VIDEO PEDAGOGY AS POLITICAL ACTIVITY

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The education of students in the techniques of video and audio production is essentially a political act. It involves a manner of structuring reality as defined culturally; this arranging, if unquestioned, normally follows a mode of "seeing" reality as presented by Western commercial broadcast television. To actively work in opposition to this method of structuring is to declare oneself politically as against the mainstream. To uncritically follow and imitate the dominant mode of production is similarly to make a political statement: to perpetuate the status quo of visual representation.[1]

While recognizing the impossibility of divorcing form from content, the major concern of this article is the structure or style of the production, and the ideologies and values contained therein.[2] As noted by Keyan Tomaselli:

> The oppositions identified here are between those who adhere to the dominant ideology of conventional film/video making, and who teach technique as if it has no ideological connotations and hoping that content and structure will follow; on the other hand are those who take a holistic view, one which is designed to liberate and exploit the specific qualities of the medium which have been hidden under the weight of convention. ("Teaching" 10)

This article assumes the necessity of actively working against the production conventions of the dominant broadcasting media, particularly in a university environment.[3] Instead, video should be explored as a dynamic method of communication with a variety of applications: between persons or groups; as a means of individual and collective social, cultural, and artistic expression; and as a pedagogical device to encourage critical thought. Such uses are currently employed to some extent in alternative media, including community television (CTV), and video as an art form.[4] This article also assumes prior knowledge of traditional video production educational techniques.

Those of us teaching video and audio production should be aware of the cultural and political implications involved in the act of showing students how to represent their world visually and aurally. Production of television programs involves the ordering of images and sound, the selection of material, and the representation of ideas; as such it involves cultural and personal values that are not "neutral" (Bibby, Denford, and Cross; Mattelart and Piemme). Those who believe video education in these fields should do more than produce "broadcast clones" must ask: Do the production practices of the university video curriculum serve to question or challenge the dominant broadcast model or to reinforce it?

Video Production and Critical Pedagogy

The political nature of education, and the rejection of the possibility of a "neutral" pedagogy or "objective" educator, has been recognized by critical scholars such as Freire, Giroux, Illich, Skirrow, and Masterman. Instead, both the *form* of instruction and the *person* relaying the information impart as much (if not more) influence as the content itself. Education is seen in a wider context that approaches learning as an ongoing process not necessarily bound to institutions, and pedagogy as the relationships between how one teaches, what one teaches, and how one learns (Lusted 3). A critical pedagogy is critical of a system that too often merely provides disciplined automatons for the labor force, rather than working toward a critical consciousness that helps students examine their assumptions about life and society. Critical pedagogists see the development of this awareness as one task of higher education.

The critique offered by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is particularly noteworthy. Freire addresses methods by which to empower the illiterate poor, to break the cycle of educational oppression. He considers it a high evolutionary state for a human being to be a Subject: to act upon and transform his or her world. When oppressed, the human becomes merely an object—acted upon and alienated from his or her world. Through critical consciousness, or "conscientization," people learn to become Subjects, and thus participate in the formation of their world.

Freire believes conscientization to be an educational process stifled by contemporary formal education: the "digestive system" (*Cultural Action*), or the "banking" system of education (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), where teachers make "deposits" into the brains of students, expecting "withdrawals" by the students at the appropriate moments. He sees contemporary "banking" education as vertically structured and dominating, impeding the development of a critical world view, preventing the oppressed from working to change their social reality. Such a critique is of particular relevance to persons working in video education, where students are guided to a shaping of their world as it is represented through video, and where a more tolerant environment exists that allows experimentation with alternative instructional methods. Freire's solutions to an oppressive educational system will be explored later in this article.

The development of a critical consciousness as a responsibility of higher education is a view not shared by those academic departments with a vocational school approach to education. An uncritical approach to video and audio production is pursued as the institutions provide a labor pool for the media industries.

Higher education, at least implicitly, endorses the hierarchical structure of the broadcast media, where "some of us are designated as professional communicators and the rest of us are designated as consumers of information" (Church 11). Even institutions that operate a channel on a local cable system have opted primarily to use the channel as a "professional" broadcast laboratory rather than to experiment with any alternative forms, as might be defined by a CTV approach (Huie). This imitation of commercial broadcast styles follows a pattern set by educational radio stations, and is eloquently bemoaned by community radio pioneer Lorenzo Milam:

> When I listen to the educational part in most cities, I want to throw up: so many of the school run stations are slavishly imitating the commercial stations, down to the greasy voiced announcers and running PSAs as if they were commercials.
>
> Jesus! Who's going to tell them that there is a monster world of ideas out there waiting to be plucked—and it don't mean a re-hash of the local rocker. (119)

This mimicry of traditional broadcast media may be attributed partly to the perva-

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siveness of the dominant form of the commercial broadcast style, until these culturally specific media styles and codes become "natural." It might be possible that the numerous broadcast licenses held by institutions of higher learning—and the ensuing ties to the broadcast industry—have contributed to this lack of a critical attitude. Whatever the cause, for years communication departments have served primarily as marketing analysis and pre-professional training centers for the communications industries rather than as sites where critical analysis of that system is conducted (Mosco; Lazere).

Production Codes and Hegemony

When the production canons of the mainstream media are not questioned, those codes are, at least, implicitly supported. This is best considered within the framework of Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, where the values and beliefs of the dominant group are reproduced through political, social, and cultural consolidation rather than overt political control. This incorporation takes place, in large part, through the acquiescence of cultural practitioners in the media (Gitlin) and through formal, institutionalized education (Giroux).

In such an analysis, mainstream broadcast media can be seen as part of a hegemonic process that is at once cultural and political. The media's manipulation of images and symbols becomes part of a reinforcement of the dominant culture. The result is that whether critical of the dominant media or acquiescent in its promulgation, either position has the effect of opposing or supporting the status quo. "Neutrality," or an uncritical attitude, results in the promotion of the dominant mode. Thus, there is no "neutral" video pedagogy—the act of training and the role of the educator are political.

As Len Masterman has noted, practical production work with video does not au-tomatically lead to critical thought and demystification of the media. The link between video production and a critical approach must be consciously forged by the instructor; the purpose of production is not to imitate broadcast practices, but to subject them to scrutiny (*Teaching the Media* 26). Without this critical approach, the video curriculum becomes a part of

cultural reproduction in which dominant practices become naturalised. Cultural reproduction . . . is uncritical; it enslaves rather than liberates; it freezes the impulses towards action and change; it produces deference and conformity. (27)

The Cultural Bias of Perspective

Visual representation involves the selection of shots juxtaposed with other shots, arranged in such a manner to give meaning to the sequence of images (Armes; Wollen). Someone with a specific purpose in mind, working from a specific cultural perspective, decides the selection of the various elements that make up the completed visual product—the camera does not merely "objectively" record a "true" picture of reality. Roland Barthes notes that the connotations encoded in the image are based on cultural experience. To receive meaning from the material, the viewer need only watch from the appropriate cultural perspective; to accurately decode the symbols created requires the understanding of the visual "language" used. Use of this term is appropriate: language represents a specific, culturally based manner in which to order the world. This structuring of reality is not fixed, but involves struggles between various ways of making sense of the world (Masterman, *Teaching the Media* 207).

The "language" of video is no exception. Using signs and symbols to convey meaning, video production is more than merely a manner of communicating; it is a way of perceiving reality as well (Cross 13). The language primarily used in video production was developed by a commercial system of broadcast television; it is based on a specific corporate perspective that is merely the dominant way (and not the only way) to represent reality.

Indeed, the dominant production paradigm itself is based on the cultural experience of medieval Europe. In the fifteenth century, rules for visual perspective were developed which determined the manner in which the seen world would be represented on paper. John Berger defines this convention of perspective as

center[ing] everything on the eye of the beholder. It is like a beam from a lighthouse—only instead of traveling outwards, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances *reality*. Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges on to the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. (16)

For example, these European rules of central perspective govern the norm of representing a road in a drawing. As they approach the horizon, the two lines depicting the road gradually are drawn closer together, until they meet. People with the proper cultural knowledge see a road disappearing into the distance; those without might interpret differently (see figure below). Armes terms this "the codification of the rules for duplicating reality systematically" (16). He views this culturally unique European concept of central perspective developing as a result of specific cultural needs in the fifteenth century. It also tied art to technology; lenses were later developed that conformed to central perspective rules, and the European perspective became a seemingly objective way to visually reproduce natural forms. At the same time this reproduction of reality was becoming established, western consciousness began to reshape the manner in which the physical world was perceived, and the first mass production of images started with the woodcut (Armes 15–17). Thus, photography, cinema, and television can trace their roots, and production canons, to fifteenth-century European culture.

"Perspective," Armes notes, "is best seen as a construct which satisfies our need to find order and coherence in the world" (191). Through the centuries, the constant reinforcement of this culturally defined perspective has led eventually to an uncritical approach to video production, where the "rules" have become "self-evident," unquestioned—and perpetuated.

The fact that video production conventions reflect a particular cultural view of reality has been noted by practitioners training indigenous peoples in the mechanics of video production. Video and audio trainers working with indigenous trainees have found their students structure messages that seem logical and correct from
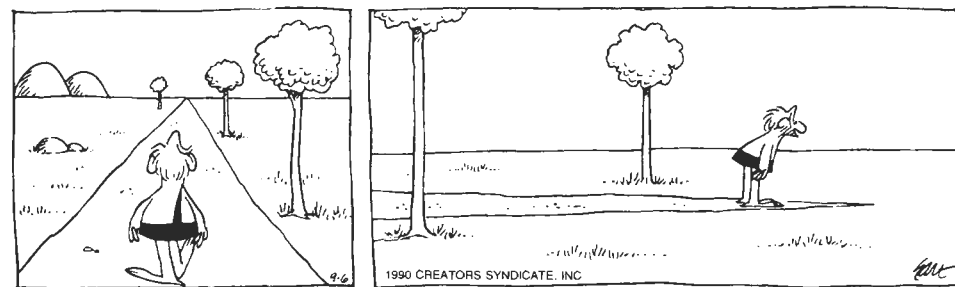
An alternative view of perspective from "B.C." Reprinted by permission of Johnny Hart and Creators Syndicate, Inc. Copyright 1990 Creators Syndicate, Inc.

the students' perspective. However, from the viewpoint of the dominant production paradigm, the programs seem "unnatural," contradicting media conventions of editing, sequencing, and rhythm (Richards; Tomaselli "Transferring"; Worth and Adair; Browne; Molnar). Tomaselli uses this information to impress upon trainers the importance of avoiding the imposition of conventional video codes on peoples having their own culturally based standards of defining reality. The same might be said to those teaching university students.

Donald Browne describes the different way Australian Aborigines see and hear their world, as reflected in their long pauses in radio broadcasts so listeners can reflect on news items (116). Helen Molnar notes the cultural sensitivity employed by video trainers in remote areas of Aboriginal Australia to encourage the development of Aboriginal program forms:

. . . the logic Aboriginal people apply to program production is quite different from the logic non-Aboriginal people apply. Their scripts do not adhere to the same flow as white scripts which go from point A to B and so on. Aborigines may start at point B, then go to point C, and then possibly back to point A. Sections of European programs that are edited out are left in by Aboriginal producers. Silence is a vital part of the Aboriginal communication process, and [Graeme] Steele says you can have two minutes of silence in a program. Europeans cut out repetitions, but each of the different ways of saying a similar thing is equally important for Aborigines and is not edited out. . . .

It is vital that European trainers bear these differences in mind, and encourage Aboriginal forms, rather than imposing on Aboriginal trainees rigid European program models. Aborigines should be able to feel confident

about producing programs that fit existing forms, and also being able to create their own new programs [sic]. (40)

Sol Worth and John Adair have documented how indigenous cultural norms are reflected in the works and production work styles of Navajo novice filmmakers. Cultural norms influenced the trainees' film works in areas such as avoidance of close-ups of people, the extensive use of jump cuts, and the focus on "*how* something happens" rather than "what will happen."

These experiments have been conducted primarily among peoples with limited exposure to television and motion pictures, rather than media-saturated students within a college or university video production class. However, the results do indicate that an awareness of the various possible ways of "seeing" the world and a sensitivity to alternative forms of video production—including those programs professionals and university video instructors might call "amateurish," "unprofessional," or "unpolished"—are the first steps toward an authentically alternative video pedagogy.

Alternative Approaches

The questions confronting those interested in establishing a critical video pedagogy are many: How do we ensure we do not merely replace one set of production conventions with another? How do we help students learn the different production styles, rather than merely lecture about these differences? How can any discussion of style take place when all students want to do is immediately learn to push buttons? Do we train students how to produce in the broadcast manner or alternative mode first? Don't they have to learn the rules first before they can break them? Where are we supposed to get samples of "quality," "uniquely" alternative programs?

Review of both the critical pedagogy and media education literature, and discussions with media educators and practitioners (through organizations such as the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers [NFLCP], Union for Democratic Communication [UDC], and University Film and Video Association [UFVA]), indicate areas of consensus, as well as some procedures that have worked for others teaching and training in video production. There seems to be general agreement that a critical video pedagogy begins with a recognition of the cultural and political nature of education, particularly as it applies to video production and media literacy.

The techniques of Paulo Freire in particular point to one alternative approach for media educators. Freire's solution to a repressive educational structure is "problem-posing": a horizontally structured participatory process, where the lines are blurred between student and teacher. What emerges is a dialectical process, where the students learn/teach and the teacher teaches/learns. The teacher listens and asks questions, but is not the provider of The Answer; students ask questions and supply possible answers, working as a group. When applied to Freire's adult literacy program, the process involves the influence of a strong moderator who helps students proceed from an acquiescent to a more critical approach to information and the structure of society. At all times the facilitator retains a respect for the experiences, intelligence, and opinions of the students. Instead of using topics and texts from outside the cultural experience of the illiterate poor, a process is utilized that allows them to draw from their daily lives. Photographs of scenes and events from their surroundings are analyzed. The meanings behind the images are then explored as the discussion revolves around the photographs' underlying "codes"— described by John Fiske as the system of signs, the rules and conventions of which are shared by members of that culture (4).

In Freire's process, discussion helps decode these signs, and clarifies the hidden system of values imbedded in the photographs. Nothing is assumed as "obvious." Freire provides an example in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where tenement residents are discussing a picture of a drunken man walking down a street where three young men are talking on the corner.

The group participants commented that "the only one there who is productive and useful to his country is the souse who is returning home after working all day because he can't take care of their needs. He is the only worker. He is a decent worker and souse like us." (111)

The facilitator had intended to discuss the problems of alcoholism. Instead, the participants moved the discussion to their own needs and experiences, taking control of the interpretation of their own cultural images. From this point, the group will learn to read based on the words and issues they themselves have raised.

Freire believes that as literacy develops, so too does a critical analysis of the forces controlling the lives of the oppressed. Empowerment ensues as the now "conscientized" understand their oppression, see their previous internalization of the values of the oppressor, and understand their ability to change the reality of their lives.

Freire's process seems ideally suited for adaptation to a video production pedagogy. Discussion, based on the students' everyday media experiences, becomes a key to uncovering the ideologies in video programs and production structures. The dominant *styles* of broadcast production are addressed, as is their relationship to the major objective of commercial broadcast television: to sell an audience to advertisers. Current broadcast production techniques are examined, as are the codes the techniques contain. Analysis includes discussion of other forms and styles used

in video, with an emphasis on CTV and video as a means of social, political, and artistic expression.

The discussion should also focus on the differences between broadcasting and the CTV and/or video as art approach—in content, technique, and consideration of the audience. The students will usually move the discussion into areas that best suit their interests and experiences, which may not always fit the agenda of the instructor. Note that, in a Freirean method, problems are identified and diagnosed by the students themselves with the assistance of, not domination by, the instructor. Again, the dialectical relationship between teacher and student blurs the traditional roles. This is a crucial point of the process—the instructor must be willing to relinquish a certain amount of control over the procedure, and be open to the personal change that he or she will probably experience. The instructor should avoid working toward any hidden agenda that fits his or her own world view or uses of media; in such a case, students will invariably just try to provide answers they believe the teacher is looking for (Buckingham). Viewpoints that include support of mainstream production techniques should be accepted, although these are open to being challenged by other students and the trainer, as are the perceptions of the instructor.

Following Freire's example, the discussion is best initiated by screening programs from commercial broadcast and alternative sources. Dominant media products can then be compared with their opposite in alternative video. The latter should be non-commercial, emphasize non-traditional production processes (such as a collective, cooperative approach rather than the traditional hierarchical practice), and provide solid examples showcasing and encouraging diverse approaches to production styles.

What are the qualities of a "good," "alternative" program? According to Peter Wollen, "A valuable work, a powerful work at least, is 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" (172).

There are a number of resources available to the instructor who desires to build a library of programs that exemplify the above attributes:

—Video art provides examples of one unique application of video; works are available for purchase or rental from a number of modern art museums (e.g., the Museum of Modern Art's Circulating Film Library in New York), or may be available from independent producers at CTV facilities or media art centers.

—Exemplary student productions are helpful, as are CTV programs that successfully break conventions—often available from the local public access facility.[5]

—Other organizations have packaged works that are available and extremely useful in the classroom: Paper Tiger Television, a video collective in New York, has been producing community-oriented programs since 1981. The "hand made," "down home" look of the programs is intended to provide a model of alternative production techniques, while the content focuses on "smashing the myths of the information industry" (Halleck; Taubin). Paper Tiger also conducts training workshops for institutions and organizations attempting to break out of the conventions of broadcast television.

—Deep Dish Television, an offshoot of Paper Tiger, gathers access programs from throughout the U.S., packages them according to themes, and distributes them by satellite to access channels and reception sites across the country.

—Martha Stuart Communications "Village Video Network" library contains programs produced by Third World villagers that often offer a unique view of the world.

—The International Media Exchange Directory (Helmerson) lists international community program producers and users willing to share tapes; such programs provide excellent examples of the culturally defined ways in which reality can be represented on video.

The addresses of these and other sources of programming and information are listed in the appendix.

There seems to be general agreement among critical video educators and trainers that discussion ideally takes place before equipment is approached, so the tools and processes can be placed in the proper perspective. Attempting discussions after students have learned equipment operation is not recommended; attitudes have already been set that usually conform to the established broadcast mode of production. This is one reason the workshops conducted by Paper Tiger Television proceed from an initial critique of the broadcast model and alternatives, to equipment training, at the same time emphasizing the collective nature of the production process (Marcus). As noted by Paul Beaud, " 'First learning to use the tool before controlling it' is very often a way of preventing such control from ever being established" (174). In higher education, having students imitate the "normal" method of video production before letting them explore the "other" production styles serves to legitimize the dominant production method, as well as the educational system that promotes the "tradition" (Grover).

Another approach, for those whose curricular structure precludes the possibility of commencing with comparisons between dominant and alternative media, provides for discussion to take place after students learn the technical operation of basic equipment (such as microphones, cameras, and switchers). This discussion occurs before students learn to use equipment or assume positions that involve the actual production of programs (such as directing or editing)—advanced positions that are actively engaged in representing reality through the construction of a sequence of images.

An alternative approach to production pedagogy allows students the opportunity to experiment with equipment and develop their own styles before learning the canons of traditional broadcast production. This helps present all production styles as valid, depending upon the producers' intent. In this case, the mainstream mode becomes yet another option, rather than "The Law."

This means that, within the university, exercises and projects should stress process over product; the method used to arrive at the completed project should be considered as much as, or more than, the project itself. Informal exercises that encourage experimentation and allow for failure are important. Projects might include the creation of a variety of programs intended for CTV, personal or collective expression, socially oriented intergroup communication, institutional or corporate video, or broadcast. In this manner, video production can be appreciated as a "style" rather than a fixed set of rules. Masterman's *Teaching About Television* and *Teaching the Media* contain a number of exercises for "reading" television; many are adaptable to "writing" television as well.

These suggestions are a result of experimentation by and discussion among video and film theorists and educators, as well as CTV trainers. A continued dialogue regarding the role of the university video curriculum is certainly in order, as is discussion of successful educational and CTV training strategies.

Summary

Video education is essentially a political activity. It involves sharing selected information and empowering students to structure reality in their own manner through representation in images—none of which is neutral. Perceptions of reality, or "ways of seeing," are based on individual and group experiences and culture. The representation of images in video are also culturally based; they follow guidelines and standardized formats established with specific cultural and economic purposes in mind. If one does not work actively against the canons of visual representation, or at a minimum question them, one is working to support the existing methods of shaping reality. Therefore, the education of students in video production is a political activity that is either in support of, or in opposition to, existing video production standards as established by the commercial broadcast industries.

This analysis of current video education represents only a step toward the development of an alternative, critical video pedagogy. Discussions involving university instructors and CTV facilitators reveal the need for such an approach to video instruction. Organizations such as the Union for Democratic Communications, University Film and Video Association, and National Federation of Local Cable Programmers have encouraged exchanges between academics and practitioners; it is within this multidisciplinary context that a critical video pedagogy is likely to emerge.

Notes

[1] This article is drawn from "Video Training as Political Act: Implications for Community Television and Higher Education," a paper presented at the annual conference of the Union for Democratic Communication, University of California at San Diego, October 11–14, 1990. I am grateful for comments on the paper provided by Alan O'Connor, Dee Dee Halleck, Stephen Acker, Dirk Koning, David Sholle, and Brenda Dervin.

[2] While Raymond Williams's definition of "cultural form" allows for the integration of both structure and content, most persons involved in audio and video production use "form" to refer exclusively to the structure of a program or medium. This definition is employed throughout this article.

[3] I am basically continuing a longstanding discussion that has taken place among educators and community television practitioners in organizations such as the Union for Democratic Communications (UDC), the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers (NFLCP), and the University Film and Video Association (UFVA), as well as in publications such as *Screen* (formerly *Screen Education*).

[4] Discussion of the CTV aspect in video training is covered more fully in the paper from which this article is drawn. For further information on the history of CTV in the United States, particularly as it involves the NFLCP—an organization dedicated to promoting the use of community cable channels—see Bednarozyk, Buske, Huie, Janes, and Stoney.

The history of independent, alternative video in the United States has been traced by Mellencamp, Boyle, and Armstrong. The emergence of video as an art form is detailed by Davis and Simmons, Schneider and Korot, Youngblood, and Price. These sources detail a rich history of active resistance to the domination of the mainstream broadcast television outlets, and the beginnings of what has become an established alternative distribution system, primarily through cable television.

[5] Obviously, the fact that a program is cablecast on a public access channel does not automatically qualify it for "alternative" status. CTV trainers suffer many of the same problems as university media educators—in particular, the difficulty of recognizing how deeply all of us have internalized the dominant production paradigm.

During the judging for a community television national video competition in 1990, one of the judges noted how, of the categories "nonprofessional" and "professional," the nonprofessional entries more often spoke directly to the heart and soul of the viewer. Often, the professionals had less to say, but said it better—technically. We shouldn't have been too surprised: many of the professional staff at CTV facilities come from or aspire to broadcast television careers; even more probably attended production courses at colleges and universities. What is remarkable is that more than a few of these CTV trainers were able to shake off their conditioning to help community producers accomplish a different manner of "see-ing the world" through video. Hopefully, we can do as much within higher education.

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Appendix: Sources of Information and Programming

National Federation of Local Cable Programmers
P.O. Box 27290
Washington, DC 20038–7290
(202) 393–2650

Paper Tiger Television
339 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10012
(212) 420–9045

Deep Dish Television
339 Lafayette Street
New York, NY 10012
(212) 473–8933

International Media Exchange Directory
Access Columbus Television
394 Oak Street
Columbus, OH 43215
(614) 224–2288

Martha Stuart Communications
Village Video Network Library
147 West 22nd Street
New York, NY 10011
(212) 255–2718

Museum of Modern Art
Circulating Film Library
11 West 53rd Street
New York, NY 10019
(212) 708–9530

Union for Democratic Communications
P.O. Box 1220
Berkeley, CA 94701

University Film and Video Association
School of Cinema-Television
Univ. of Southern California
University Park, MC 2212
Los Angeles, CA 90089