

VIDEO AND THE REST OF THE WORLD

—by Ed Janzen

A popular set of global statistics circulating about the Web these days puts the proposition, “If the world had only 100 people,” how many would be Americans, how many Africans, how many women, and so on. Some figures are high and some are low, but the most striking statistic in this calculus is that only one person owns a computer.

Surely, then, less than one owns a camcorder?

But increasingly people do. Musician Peter Gabriel first noticed this in the late eighties, when, on Amnesty International’s Human Rights Now tour, he encountered activists who were beginning to use video to tell their stories. Not so long after that, on March 3, 1991, George Holliday, an ordinary American who had purchased a camcorder to record family occasions, made history by spontaneously shooting footage of white Los Angeles police officers beating a black man, Rodney King, crystallizing for many viewers a regime of police brutality they’d never before experienced so viscerally.

Inspired by the potentials in these two phenomena, in 1992 Gabriel teamed up with the Lawyer’s Committee on Human Rights and the Reebok Fund for Human Rights to found Witness, an organization designed to explore the possibilities of video to contribute to human-rights struggles.

Witness started off simply giving video equipment to its cooperating organizations, but soon found that, without a more comprehensive strategy, simply making video wasn’t enough. “Rodney King was an aberration,” Witness program manager Sam Gregory told me. “You don’t usually get your footage on CNN and global television. In fact, most of the time the media is not at all interested in human-rights footage.”

Consequently the organization turned toward a two-pronged approach, including training and strategy. A limited number of groups are now selected for assistance based on whether or not video will make a difference in their campaigns. Teaching people how to shoot videos is important, but the strategy is even more so: exactly what will it take for a particular video project to be seen by UN bodies and government decision-makers?

Not surprisingly, then, the documentary format enjoys pride of place in Witness’s work, “a reflection of the fact,” says Gregory, “that we come from a human-rights world, where truth and validity in what we present is absolutely crucial. If you use storytelling obviously you draw on personal stories, you draw on narratives. You tell a story, but you tell it in a rigorously truthful way.”

But other formats can be effective, too. Among the Burmese refugees along the Burma-Thailand border, for example — where Witness runs one of its programs — young activists traveling from camp to camp show locally produced videos produced in soap-opera format as a way to communicate with refugee popula-

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tions that frequently feel frustrated, disengaged and disempowered.

In addition to a solid basis in fact, Witness-sponsored video projects are often highly portable. In a sponsored project in the eastern Congo focused on child soldiering, human-rights organizers simply pack the video equipment in the back of a car and drive it from place to place.

I asked Gregory if Witness’s focus on video, as opposed to film, was deliberate. He identified technological accessibility as a key, determining factor. “Almost anywhere now in the world you can buy a mini-dv tape in a reasonably sized town — where you’d have trouble finding 8-mm or 16-mm [film stock].” Two other things he didn’t mention were desktop video-editing suites and the lack of a need for a big production crew.

In many respects the story of what’s been happening in video in developing countries can be neatly framed as the story of what happened between the first and second Palestinian intifadas. Besides some mainly theatrical stone throwing, the first intifada (1987-90) was basically a popularly organized, economically based event, featuring boycotts of Israeli products, sit-down strikes and non-cooperation activism. It could also be said that the First Intifada was basically an “analog” intifada, meaning that the news coverage the Palestinians sought was still provided by traditional (typically Western) news outlets with proprietary control over the given medium’s technology.

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The second “al-Aqsa” intifada (2000-05) came to be known for reduced popular/democratic involvement and an increase in armed violence. But one important part of that story has rarely been told. With the al-Aqsa Intifada media watchers certainly saw a great many images of young Palestinian men shooting guns, willing to sacrifice themselves in combat. But what those audiences didn’t see were a lot of other young Palestinian men (and women) shooting camcorders.

For the first time, Palestinians were able to tell their own stories — a digital intifada. Indeed, all but a few Palestinian “filmmakers” are, in fact, videographers — though you’d never know it from their increasingly long lists of film-festival awards and acclamations.

The accessibility of video technology keeps arising as an issue, raising interesting comparisons with video in the “developed” countries. Video artists in northern countries have long been attracted to video’s accessibility, especially those speaking from a feminist perspective who in the 1960s found themselves frozen out of traditional art media by the patriarchal European and North American art-gallery cultures.

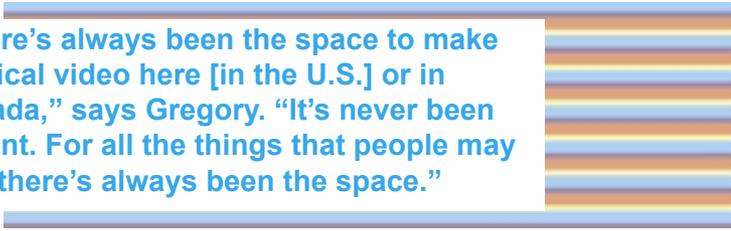
In southern countries, however, accessibility is a concept located in a game of even higher stakes. “There’s always been the space to make political video here [in the U.S.] or in Canada,” says Gregory. “It’s never been absent. For all the things that people may say, there’s always been the space.”

But in places like Jogjakarta, Indonesia — home to a burgeoning political video

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culture — the ability to express political dissent through video is a novelty. “It’s now probably only one generation,” says Gregory, “who are just searching into that space and are saying here are the digital tools, here’s a chance to tell fiction, to tell documentary and who try to use it within their own generation and to infiltrate the mainstream — ten or fifteen years it takes like that.”

Then again, there are plenty of people living in northern nations who experience “southern” conditions when it comes to making their voices heard. For this reason, Witness currently sponsors projects in Croatia on people suffering with mental disabilities; in Bulgaria on its Roma minority population; and in the U.S. on the Mexico-U.S. border and the now-infamous “rendition” of terrorism suspects to foreign countries to undergo torture.



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I asked Gregory if the success of high-profile documentaries like Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9-11* or Morgan Spurlock’s *Super Size Me* supplied motivation to videographers and documentarists in southern countries. He admitted that some producers must have been inspired by such commercial documentary successes. But in the global South, the video phenomenon isn’t about a few documentary stars. (Nor — lest readers be deceived by the focus of this article — is it about Witness itself, a relatively small organization run out of New York City sponsoring only twelve or thirteen projects at any given time.)

“It’s about hundreds of thousands of people producing video; it’s not about one movie,” Gregory said. “It’s not about one movie made in Nigeria, one movie made in Indonesia, one movie made in the U.S.” Rather, it’s about “cultures of storytelling and storytelling around human rights, which are looking for a space to be heard — and also for a space to take action.”

The potential of video in the global South is already huge, and, as practices like video blogging and on-line video sharing take hold (check out globalvoicesonline.org, for example) a whole culture of political storytelling and resistance is springing up. Witness is planning its own contribution to this movement: a human-rights video hub, to which users will be able to upload human-rights-related footage. A pilot site is planned for this September.

I dared to suggest a comparison with YouTube. “A YouTube for human rights, in some ways,” admitted Gregory. “But with the crucial added element that it will have tools for action.”

STILLNESS AND MOVEMENT BETWEEN VIDEO ART CINEMA AND PHOTOGRAPHY

—by Elena Marcheschi

How many directions and interpretations for this magma of electronic images and sounds called “video” — always ready to change, move, stop, convert, reverse, multiply, destroy, recreate itself? Since its origin critics, academics and curators have tried to organize their definition of video.

I like to think video is a form of technological resilience to human imagination and perversion, an endless exercise of research for a new perception of time and space, drowning glances in what’s outside us and plunging movements into a psychological, interior dimension. It can be nothing — or everything — pure creativity, art for art’s sake, new *avant-garde* that renews itself as passing time. Video will keep on revealing its ability to contain every language and to create its own communication through its capacity to establish dialogues, invade territories, develop metamorphoses. We are in a world of technological images. Video was not alone at its birth; it couldn’t think only by itself, it had to confront, to look around. But, thanks to its electronic nature, it had the chance to borrow what it liked and reject what it didn’t.

Video art caresses and smacks photography and cinema at the same time, looking for a new direction and definition of vision, flirting with still images from one side and with movement from the other. Both these issues — relations between stillness and movement — were discussed at the Magis–Gradisca International Film Studies Spring School (March 31 to April 8, 2006, Gradisca d’Isonzo, Italy) mainly through Philippe Dubois’s workshop, “Les mouvements improbables,” which arose out of a curatorial exhibition experience Dubois made in Brazil in 2003.

Starting from the assumption that movement defines our relations with the world (which we confront in all centuries’ philosophical research, from Greek thinkers to contemporaries like Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, etc.), artists’ research of the “moving image” today focuses on the notion of temporary and spatial limits through a never-ending questioning of human perception’s capacities. If stillness and movement converge in images, letting the spectator wonder about what is still and what is moving, this specific process leads us back at the origin of images’ technological reproduction, from photography’s fixity to the magic of “fixity’s movement” in cinema, while video language naturally covers the distance between those media.

Muybridge’s studies upon *planches* of different life situations concentrated on