is a politcal concept that has evolved globally within tribes, villages, and religious communities. Our desire to empower people through participation in media is yet another manifestation of age old concepts: to help people organize and mobilize themselves to shape their own social environments. This is the political essence of public access and, by extension, the foundation of CTV training programs.

Since the 1940s, community radio stations around the world have also been wrestling with how "participation" translates into policy. Is it enough to simply interview community members, or does community participation have to include not only participation in the production, but also the decision-making or management process of the radio station? Is a radio station fighting for a more democratic society a community radio station even if it does not allow democratic community participation in the radio station itself?[11 2A]

My aim here is to focus on one aspect of CTV ideology: *how we train people to define their world through video.* In particular, I will address the myth of the "neutral" video trainer or educator, and how this myth relates to cultural imposition.

Training: The Myth of Neutrality: There is no such thing as "neutral" video training. When someone produces a TV program, he or she selects material, orders images and sound, and represents ideas. All of these involve personal and cultural values that are not neutral or objective–they're based on the individual's own experiences.[2] Training people how to make video programs also communicates cultural perceptions, beliefs, and values. These values come from the

1968 First community operated closed circuit television channel in the United States begins in Dale City, VA (DCTV).

1969 Television goes portable with Sony's 'Video Rover' AV 3400 camera.

1970 New York City's Board of Estimate requires cable channels be set aside for public use.

1970 Cable systems number 2,490 with 4,500,000 subscribers.

1971 Alternate Media Center established at New York University.

1972 Sony introduces the first 3/4" video cassette recorder.

1972 FCC cable regulations set national access standards.

COMMUNITY TELEVISION REVIEW 14.3

trainer's experiences...and his or her many years of watching broadcast television. After a while, the constant repetition of the production canons makes it almost impossible for any of us to even comprehend that there may be a variety of ways to approach the same material. Or different ways to interpret the world. So, our programs, our trainees' programs, their trainees' programs–all end up reproducing the visual symbols, the culture, and the values of broadcast television.

Within the broadcast culture, the mass audience is addressed for the purpose of selling people to advertisers.[3] Everything about a program – its rapid pace, its constantly changing visuals, its banal content so as not to offend any viewer – all reflect the need of broadcasters to hold an audience until the commercials appear. The traditional production process also encourages a hierarchical division of labor, where one or two people determine the program content and structure, and the others merely carry out their assigned duties.

By adopting these program conventions, teachers in schools and universities, and trainers at CTV facilities, are accepting the validity of the world view presented by the dominant media. In effect, they have made a choice to support the status quo; the dominant value system is then reinforced by training others to interpret the world in a similar manner. The teacher and trainer, seemingly just neutral positions within a school or a CTV facility, are actually engaged in cultural politics on a daily basis. With each day that passes, with each new inductee into video production, a political repercussion follows: either the status quo has been reinforced, or it has been challenged.

Culture and Politics/Power: The experiences of native peoples that have never seen or used video or film might help demonstrate how culture is reflected in ways of "seeing the world" or representing this "reality" in a video program.

Aborigines in Australia make programs that have long silences in them, or that repeat the same thing in many different ways.[4] It follows their cultural norms – the Aborigines think silence provides an opportunity to reflect on a speaker's words, and that the many different ways of saying the same thing are important to understanding. If they had been trained by someone who was not sensitive to the cultural invasion possible with video training, they would probably cut out the silences...or the repetitions.

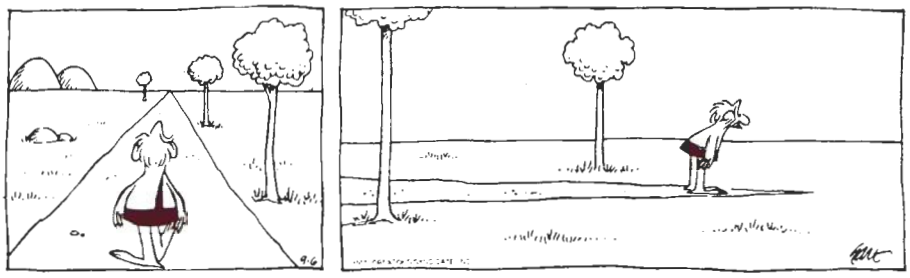

Figure 1. An alternative view of perspective from B.C. Reprinted by permission of Johnny Hart and Creators Syndicate, Inc. Copyright 1990 Creators Syndicate Inc.

In a classic experiment in the U.S.,[5] Native American Navajos who had not viewed much television or movies were trained in film production. The trainers took particular pains to avoid imposing their own professional standards on the native trainees, hoping to see how the Navajo culture displayed itself in the students' productions. They limited themselves to showing the trainees how the equipment worked, and the fundamentals of processes like editing.

The trainers found that their students' films reflected Navajo cultural norms and values. The programs were created without close-ups, considered by the trainees to be the equivalent of staring directly into a person's eyes–which, in Navajo culture, was considered rude and an invasion of privacy.

The students also used jump cuts quite a bit, reflective of the thought processes of the culture. Some older Navajos could see a difference in the way a story was told "in Navajo" or "in English"–even when the program was silent! They were reacting to the manner in which the images were put together, and the linear or non-linear mental processes it reflected.

So, the manner in which people see the world–influenced by culture and experience–ends up dictating how they will represent that reality in their visual media. Their symbols, their cultural values are all reproduced in their media product. If we as educators and trainers ignore these very different ways of looking at the world, we'll probably end up invading someone's culture. We'll do it unknowingly, naively...but we'll do it nonetheless, as certainly as did the missionaries and conquistadors invading the "New World". We'll show people how to picture their world on video "just the way that it's done," without regard for how they see the world, without giving them the opportunity to play with the equipment and see how it can serve them and their culture.

Perception and Politics / Power: The examples given of native people using video are not the norm, obviously. Most people we're training have seen a lot of broadcast television; maybe they just want to copy it. Most likely, they're probably not aware that programs can look any different than on commercial television. We can give them the opportunity to select for themselves a production style that might more accurately reflect their own cultural perspective.

As I've mentioned, there is not just one way of seeing things–even through a camera lens. It is hard to really grasp these differences, though, because the current manner of interpreting reality has permeated everything in our culture over the last 600 years.

Our current Western way of perceiving reality, particularly through a lens, really started in the 14th Century.[6] Someone came up with a way of standardizing the way things that were seen were put on paper and drawn. For example, when you draw a picture: the way that the two lines making up a road get closer and closer together as they approach the horizon–this follows the rules of "central perspective" that originated in Medieval Europe. But there are other ways of interpreting the same phenomenon, as indicated in figure 1.

Central perspective became important to those making blueprints and technical drawings – the "Age of Science" had begun. So

1972
Pay cable service debuts with Home Box Office.

1975
HBO's satellite service makes franchising the top 20 TV markets economically feasible.

1975
National Federation of Community Broadcasters founded.

1975
Cable systems number 3,506 with 9,800,000 subscribers.

1976
NFLCP testifies for the first time before the FCC.

1978
First NFLCP convention held in Madison, WI.

1978
First Hometown USA Video Festival.

these European rules became the norm, and just about everything was worked or reworked to fit the new rules of central perspective – including art and technology. In particular, when lenses were developed they followed these rules, which reinforced the idea of central perspective even more. The lenses made these rules seem like, well...common sense. After all, how could anyone question what they had actually seen through the lens?

It was a cultural development unique to 14th Century Europe. Through the centuries, the constant reinforcement of this culturally defined perspective led to an uncritical approach to video production, where the "rules" have become "self-evident," unquestionable– and perpetuated. Perception – how we view and interpret reality – is very definitely based on our culture and our experiences.

Within our training programs, we have the ability to break this attachment to production rules inappropriate to CTV. How? Think of the stuff people need to know to safely operate the equipment. Separate that from the information that tells them how to frame a "good" shot, or how to put together a program. It's this second area that deals primarily with culture, power, and "ways of seeing" through video. And it's this area that needs our attention if we want to avoid a culturally insensitive training program.

Recommendations?: Having outlined the problems of culture, power, and training, I have no desire to propose specific solutions. We don't need to create another orthodoxy for production training. Instead, each of us needs to adapt concepts to fit our own unique situation, and share our successes and failures with those of similar interests. The pages of CTR seem ideally suited to continue this discussion. However, there is a general direction in which we should move–a path that others who have traveled before have already marked for us. The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire,[7] known throughout the world for his enlightened approach to life-long learning, seems particularly suitable to CTV purposes.

Freire believes that to begin to think critically–on our own–it is necessary to break the chains that bind us to an imposed view of reality. But we can't do this unless we can see the chains–the old way of looking at the world. This requires looking at ourselves critically, and comparing our values with who we actually are, and what we actually do. Access is now mature enough where it can only benefit from such a critical appraisal; the naivete of youth is no longer a luxury we can afford.

Discussion needs to take place at all levels – from national conferences to local ones, from staff meetings to training sessions–regarding the numerous ways in which CTV interfaces with power, politics, and culture. "Politics" goes far beyond the traditional concept of pressuring legislators or negotiating with cable companies. "Politics" means power relationships of all kinds, with all their aspects – including, among others, gender, race, age, and culture.

In particular, the issue of training needs to be put on the table and scrutinized. Do the methods we employ when teaching people how to create video programs follow the stated goals and beliefs of CTV? Within training programs, is CTV as a philosophy and "mode" of production being discussed? Are mainstream broadcast production and content standards being questioned, or merely imitated–and therefore perpetuated?

The process of evaluation and change is not easy. It is not appropriate in all situations. It does involve rethinking if the why we do training in CTV fits the how we do this training. The link between video production and critical thinking does not occur just because someone learns how to operate video equipment. The connection must be consciously forged by the trainer.

Accepting the necessity of an empowering program of training does not necessarily make things any easier, but only raises more questions: Do you train people how to produce in the traditional broadcast manner or CTV mode first? Don't they have to learn "the rules" first before they can break them? How do you get a discussion going when all trainees want to do is start learning the equipment immediately? They want to learn how to do broadcast programs; shouldn't we give them what they want? Are we imposing our own view of video on them if we train according to how we think CTV should look? Where are we supposed to get the time to talk about this stuff? Where are we supposed to get samples of "quality," "uniquely" alternative programs?

There are no answers, but plenty of discussion and ideas. The discussion has been going on for a while within the pages of Screen magazine (formerly Screen Education), the Independent, and at meetings of the Union for Democratic Communication (UDC), the University Film and Video Association (UFVA), the Association of Independent Video and Film Makers (AIVF), and the NFLCP. Addresses of these organizations accompany this article.

Many of our problems are not new; they have been dealt with by video artists, filmmakers, and community radio activists before us. For example, as we search for definitions of what constitutes a "good," "alternative" program, we can draw from film theorist Peter Wollen. He describes a powerful work as:

> one which challenges codes, overthrows established ways of reading or looking, not simply to establish new ones, but to compel an unending dialogue, not at random but productively.[8]

There are organizations that are able to provide assistance locating exemplary works such as Wollen's notes. The addresses of a few of them accompany this article.

The prison we create by strict adherence to the dominant production precepts does have a means of escape. Liberation is tied to first recognizing that the cage exists, and then understanding the historical conditions under which these confines developed and exist. Finally, a commitment is required–a dedication to forging a process that encourages alternative expressions of culture through various production approaches. Through this process, CTV can waken from the nightmare of trying to live by tenets established by the dominant media...and recognize the validity of an alternative path.

. . .The initial peace and security of conformity that came with my conversion has given way to uneasiness. I march with the others, but something feels wrong and I can't identify what it is. It must be only me, though–none of the others seems to question what they are doing. Or are they? I sense a thumb hesitate a

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1979
Supreme Court strikes down FCC access rules.

1979
NFLCP Newsletter becomes Community Television Review.

1980
NFLCP convention in East Lansing, MI organizes against SB 2827, which would have eliminated local, state or federal access

1980
Cable systems number 4,225 with 16,000,000 subscribers.

1981
National Association of Telecommunications Officers and Advisors founded.

1981
NFLCP moves to Washington, D.C.

1982
AT&T agrees to divest under anti trust pressure from the Justice Department.

Everyone's Channel Documents the History of Community Television

David Shulman's *Everyone's Channel*, a 58 minute video documentary, spans more than two decades of access history. Four years in the making, shot in over 15 cities across the US, *Everyone's Channel* includes a wide variety of examples of community television at its best.

Appearances by such notables as George Stoney, producer of Canada's Challenge for Change, and Nick Johnson, former FCC Commissioner, together with a cast of hundreds of access users across the country, give a broad and diverse perspective on the historic struggles and triumphs of public, educational and governmental access centers.

The program traces the development of public access, from Lyndon Johnson's use of one of the first black and white portapacks during a White House speech, to the Kansas City KKK challenge. Entertaining as well as educational, the program shows us examples of the impact which access has had on our lives, from a group of senior citizens whizzing a mean kazoo rendition of "Give My Regards to Broadway", to the empowerment of renters facing deplorable living conditions by deciding to go on strike. These are but a few examples of how the program demonstrates the continuing growth and potential of public access as a grass roots communications resource.

To order *Everyone's Channel*, send $85 for non-profit, access related use, $100 for all others, to: The Buske Group, 3112 "O" Street, Suite 1, Sacramento, CA, 95816. For more information, call (916) 456-0757.

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second before pressing the record button in unison with the others...then a light appears in one visible eye, the clone stops, frowns, and ...disappears! Then another is gone...and then more. I hesitate...and then I, too, wake up. ■

Notes

1 This essay is based on another work in progress. While I take full responsibility for the ideas contained within, I am grateful for comments provided on the work from which it is drawn. Thanks to Chip Berquist, DeeDee Halleck, Dan Marcus, and Karyn Rogoff.

2 Critiques of Community TV

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Armes, Roy. 1988. *On Video*. New York: Routledge.

Berger, John. 1977. *Ways of Seeing*. New York: Penguin.

Fuglesang, Andreas. 1982. *About Understanding: Ideas and Observations on Cross-Cultural Communication*. New York: Decade Media

7 Critical Analysis of Education

Freire, Paulo. 1989 [written in 1970]. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum Publishing Company.

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8 Media Studies and Visual Literacy

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Masterman, Len. 1980. *Teaching About Television*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Masterman, Len. 1989. *Teaching the Media*. London:Comedia.

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Appendix

Sources of Programming and Information

ASSOCIATION FOR INDEPENDENT VIDEO AND FILMMAKERS(AIVF)
625 Broadway, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10012
(212) 473-3400
Publishes The Independent

DEEP DISH TELEVISION
339 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012
(212) 473-8933
Deep Dish packages exemplary access programs from throughout the U.S.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA EXCHANGE DIRECTORY
Access Columbus Television, 394 Oak Street, Columbus, OH 43215
(614) 224-2288
Provides names and addresses of international program producers;their programs can provide excellent examples of the culturally defined ways in which video is used.

MARTHA STUART COMMUNICATIONS
Village Video Network Library, 147 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011
(212) 255-2718
Library contains programs produced by Third World villagers. These can show the diverse ways in which cultures use a camera to uniquely "see" the world.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Circulating Film Library, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019
(212) 708-9530
Video used as an art form provides examples of one unique application of video. Many works are available for rent from the museum.

PAPER TIGER TELEVISION
339 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10012
(212) 420-9045
Paper Tiger programs have hard hitting content, with a "hand made," "down home" look that can be used as a model of alternative production style.

UNION FOR DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATIONS
P.O. Box 1220, Berkeley CA 94701
Members include progressive academics and media practitioners.

UNIV. FILM AND VIDEO ASSOCIATION
School of Cinema-Television, Univ. of Southern California, University Park, MC 2212, Los Angeles, CA 90089
Publishes The Journal of Film and Video. Targeted toward university instructors of film and video.

1984
Cable Communications Policy Act deregulates cable and permits cities to request access channels.

1985
Cable systems number 6,600 subscribers with 32,000,000 subscribers.

1986
NFLCP celebrates its 10th Anniversary.

1987
Alliance for Communications Democracy founded.

1989
FCC initiates inquiry on the effect of the Cable Act.

1990
Cable systems number 9,575 with 50,000,000 subscribers.

1991
NFLCP celebrates its 15th Anniversary.