



**THIRD WORLD NEWSREEL**  
Reflections on Progressive Media  
Since 1968

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>1. <i>TWN Fifty Years</i>.....</b>	<b>4</b>
JT Takagi, 2018	
<b>2. <i>Foreword</i>.....</b>	<b>7</b>
Luna Olavarría Gallegos, 2015	
<b>3. <i>Introduction</i>.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Cynthia Young, 1998	
 <b>NEWSREEL</b>	
<b>4. <i>On Radical Newsreel</i>.....</b>	<b>12</b>
Jonas Mekas, c. 1968	
<b>5. <i>Newsreel: A Report</i>.....</b>	<b>14</b>
Leo Braudy, 1969	
<b>6. <i>Newsreel on Newsreel</i>.....</b>	<b>19</b>
Norm Fruchter, Marilyn Buck, Karen Ross and Robert Kramer, 1968	
<b>7. <i>The Woman's Film</i>.....</b>	<b>27</b>
Louise Alaimo, Judith Smith and Ellen Sorin	
<b>8. <i>Los Angeles Newsreel</i>.....</b>	<b>32</b>
David E. James, 1999	
 <b>EARLY THIRD WORLD NEWSREEL</b>	
<b>9. <i>An Interview With Christine Choy</i>.....</b>	<b>44</b>
Scott MacDonald (with collaborators Allan Siegel, Worth Long and Renee Tajima), 1999	
<b>10. <i>An Interview with Allan Siegel</i>.....</b>	<b>65</b>
Jacqueline Stewart, 1999	
<b>11. <i>Newsreel Old and New: Towards a Historical Profile</i>.....</b>	<b>90</b>
Michael Renov, 1987	
<b>12. <i>Filmography</i>.....</b>	<b>107</b>

# TWENTY FIFTY YEARS

JT Takagi, 2019

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"We live in a world full of the most intense contradictions, and we must find ways to use the best we have - ourselves, our work, to bridge those contradictions, to learn the lessons that those contradictions teach. And that is the work of the poet within each one of us - to envision what has not yet been - and to work with every fiber of who we are, to make the reality pursuit of those visions irresistible."

*Audre Lorde*

"The revolution that takes place in your head, nobody will ever see that."

*Gil Scott-Heron*

In 1967 when some 60 filmmakers met in the now legendary Jonas Mekas' loft and formed The Newsreel, the US was fighting a losing war in Vietnam, and protest movements here were growing against that war, against racial and class oppression both at home and abroad, and women were organizing for their liberation. The Newsreel was established in 1968 to be part of those efforts and an organized agitprop arm of the radical movement for change in the world. Soon after its inception, Newsreel chapters formed across the country, from Boston to Detroit to San Francisco, with chapters even in Tokyo and Mexico City.

During that time, Newsreel filmmakers produced numerous B&W 16mm films, mostly shorts that documented activism and analyzed the roots of the conflicts here in the US and in the Third World. A typical Newsreel film featured a machine gun audio background for its NEWSREEL logo, and made sure the viewer knew who the enemy was, what people were doing about it, and aimed to inspire one's participation in the movement. Newsreel cared little

about following film “rules”, sometimes on purpose and sometimes due to lack of equipment, tried to avoid heroizing individuals, and rarely credited the makers except as the Newsreel collective.

Newsreel also became a distributor by necessity – besides showing their own films, the group helped to show films from Vietnam, China, Cuba, North Korea, and from various national liberation struggles in Africa and Latin America. This, at a time when such media could not legally be brought into the US and media meant heavy, 16mm film reels. This, at a time when there were only three TV channels, no internet, and no accessible way to view non-mainstream media, so showing a radical film sometimes meant carrying the film reel and a projector and finding a wall in order to screen it.

By the early 1970’s the New York chapter of Newsreel became Third World Newsreel, became a non-profit and focused on media by and about diverse peoples and social justice issues. That is when the organization began producing and supporting films primarily by and about people of color, with women of color at its helm, remaining progressive at its core.

Flash forward to 2018 – as Third World Newsreel (TWN) celebrates its 50th Anniversary. Since the 1970s, the organization has worked in educational distribution and has produced numerous long format documentaries as well as shorts, many of which have aired on public television. Among our signature Third World Newsreel films is *A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde* (1996), which looks at the life of this groundbreaking Black, feminist, lesbian poet, mother and activist. This film not only evokes the art and genius of Audre, but realizes the continuing mission of TWN, bringing the voices of under-represented communities to the fore, and hopefully, motivating the next generation to remake society.



*A Litany for Survival: The Life and Work of Audre Lorde*, Ada Gay Griffin/Michelle Parkerson, Third World Newsreel, 1996.

Besides distribution and production, TWN has trained thousands of emerging progressive filmmakers of color through its various workshops

and programs. Its 41 year old TWN Production Workshop has graduated many award winning filmmakers that produce social issue media while collecting Oscar and Emmy nominations at the same time. In addition, TWN also runs the free TWN Evening seminars on a range of production topics aimed at emerging makers of color, as well as free community media workshops for immigrant groups, seniors and youth.

Finally, during the past decade, TWN has been working to preserve its older films and in doing so, is finding that many of its late 1960s and early 1970s collection remains painfully relevant. From Newsreel’s *Black Panther (Off the Pig)* (1968) and *Janie’s Janie* (1971), many

of our films show the direct line from the 1960s struggles to Black Lives Matter and the #Me-Too movement, with lessons and stories to be mined from these documents. For example, in *Break and Enter (1971)*, Newsreel followed “Operation Move-in” as mostly Latinx families, pushed out of their homes due to gentrification (called “urban renewal” at the time), fought back by moving into empty buildings on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. This film works as a call to action now, when almost every neighborhood is threatened by developers, an inspiring guide to organizing and the idea of people gaining control of their communities.

The current period has proved to be a time of increasing struggle in this country, and we are all being called to fight for the rights of people of color, to end state violence, to stop all wars and prevent a potential nuclear one, to preserve the rights of women and LGBTQ people to their own bodies and lives, and to work for a new society where working people can live, work and thrive.

This was the battle in 1968, when Newsreel was formed – and possibly to the surprise of our founding members – remains the battle. While the weapons we use have changed – from 16mm cameras to digital camcorders and cell phones, from projecting film prints to streaming, the effort to open eyes, change minds, and instigate people to action remains the same.

We’re pleased to present an updated and revised version of the 2008 digital monograph of articles by and about Newsreel and Third World Newsreel, which we hope gives viewers and readers, cineastes and activists a sense of the political, historical and artistic context for our films.

We hope you make the best use of the materials we offer – and in the end, that means doing more than just watching our films.

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JT Takagi is an award winning filmmaker, sound engineer, educator and the Executive Director of Third World Newsreel (twn.org), the alternative media center that trains, distributes, produces and acts as fiscal sponsor for media by and about people of color and social justice issues. Takagi’s films focus on Asia, Asian American and immigrant issues and include four national PBS airings. Among her recent work are web documentaries on [legaciesofthekoreanwar.org](http://legaciesofthekoreanwar.org), co-produced/co-directed with Deann Borshay Liem, and consultant producing for *Resistance at Tule Lake* by Konrad Aderer; her recent sound credits include the Oscar nominated and Emmy winning *Strong Island*, *Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* and *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart and Maynard*. Ms. Takagi teaches at the City College of NY and the School of Visual Arts MFA Social Documentary Program.

# FOREWORD

Luna Olavarría Gallegos, 2015

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*Make-Out* (1970) took me by surprise. While going through Third World Newsreel films from the 60s, 70s, and 80s to include in this monograph—a project that was part of my work as a summer college intern in 2015—I came across the 1970 first-person narrative of a teenage girl and boy hooking up.

The five minute movie shows a couple making out in a car as we hear the girl's inner thoughts. Everything from the dress she saw earlier that day to irritation with her partner's aggressive tongue cross her mind— seemingly everything except for "I like this." The reason *Make-Out* resonated with me was that I have heard this narrative before. Too many of my friends have recounted similar experiences where men they are intimately involved with seem unaware of a lack of connection with their partners. The girl's boredom, anxiety and annoyance are emotions too common for situations like this— an issue the film brings up with the question she asks herself, "do all girls have to go through this?"

While reading an article about the film, I learned that it was created during the early second wave women's movement, documenting not only a new set of gender issues, but reflecting the concerns of feminist women within Newsreel who wrote, directed and produced the film. The script itself was generated by feminist discussion groups, which made me realize that perhaps some discussions of oppression that these women filmmakers were documenting remain relevant—including what consent is, and whether or not women in this society have true autonomy. Today, surrounded by more media than ever largely created by a capitalist patriarchy, I wonder whether or not my decision to say "yes" is ever my own, and how much power I actually have.

*Make-Out* reminds me that these kinds of stories are as true for people today as they were in the 70s—and that these conversations are multigenerational. But for the most part, films



*Make-Out* (Newsreel #49), Newsreel, 1970.

on these issues don't reach my generation. My generation is impatient and quick and a lot of us grew up with a basic understanding of sexism and racism. Art needs to grab us in order to get our attention. As we develop in a world with so much to consume, art and media needs to be clever, impactful and often times short. This is a lot to ask for but *Make-Out* hit the nail on the head—in fact, I can't think of a situation better at describing a patriarchal society steeped in fear of emotions, trust and communication than a make out session in which a man is un-

aware of the lack of connection and the possibility of mutual pleasure, and which in its worst incarnation could be viewed as date-rape.

The film is important as it tackles themes that continue to be prevalent five decades later, and the simple monologue is effective in raising questions about masculinity, hook up culture, defining progress, and what consent really means in a heteronormative and sexist society.

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**MAKE OUT is available for free viewing on Third World Newsreel's Vimeo Channel: <https://vimeo.com/thirdworldnewsreel/makeout>.**

Born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico in a bicultural Puerto Rican/New Mexican household, Luna Olavarría Gallegos is a writer, organizer and technologist who works around themes of digital labor, diaspora and a Latin American identity beyond a myth of mestizaje. Last April, she launched the multimedia project and album developed in Havana, Cuba— AfroRazones— a contemporary Black archive. As a curator/producer, she has organized panels, showcases, film festivals and museum exhibitions that have highlighted the work and critical movements of Black and Latin American artists and movements. Her written pieces on music, race and technology have been published in outlets including *The Guardian*, *The Fader* and *Remezcla*. In 2016, she co-founded GET ARTISTS PAID, a group dedicated to confronting the issues of unjust payment in the art and media worlds, alongside Ada Rajkovic. This same group has transformed into the platform ART EXIT, which critiques and educates around the destruction brought on by a global elite and defends the rights of independent artists, specifically women, queers, Black, Latino and Indigenous people, and people with less resources. Luna is currently a graduate student at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program.



# INTRODUCTION

Cynthia Young, 1998

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Thirty-one years ago, 60 underground filmmakers and student activists assembled in New York City to discuss making a film of the Pentagon protest. Angered at the mainstream media's misrepresentation of the event, they gathered to consider pooling their resources in order to create a counter-document of the demonstration. That December evening, debate raged long into the night. The group considered everything from what footage should be included to how to distribute the finished product, recognizing that independent film production necessitated alternative distribution networks. When the dust finally settled, participants had done much more than iron out the logistics of a film project; they had founded Newsreel, an organization that would spark an activist film movement.

*Third World Newsreel: Thirty Years of Media and Politics on the Left* explores the rich history of that film collective from its origins in the social movements of the 1960s to its present day role as an important producer, exhibitor and distributor of film and video by media makers of color. Including interviews with Allan Siegel, Norm Fruchter, Christine Choy, three of Newsreel's seminal members, and articles by renowned film scholars, Michael Renov and David James, this anthology provides new insight into the political battles and aesthetic debates that animated the group. In one sense, *Third World Newsreel* is an institutional history, but it is also much more than that, for the collective's history has always been intricately intertwined with the shifts in the US political and cultural landscape. As a result, this anthology reflects upon the tumultuous political changes that have transformed the US in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The March on the Pentagon, the draft card riots, the student takeover at Columbia

University, the bombing of Hanoi, the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, Students for a Democratic Society. The Newsreel lens captured many of the people and events that defined a decade, and by the beginning of 1968, Newsreel had become the filmmaking arm of the New Left. With branches in every major city including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Chicago and Boston, films such as *Columbia Revolt*, *No Game*, *America 68*, *Black Panther*, *El Pueblo Se Levanta* and *The Woman's Film* screened in outdoor parks, church basements, union halls, at political meetings, and even Woodstock. Resembling battle footage, shot in grainy, black and white, 16mm film with inconsistent sound and unusual editing, Newsreel films represented a direct assault on Hollywood's standards of narrative style and visual pleasure. Disseminating images and information censored from the nightly news, Newsreel's style and subject matter helped to create what critic Michael Renov has rightly called the "political imaginary of the New Left," crafting a generation's political and cultural agenda. Newsreel films, according to San

Francisco Newsreel members Marilyn Buck and Karen Ross, were a "way for film-makers and radical organizer-agitators to break into the consciousness of the people." They confounded expectations, encouraged viewer identification, capturing and sometimes inspiring radical participation.



The Newsreel logo, c. 1970.

By 1970, however, most New Left organizations had either begun to transform themselves or disband altogether, and Newsreel was no exception. In fact, most of New York Newsreel's founding members began

departing to pursue individual film projects or political organizing. This exodus coincided with internal demands from Christine Choy, Susan Robeson, Robert Zellner and other members of color for increased power within the organization. Before long, New York Newsreel metamorphosed into Third World Newsreel, displaying a renewed commitment to training filmmakers of color and representing urban communities. Establishing a production workshop and its own theater, while producing such groundbreaking films as *Teach Our Children*, *From Spikes to Spindles* and *Percussion, Impressions and Reality*, Third World Newsreel became an integral part of a US Third World Left active during the 1970s.

An important counterpart to the New Left, this group of cultural and political activists, many of them New Left veterans, expressed their solidarity with Third World liberation movements, likening the problems of their communities—racial discrimination, police brutality, economic exploitation—to those of colonized (or formerly colonized) nations. Inspired by the Cuban and Chinese revolutions and vehemently opposed to US involvement in Southeast Asia, US Third World Leftists founded the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and participated in the series of Third World strikes at San Francisco State and Berkeley. They also spearheaded organizing efforts in local Chinatowns, in 1999, the health care

able housing and economic justice. Just as Newsreel was the mouthpiece for the New Left, Third World Newsreel shaped and articulated the issues of critical import to US Third World Leftists. For the first time, *Third World Newsreel: Thirty Years of Media and Politics on the Left* enables both participants and observers to consider the group's transition from a new Left to a US Third World Left institution.

Despite the political reversals of the last twenty years, Third World Newsreel has increased its commitment to social justice and independent media-making. Expanding its distribution network and curating touring exhibitions such as the successful "D'Ghetto Eyes," Third World Newsreel continues to showcase work from established and emergent film and video makers of color. By distributing award-winning directors Christine Choy, Isaac Julien, Julie Dash, Michelle Parkerson, J.T. Takagi, and Charles Burnett, and creating avenues for lesser known artists such as Daresha Kyi, Cyrille Phipps, Cheryl Dunye, Randy Redroad, and Renee Tajima, the organization has influenced the future direction of independent media. Opposing right wing efforts to censor what audiences see on their televisions, in art galleries and in their local theaters, Third World Newsreel has undertaken the battle for a progressive arts policy and a just social order.

On the occasion of Third World Newsreel's 30th anniversary, it seems only fitting that we celebrate and critically consider the group's past, present and future impact on independent media-making and political activism. Through historical documents, never before published interviews, and critical essays, *Third World Newsreel: Thirty Years of Media and Politics on the Left* evaluates the group's various transitions, providing key insight into both the potential and limitations of media activism. Long overdue, this anthology is an invaluable resource for film scholars, artists and media activists, and anyone interested in the history of US social movements, the development of cutting edge film and video and the preservation of public access to independent progressive film and video.

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Young is the author of *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Duke UP), which looks at the influence of Third World anti-colonialism on activists, writers and filmmakers of color in the 1960s and 1970s. The project earned her fellowships from the Ford and Mellon Foundations. She is the author of articles, reviews and short essays in several journals including *American Quarterly*, *New Labor Forum*, *Disposition*, *American Literature*, *Cinema Journal* and *Journal of Visual Culture*. She also recently co-edited with Min Song a forum for *American Quarterly* entitled "Whiteness Redefined or Redux?"

Her current manuscript, *Terror Wars-Culture Wars: Race, Popular Culture and the Civil Rights Legacy After 9/11* considers the contours of popular culture and contemporary discourse in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Of particular interest are questions of black citizenship and immigrant exclusion. She considers a range of texts in order to decipher how African Americans are being reinscribed as ideal citizens in contrast to new Asian, Arab and Latino/a immigrants who are positioned as inherently suspicious and inassimilable. The project has been supported by a fellowship at Harvard University's Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History.

# ON RADICAL NEWSREEL

Jonas Mekas

c. 1968

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December 22 will go into the history books of cinema. Some thirty filmmakers—cameramen, editors, soundmen, directors—gathered at the Film-Makers' Cinematheque and created a radical film newsreel service. The same day a very significant coincidence occurred: On our way home, in the evening papers, we read the headline—"Universal Newsreel Service Closes."

The new Newsreel service is still in organizational stages, it needs money very badly, but the first newsreels should be out sometime this week. Not even the name of the service is fixed as yet, proposals going from the Guerrilla Newsreel to the Radical Newsreel to just simply the Newsreel. But whatever the name, the time is really ripe for it. What will the new Newsreel do? I will quote here some of the half-official announcements:

The Newsreel is a radical news service whose purpose is to provide an alternative to the limited and biased coverage of television news. The news that we feel is significant—any event that suggests the changes and redefinitions taking place in America today, or that underlines the necessity for such changes—has been consistently undermined and suppressed by the media. Therefore we have formed an organization to serve the needs of people who want to get hold of news that is relevant to their own activity and thought. The Newsreel is the cooperative effort of many young film-makers who have been documenting independently whatever they considered "news." Most of their footage has had no outlet, and some has not been seen. The Newsreel will be such an outlet and will make several types of news film:

short newsreels which will appear every week or so; longer, more analytic documentaries;

informational and tactical films.

The Newsreel films will reflect the viewpoints of its members, but will be aimed at those we consider our primary audiences: all people working for change, students, organizations in ghettos and other depressed areas, and anyone who is not and cannot be satisfied by the news film available through establishment channels. We intend to cover demonstrations; to interview figures like LeRoi Jones and Garrison; we want to show what is at stake in a housing eviction or in consumer abuses in Harlem; we should provide information on how to deal with the police or on the geography of Chicago.

Films made by the Newsreel are not to be seen once and forgotten. Once a print goes out, it becomes a tool to be used by others in their own work, to serve as a basis for their own definition and analysis of the society. Part of our function, therefore, is to provide information on how to project films in nontheatrical settings—on the sides of holdings, etc. We hope that whoever receives our films will show them to other local groups as well, thus creating an expanding distribution network. We shall also encourage the formation of similar newsreel groups in other parts of the country, so that there can be a continual interchange of news films, whereby people in Oakland can see what happens in New York and vice versa.

Films may be obtained from the Newsreel in the following ways: 1. Free of charge to community organizing groups that cannot afford to pay for prints; 2. On a regular subscription basis to film clubs, national organizations theatres, etc., who will pay for the cost of prints plus handling charges; 3. By renting back prints of the Newsreel in a package; 4. By renting whatever foreign or other documentary films we have compiled.

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Filmmaker Jonas Mekas was born in Lithuania in 1922. Mekas' film *The Brig* was awarded the Grand Prize at the Venice Film Festival in 1963. Other films include *Walden* (1969), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (1972), *Lost Lost Lost* (1975), *Scenes from the Life of Andy Warhol* (1990), *Scenes from the Life of George Maciunas* (1992), *As I was Moving Ahead I saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000), *Letter from Greenpoint* (2005), *Sleepless Nights Stories* (2011) and *Out-takes from the Life of a Happy Man*. In 2007, he completed a series of 365 short films released on the internet—one film every day—and since then has continued to share new work on his website, [www.jonasmekas.com](http://www.jonasmekas.com).

In 1954, Mekas and his brother Adolfas Mekas, started *Film Culture* magazine, which soon became the most important film publication in the United States. In 1958 he began his legendary *Movie Journal* column in the *Village Voice*. In 1962 he founded the Film-Makers' Cooperative, and in 1964 the Film-Makers' Cinematheque, which eventually grew into *Anthology Film Archives*, one of the world's largest and most important repositories of avant-garde cinema, and a screening venue. To this date, he has published more than 20 books of prose and poetry, which have been translated into over a dozen languages. His Lithuanian poetry is now part of Lithuanian classic literature and his films can be found in leading museums around the world. He is largely credited for developing the diaristic forms of cinema. Mekas has also been active as an academic, teaching at the New School for Social Research, the International Center for Photography, Cooper Union, New York University, and MIT.

Since 2000, Mekas has expanded his work into the area of film installations, exhibiting at the Serpentine Gallery, the Centre Pompidou, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Moderna Museet (Stockholm), PS1 Contemporary Art Center MoMA, Documenta of Kassel, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, and the Venice Biennale.

# NEWSREEL: A REPORT

Leo Braudy

*Film Quarterly*, Volume 21, Number 2

Winter 1968-69

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"... What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form. Works of art which lack artistic quality have no force, however progressive they are politically... We must carry on a struggle on two fronts."

*Mao Tse-Tung, quoted at various moments by Kirilov and Véronique in La Chinoise*

In the approximately nine months of its existence, New York Newsreel has completed fifteen films, with several more almost ready for release. The films are frequently very good and always interesting, although sometimes much good will is necessary to disentangle the web of aesthetics and politics at a particular film's center. But Newsreel shows in general a vital and aggressive willingness to experiment with traditional documentary methods in a concerted effort to work "on two fronts" and integrate its political commitment with the movie-making techniques.

The earlier Newsreels are closer to usual documentary form. They do imply that the viewer has some knowledge, for example, of the antiwar, anti-draft movement. But they generally take the expository approach dictated by the documentary assumption "I was there and you weren't." This method is best exemplified by *Boston Draft Resistance Group*, done mostly in synchronized sound with some narration that describes and explains the group's activities. It is clean and straightforward in a kind of BBC manner that perfectly suits the incessant reasonableness of the Boston Draft Resistance Group's arguments and their decision to look

fresh faced and shorn. This familiarly professional documentary form (even down to the detailed credits, the only such in the Newsreels I have seen) with its radical content is one way of attacking the problem.

Two less successful films about draft resistance are *Chomsky* and *Resist and the New England Resistance*. The frame of the first is an interview with Noam Chomsky that is then interspersed with antiwar and anti-draft activities. It was made just after the Coffin-Spock indictment, but still has a sense of immediacy in its combination of shots from the first Call to Resist meeting several months before, an interview with Coffin, and the actions of several individual resisters. *Resist and the New England Resistance* uses the same Call to Resist footage, but relates it more directly to individual decisions to turn in draft cards and the political implications of such acts.

Except for some close-ups, the camera in *Boston Draft Resistance Group* only records. It is a witness, not a participant or a commentator. Such an approach appears more purely in a film called *Four Americans* released by Newsreel, but edited and synchronized from Japanese



*Boston Draft Resistance Group*, a.k.a. *BDRG* (Newsreel #7), Newsreel, 1968.

footage. Before a dark backdrop the four deserters from the *Intrepid* make joint and later individual statements about their decision. The setting is very stagy and frontal; the camera never moves. But gradually the men emerge in contrast to their rigid aesthetic format.

Later newsreels do not completely drop this more "objective" and traditional approach because the group preserves a sensitivity to the special kind of treatment each subject demands. A comparatively recent film like *Meat Cooperative* again

has a fairly straightforward chronological form, while it describes in a Consumer Reports manner the growth of a Lower East Side community meat cooperative that successfully does away with the bad meat and high prices of the local supermarkets until OEO funds are cut off and it must close. The second section, in which the leaders of the cooperative try to get help from the local congressman to have the funds renewed, is inconclusive and abrupt, like the action itself. But the promise of the cooperative, and its potential as an example, carries the weight of the film. Although *Meat Cooperative* like *Boston Draft Resistance Group* is aesthetically traditional, it is politically part of a propaganda of possibilities that stands opposed to what one Newsreel member called "the aesthetically and politically mindless propaganda of the thirties."

But the more pervasive trend in Newsreel has been films that demand much more from the audience in both aesthetics and political response. *Meat Cooperative* can be called open-ended because it suggests the possibility of other cooperatives on its model. But films like *No Game*, *Garbage*, *Riot Weapons*, *I.S. 201*, and *Chicago* abandon the familiar doc-

umentary explicitness and chronological linearity to demand more of the audience's attention and engagement. The assumption of these films seems to be that a TV-conditioned desire for pleasant sound and sync dialogue is related to a desire for easy and unabrasive answers to distant problems. Their soundtracks and frequently their spray of images are irritating and confusing. The non-sync film becomes more radical than the sync because sync suggests easy solutions, the effortless marriage of word and image. But these films imply that neither the problems nor the solutions are easy. Earlier propaganda frequently had little aesthetic appeal, while its political content was simplistic, schematic, and therefore easily ignored. These more experimental Newsreel films attempt to achieve a more open-ended political result by aesthetically radicalizing the audience as well. The understanding needed to bring together sound and image mirrors the understanding necessary to translate accurate analysis into appropriate political action.

*No Game*, Newsreel's Pentagon film, stands uneasily between the "witness" films and the more experimental ones. The camera moves about the Lincoln Memorial, recording parts of speeches, incidents, and faces, and then follows the marchers to the Pentagon. The soundtrack

is a frequently hard to understand mix of statements by the speech makers, hubbub, and marching noise that synchronizes momentarily in a Peter, Paul and Mary song. Finally, when the camera sweeps down a line of troops before the Pentagon, a studio voice authoritatively addresses the soldiers about the War, and the image shifts to Vietnam footage. Although some audiences have complained about this voice and the way it disrupts the more documentary tone of *No Game*, I found it much less annoying than the many pointless wide-angle shots. The shift in images is,

**"...the more pervasive trend in Newsreel has been films that demand much more from the audience in both aesthetics and political response."**

however, very effective. The confused charges around the Pentagon give way to the overexposed blacks and whites of the war scenes; the familiar bushes and trees change into the landscape of a lunar world; and the helicopter that hovered over Arlington Bridge is transformed into an image of malevolent destruction.

Despite these striking images of the dreamworld of evil marchers are trying to fight, the studio voice in *No Game* does detract from its final effect; it is too authoritarian and its final optimism about the value of the march is too easy. The explaining and interpreting overvoice is feasible for films like this primarily because it's cheap. Politically, its effect can be dogmatic and abstract, without a feeling for the nuances of the concrete situation. Films without the direction of an overvoice, on the other hand, risk fuzziness or the imposition of even more simplistic devices. *The Jeanette Rankin Brigade*, which details a trip to Washington by a group of militant women, falls too easily into a series of heavy ironies that juxtapose the resolute women with a



conclusive, and could lead to more understanding of the proper use of this kind of protest. But without an appropriate or compelling artistic form, inconclusiveness appears only as confusion.

In *Riot Weapons* the last image makes a direct appeal to the audience to engage the film and the problems it depicts: two black New Jersey National Guardsmen point out of a billboard in Newark, while the camera closes on the pointing hands. But the direction of the film that precedes this image is unclear. Gun advertisements in police magazines, publicity shots of police tanks, and scenes of riot training alternate with footage and stills of riots and their aftermath. The contrast is heightened by the soundtrack: behind the ads is the clatter of guns and the shriek of sirens; behind the riot scenes, only silence. But the riot sequences generally lack any bite or point, in addition to being repetitious. What are the demands that the final image is making on the audience? If the contrast between the two kinds of sequence is the main point, what choice has been made about the length of the film? Does *Riot Weapons* merely document trends in police militarism or does it also imply that black and white radicals should arm themselves too? Is there, for example, a progression from ads for police weapons to ads for ordinary weapons? (I could not tell when I saw the film.) *I.S. 201*, which deals with a memorial parade in honor of Malcolm X and other commemorative activities in a New York public school, similarly tries to find some form other than the chronological narrative of the observing documentary camera. The titles for the separate sequences have a screechy soundtrack behind them (and follow rather than precede the events they describe). The film does capture some sense of the rush of these activities and the energy liberated by Malcolm's influence. But once again there is a lack of effective rhythm in the film itself, an inability to set up its own terms securely enough. For a film that deals with potential action and movement, *I.S. 201* has a curious lethargy, especially in the shots of the destroyed areas of Newark, while an *I.S. 201* panel discussion occupies the soundtrack.

Talk, as it is embodied in the discussions that swirl around political actions, forms an increasingly important part of Newsreel's films. The films now in progress concentrate even more on developing a kind of "follow" documentary, a film about the dynamics of different groups as they get into, learn about, and try to deal with the society they live in, to bridge the gap between talk and action. *Garbage* and *Chicago* are the two most interesting and most successful attempts I have seen so far to document this process of thought and action and produce a film that has aesthetic form with political finality. *Garbage* follows a Lower East Side group called "Up-Against-The-Wall-Motherfuckers" on a trip to throw garbage into the central fountain of Lincoln Center as a statement about the cultural garbage Lincoln Center purveys and the mounds of real garbage people are living in because of the New York garbage strike. The soundtrack is full of talk—jokes, arguments about the project in earlier discussions, commentary during the trip itself, "America the Beautiful" in falsetto, and discussions afterwards, and more talk about later action to relate the existence of Lincoln Center to the problems of the Lower East Side as a community. *Garbage* was shot by many Newsreel cameramen, and therefore embodies many points of view, in its images as well as in its soundtrack, about the appropriateness of the garbage dump as a reaction to the fact of Lincoln Center. One especially ambiguous shot of a black janitor with a broom watching the exuberant Motherfuckers go by introduces the idea that those in power will never be touched by something as whimsical as this; the only effect will be extra work for the people who have to clean up.

*Chicago* deals with the late March conferences at Long Villa outside Chicago to plan for radical action during the Democratic convention. Most Newsreels start with a "teaser" be-

fore the logo and title. In Chicago it is a seemingly pointless ride down a long Chicago street, faster and faster, with jumpier and jumpier cuts, until the street deadends in the International Amphitheater, site of the convention. This trip appears several more times in the film, together with approaches from other streets, and rides around Chicago by car and elevated. The camera is restless—not content, as in, for example *Boston Draft Resistance Group*, to follow along and listen to explanations, but dodging in and out, breaking away from the conference discussions with their endless cups of coffee, speakers, and uncomfortable chairs, looking out into Chicago for the relevance of all the talk, for where it connects. The two longest sections devoted to speakers underline this problem. A white committee leader reports on the arguments, the irresolution about what exactly should be done at the convention. Then, towards the end of the film, a black speaker lists in numerical order the demands the convention has decided on and phrased with a rigid certainty, while the camera keeps cutting back to the elevated train ride. Is this the way to Chicago? Is this what should be done?

Films like *Garbage*, *Chicago*, *Boston Draft Resistance Group*, and *Meat Cooperative* have a richness and vitality that repays seeing them several times. Even the less successful Newsreel films are provocative in their deficiencies. Ideally, Newsreel is a community of politically committed film-makers who can progress in artistic ability and political understanding at equal pace. But practically, people come into the group at different levels of sophistication in both film-making and politics, make films, and then change to varying degrees. Making films that strive for some immediacy, with a large group and possibly interminable discussions, forces the need for a series of compromises, with many bad choices being made about both subject matter and treatment. Newsreel members admit that many of their films contain “cheapies”—bald ironies, badly conceived footage, muffed effects. But more important is that many Newsreel films work fruitfully in the terms they have set for themselves. The Newsreel is the words “The Newsreel” flickering violently to the sound of a machine gun—the cinematic equivalent of Leroi Jones’s line “I want poems that can shoot bullets.”

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Leo Braudy is among America’s leading cultural historians and film critics. Currently University Professor and Leo S. Bing Chair in English and American Literature at the University of Southern California, he teaches Restoration literature and history, American culture after World War Two, popular culture and critical theory, including the histories of visual style and film genres. His work appears in journals such as *American Film*, *Film Quarterly*, *Genre*, *Novel*, *Partisan Review*, and *Prose Studies*—to name a few.

His book *Jean Renoir: The World of His Films* was a finalist for the National Book Award. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has written for *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Harper’s*. His book *From Chivalry to Terrorism*, was named Best of the Best by *The Los Angeles Times* and a Notable Book of the Year by the New York Times.

His most recent books are *Haunted: On Ghosts, Witches, Vampires, Zombies, and Other Monsters of the Natural and Supernatural Worlds* (Yale University Press, 2016) and *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 8th Edition (Oxford University Press, 2016).

# NEWSREEL ON NEWSREEL

Norm Fruchter, Marilyn Buck, Karen Ross and  
Robert Kramer  
*Film Quarterly*  
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**Norm Fruchter, NY Newsreel:**

Newsreel, for me, is the constant challenge of facing choices which are at once, and indissolubly film-making choices, political choices, activist choices, aesthetic choices. None of us are satisfied with the blend that emerges...how to make what we want? Films as weapons? (Historical phrase—badly weathered.) Bullets kill, and some films get into people's heads, to shock, stun, arrest, horrify, depress, sadden, probe, demand. We want that kind of engagement—films people can't walk away from, with "Oh yes, I saw a film show last night, sort of political."

Who doubts, any more, that this country is so monstrously damaging, to both its domestic and foreign captive populations, that revolution is essential? The problem is how: what forces we're building, what this multi-faceted thing we call the Movement will grow into, what real organizations we're making out of all the disaffection this country breeds. Not that armageddon is coming, or apocalypse—but in small ways the streets explode, and the fabric of consent which sociologists once celebrated shreds visibly on the TV. Who knows what's happening to this country? So our films have to attack, they come out of as close as we can get to the activity we value. Getting deeper, harsher, more corrosive, more inflammatory—those are

our problems.

We should hate a lot more. Let it out. Let it dissolve the insufferable smugness which protects everybody. The media. None of us are old enough to have any illusions about infiltrating the major media to reach mass consciousness and change it—we grew up on TV and fifties Hollywood...

### **Marilyn Buck and Karen Ross, San Francisco Newsreel:**

This society is one of spectators, who live and perceive through the news media, particularly the visual media. People's lives revolve around the assumptions which are made by which channel they watch or what movie they choose to see. And all the TV channels and American films speak from the same mouth of control and power. We looked around...and Newsreel was conceived and born. A way for film-makers and radical organizer-agitators to break into the consciousness of people. A chance to say something different...to say that people don't have to be spectator-puppets.

In our hands film is not an anesthetic, a sterile, smooth-talking apparatus of control. It is a weapon to counter, to talk back and to crack the facade of the lying media of capitalism.

The radicals who have become involved in San Francisco Newsreel had previously participated in the development of the left political movement. Yet some of these experiences resulted in alienation. A disappointment and frustration with the forms of the left. Creative action was lacking. Newsreel has offered a definite medium in which to work: a weapon to destroy the established forms of control and power over people. We have had to overcome our lack of technical knowledge of film-making. Moreover, we must realize our political responsibility within our chosen form.

Many others who came to Newsreel as film-makers and artists had isolated themselves in their own work and private political fantasies. Newsreel has become an outlet for real political expression in a medium familiar to them. Their political fantasies were exposed. They had to begin relating to more active participation in the movement. They were political but it was necessary to combine the political content with form.

### **Fruchter:**

Easier to define than make the films we want. We're tied to events, and we shouldn't be. Pentagon, Columbia, Chicago, the Haight. Where should we begin? Most instincts are particular: narrow it down—this group, this action. Follow the officers of the Hanna Company in their jaunts through Brazil? Follow a Peace Corps volunteer? But why document the obvious—none of the people we make films for need that bad joke exposed, they've lived with (and often worked within) the reality. The varieties of domestic and external pacification deserve burlesque, no more. New forms? But how much will time, limited energies, finance, and the wearing pressure of events, the race to stay responsible, limit us?

### **Buck and Ross:**

Newsreel is a collective rather than a cooperative; we are not together merely to help each other out as film-makers but we are working together for a common purpose: to make films which shatter the image and reality of fragmentation and exploitation in this society. Yet there

of assimilation. Assimilation of the film-maker and the radical, assimilation of the individual into the collective. In making films together which reflect a collective, a movement of ideas and actions rather than the individuality of the artist, we must develop new values, forms, new criteria for individual interaction. Differences in techniques and analysis of content must be worked out collectively. The body must endorse the resulting film or it cannot be distributed through Newsreel.

**Fruchter:**

Responsibility. There's no revolutionary party yet, only fledgling forms of various undergrounds. No coherent strategy, no discipline to stay hewed to, so we make our politics (our films) on the hoof; our discussions often threaten to become interminable. How to transcend this transition stage? What's our response, for instance, if we think that sabotage is only marginally effective and yet guys are going to jail for it? What's our response to the police ambush in Cleveland, who among us has doubts about why black men are moved to shoot police? Newsreel is a jumping-off point. Or are we kidding ourselves? In '42, '43, '44 in Italy, what did Zavattini and Rossellini and the rest say to themselves? Were the partisan units a real alternative? What were the terms on which they said, "But we must fight as filmmakers"? What historical stage are we in, what categories can we use to decide what we must do?

**Robert Kramer, New York Newsreel:**

We began by trying to bridge the gap between the states of mind and ways of working that we were accustomed to as film-makers, and the engagement/daily involvement/commitments of our political analysis and political activity. This had immediate implications—not only for our film-making, but for interpretations of what, as film-makers, as people engaged in a struggle against established forms of power and control, against established media of all forces, we had to do with or without cameras.

**"In making films together which reflect a collective... we must develop new values, forms, new criteria for individual interaction."**

In regard to our films, I think we argue a different hierarchy of values. Not traditional canons of "what is professional," what is "comprehensive and intelligent reportage," what is "acceptable quality and range of material." No. Nor do we accept a more sophisticated argument about propaganda in general: that if the product isn't sold well, if the surface of the film (grainy, trou-

blesome sound, soft-focus, a wide range of maladies that come up when you are filming under stress) alienates, then the subject population never even gets to your "message" about the product—they just say, "Fuck that, I'm not watching that shit."

The subject population in this society, bombarded by and totally immersed in complex, ostensibly "free" media, has learned to absorb all facts/information relatively easily. Within the formats now popularized by the television documentary, you can lodge almost any mate-

rial, no matter how implicitly explosive, with the confidence that it will neither haunt the subject population, nor push them to move—in the streets, in their communities, in their heads. You see Cleaver or Seale on a panel show, and they don't scare you or impress you or make you think as they would if you met them on the street. Why? Because they can't get their hands on you? Partly, sure. (Fear and committed thought exist in terms of the threat that power will be used against you—in terms of the absolute necessity of figuring out what has to be done—not in terms of some vague decision to “think it through” in isolation.) But also, because their words are absorbed by the format of the “panel show,” rational (note well: ostensibly rational) discussion about issues that we all agree are important and pressing, and that we (all good liberal viewers) are committed to analyzing. Well: bullshit. The illusion of the commitment to analyze. The illusion of real dissent. The illusion of even understanding the issues. Rather, the commitment to pretend that we're engaging reality.

OK. At the point when you have considered this argument, then you start to make films with different priorities, with shapes justified in a different way. You want to make films that unnerve, that shake assumptions, that threaten, that do not soft-sell, but hopefully (an impossible ideal) explode like grenades in peoples' faces, or open minds up like a good can opener. We say: “the things you see in these films are happening at this moment, they are our ‘news,’



Columbia Revolt (Newsreel #14), Newsreel, 1968.

they are important to us and do not represent the droppings of a few freaks, but the activity of a growing wave of people, your children who were fighting the pigs at Columbia, your brothers who walked out of this high school, your sons who deserted the army, your former slaves who will not now accept your insufficient reparations, etc., etc. You know this reality. You know enough to know that this is real—now deal with it, because soon it's going to come to deal with you, in one way or another.” The effect of our films is more like seeing 250 Black

Panthers around the Oakland Court House, or Columbia students carrying on the business of revolt at Kirk's desk, or Free Men occupying the streets of Berkeley, than listening to what some reporter tells us about what these people might have said, and how we can understand “rebellion” psychologically. We strive for confrontation, we prefer disgust/violent disagreement/painful recognition/jolts—all these to slow liberal head-nodding and general wonderment at the complexity of these times and their being out of joint.

We want a form of propaganda that polarizes, angers, excites, for the purpose of discussion—a way of getting at people, not by making concessions to where they are, but by showing them where you are and then forcing them to deal with that, bringing out all their assumptions, their prejudices, their imperfect perceptions.

**Buck and Ross:**

Some viewers make the whole choice to see Newsreels. They are aware of what they are going to see, and the films thus reinforce their conceptions—or they may shake these viewers back into radical action and analysis. Most importantly, Newsreels must be weapons: they must confront people who are not motivated to go see them. Newsreel must make half the decisions for them. Street projection is the first answer we've come up with so far. We take the films into the street, we stop people on the street, and confront them with our films. Involve them as participants. They're not home glued to their TVs, where if subjected to action they merely sit and absorb it in some unconscious place in their heads. The truck, mobile, produces live action on the street. Motion within motion. It has come to them during a walk down the street, they've stumbled upon it. Newsreel has forced itself into their consciousness. They have been confronted. The decision to watch, to register disgust or interest is now theirs. We have the opportunity to talk with them about their reactions, between films. To those inquisitive, we explain more. To

**“We want a form of propaganda that polarizes, angers, excites, for the purpose of discussion...”**

those objecting, we can try to break their arguments. We have our confrontation as people. Newsreel has its confrontation through film.

Newsreel can evaluate the effectiveness of its films by looking at its audiences and their responses to the films. Many of our showings have been very discouraging: not many people or no reaction to the films at all. Others have been elating: lots of

people who react vigorously to the films, asking questions or arguing about the validity of the films. And the difference in the showings may be only the audience. Middle-class neighborhood groups may feel that the straight documentary sync-sound film on draft resistance is very good to see: informative, encouraging, and perhaps even motivating. But when the same film is shown to young Chicanos, it's absolutely useless. The guys walk out, hiss, and ask “When are you going to show us some action?” And so, we run the Haight riot film, a five-minute street film with a lot of action set to contemporary rock music. And they dig it. We show *Garbage*, a cultural exchange between the Motherfuckers of New York and Lincoln Center, a fast-moving film also, thinking this might also turn the guys on, and they are bored by it and finally walk out. But college and ex-college radicals say, “Far out, those guys are doing some good things—I like their style.” And the older, middle-class people in the audience may not dislike it, but don't quite see the point...or register confusion or a polite distaste for the obscure language and people of the film.

**Kramer:**

We shoot as best we can—but we shoot what's important to us, what meets our perceptions of our lived reality; we cut according to our priorities, our ideologies, not “to make it plain and simple to them.” Not to present a “line.” Not to present the lived reality as less complex than it really is. Not to enter into that sterile game: modulating our emotions and intensities and intelligences in some vain hope that by speaking your language your way we can persuade you. No, we know the effective outcome of that: only the acceptance of another of the subtle forms

of domination and control. Now we move according to our own priorities, and we are justified in this by objective conditions. Five years ago, for example, such a decision would have been suicidal. Our movement was only emerging—few people knew anything about it—few people were involved. But now, all our audiences (and our audiences represent the full spectrum of the society) know the essence of what we're talking about. They read it every day in every paper digested and shaped it to their preconceptions. So now we present it to them in its nakedness, in our true understanding of it, not vitiated by analyses and "in-depth studies" that we do not accept, but just exactly what counts from our point of view. The established media have done the job of popularizing: now we must specify and make immediate; convert our audiences or neutralize them; threaten.

### **Buck and Ross:**

The *Columbia* film, about the seizure of Columbia and the politics of that seizure, is an important film to college students. It was shown to students at the University of California, Santa Cruz, on the eve of a scheduled protest against the Board of Regents which was meeting on campus the next day. The film helped to bolster enthusiasm for the students' action and create a mood in which the protest could take place and be successful. The film on the Black Panther Party turns people's heads around, awing them with the strength and the nature of the Panthers of which they may not have previously conceived. We think the film is politically and visually exciting—it demands that people react to it, and not pass it off. It is a film that evokes response with the most diverse kinds of audiences—liberals on their way to the film festival, students at the universities, the black community in the streets.

### **Kramer:**

Our films remind some people of battle footage: grainy, camera weaving around trying to get the materials and still not get beaten/trapped. Well, we, and many others, are at war. We not only document that war, but try to find ways to bring that war to places which have managed so far to buy themselves isolation from it.

So, to return to the issue of propaganda. Our propaganda is one of confrontation. Using film—using our voices with and after films—using our bodies with and without cameras—to provoke confrontation. Changing minds, altering consciousness, seems to us to come through confrontations, not out of sweet/reasonable conversations that are one of the society's modes of absorbing and disarming dissent and movement, of giving that illusion that indeed we are dealing with "the issues." Therefore we keep moving. We keep hacking out films, as quickly as we can, in whatever way we can.

To all film-makers who accept the limited, socially determined rules of clarity, of exposition, who think that films must use the accepted vocabulary to "convince," we say essentially: you only work, whatever your reasons, whatever your presumed "content," to support and bolster this society; you are a part of the mechanisms which maintain stability through re-integration; your films are helping to hold it all together, and finally, whatever your descriptions, you have already chosen sides. Dig: your sense of form and order is already a political choice—don't talk to me about "content"—but if you do, I will tell you that you cannot encompass our "content" with those legislated and approved senses, that you do not understand it if you treat it that way. There is no such thing as revolutionary content, revolutionary spirit, laid out for inspection and sale on the bargain basement counter.



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Norm founded the Community Involvement Program (CIP) in 1995 as a center focused on improving urban education through research, policy studies and evaluations, as well as supporting community organizations working to improve neighborhood schools. For ten years CIP was part of the Institute for Education and Social Policy (which Norm also founded), at New York University, but in 2006 CIP left NYU and affiliated with the Annenberg Institute. CIP's studies have examined the cost effectiveness of small high schools; performance-driven budgeting; new models for special education; accountability in charter schools; and the relationship between teacher quality, family income and student performance in NYC schools. Norm is a co-founder and vice-president of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, and has served on many panels investigating the improvement of urban education in the U.S. and abroad.

From 1987 to 1996, Norm was Program Advisor for Education at the Aaron Diamond Foundation, where he helped develop the New Visions Project that produced twenty new, small New York City public secondary schools. From 1983 to 1993, he served as an elected member of a Brooklyn community school board, the last four years as president.

During the 1980's, Norm conducted school change studies for Advocates for Children of New York, and evaluations of national school improvement programs for the Academy for Educational Development (AED). During the 1970's, he helped organize and direct an alternative high school for dropouts in Newark; a bachelor's degree program for public sector workers at Saint Peter's College in Jersey City; and a program to train parents to work for school improvement in a dozen New Jersey cities.

In the 1960's, he was an organizer for Mobilization for Youth and the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] Newark Community Union Project, and co-founded NEWSREEL, a civil rights and anti-war movement film-making group. From 1960 through 1962, he was an assistant to the editor of the *New Left Review* (London), and from 1965 through 1970, he was an editor of *Studies on the Left* (New York City).

Born in 1937 in Camden, New Jersey, Norm attended Camden public schools and Rutgers University, where he earned a B.A. in 1959, *magna cum laude*. He was awarded Woodrow Wilson and Fulbright Fellowships from 1960 through 1962. He earned an M.Ed. from Teachers College, Columbia University in 1982.

Norm has recently published *Urban Schools, Public Will* (Teachers College Press, 2007), is a co-author of *Choosing Equality: The Case for Democratic Schooling* (Temple University Press, 1987), which won the 1988 American Library Association's Oboler Prize for Intellectual Freedom; *New Directions in Parent Involvement*, (AED, 1993); and *Hard Lessons: Public Schools and Privatization* (The Twentieth Century Fund, 1996). He has published two novels: *Coat upon a Stick* (Simon & Schuster, 1962); and *Single File* (Knopf, 1970). He also made three films: *Troublemakers*, an award-winning documentary about Students for a Democracy Society's Newark organizing project, 1966; *Summer '68* about the movements that coalesced at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago; and *People's War*, a documentary shot in North-Vietnam in 1969.

Marilyn Buck, born December 13, 1947, was a feminist poet, imprisoned for over thirty years for her revolutionary activities—she succumbed to cancer at the age of 62 shortly after being released from prison in August 2010. Throughout her years in prison, Marilyn remained a steadfast supporter of fellow political prisoners and an advocate for the women with whom she was imprisoned.

Marilyn became an accomplished, highly acclaimed poet and translator, the result, she says, of being "a censored person. In defiance, I turned to poetry, an art of speaking sparsely, but flagrantly." Marilyn's poems can be found in many collections, in her chapbook, *Rescue the Word*, and on her CD *Wild Poppies*. She was awarded the P.E.N. American Center poetry award in 2001.

Tchanan Ross (formerly known as Karen Ross) worked with the original Newsreel collective that began in 1968, as a member of the San Francisco chapter. She currently lives in Oregon, where she continues with her jewelry making and metal sculpting business.

Robert Kramer made his mark as the great filmmaker of the American radical left whose first films painted a portrait of a generation of militants marked by their opposition to the war in Vietnam (*In The Country, The Edge, and Ice*). He was a founder and prime mover of Newsreel (a national collective of political filmmakers). He never stopped reflecting in his films on the 'heart of darkness' of the West, or on the lives of those who rebelled against it in his youth.

Recognized as a filmmaker of the first magnitude in America by Jonas Mekas and in Europe by 'new cinema' circles, Kramer circulated from the beginning in a realm of discovery as far away from Hollywood as it was from underground and experimental film. In France he was recognized with the highest award in the arts, the Legion of Honor. In his thirty years of total independence, he made film his instrument for discovery and used it to reflect on personal and collective experience. By mixing document and fiction, he invented an artistic form that is original, malleable, and free, and is marked by a polyphonic crossing of voices and characters (more than fifty in *Milestones*) and by the immediate presence of the filmmaker as witness or conversation partner.

Before making films Kramer set off to work as a reporter in Latin America, though the trip was cut short by the death of his father. Then worked with Peter Gessner on 'FALN', a film on the guerrilla movement in Venezuela. In 1966, he joined with Norman Fruchter, Robert Machover, and Peter Gessner to start Alpha 60 (aka: Blue Van Films), and later with other political filmmakers were central to forming Newsreel. His Newsreel experience lasted from 1967 to 1971, during which about sixty short, and middle-length films were produced - documentaries, films of struggle, and agit-prop films.

Robert Kramer, an American movie director whose portrayals of militants caught up in the antiwar movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's earned him a prominent place in modern political cinema, died on Wednesday in a hospital in Rouen, France, at the age of 60. Friends gave the cause of death as meningitis. Kramer is survived by his wife, Erika, and their daughter, Keja, as well as by Rain Kramer, his daughter from an earlier marriage.

# THE WOMAN'S FILM

## Louise Alaimo, Judith Smith and Ellen Sorrin

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It was 1969. The anti-war movement was at its height. The Black Panthers were holding their first national conference in Oakland, California. Newsreel was a growing national organization servicing the growing and powerful left. There were now Newsreel offices in Chicago, Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, Buffalo, New York and San Francisco. We were three women (two from New York, one from Milwaukee) who had each joined San Francisco Newsreel. Louise was married to an actor in the San Francisco Mime Troupe, did not yet have children and was 29 years old; Judy was right out of college, single and 22 and Ellen, 22, was also just out of college and had come to San Francisco to join her boyfriend who was part of the Mime Troupe. We were not filmmakers - but we were politicized. We had each been active in the antiwar movement and/or other community based political organizations. Although not experienced film producers, we were interested in the media. Louise had been a production assistant on a few films when she was part of New York Newsreel, Judy had taken one film course and several photography courses in college, and Ellen was interested in the theater. Being a member of Newsreel meant working in the office cleaning and arranging bookings of films, as well as doing screenings of films in universities and in the community. We wanted to be in Newsreel as a way of participating in the vibrant anti-war and left wing movement. It was a very exciting time. We were glad to be members of Newsreel.

By the beginning of 1970, the woman's liberation movement was emerging as a new and dynamic voice within the left. Newsreel began getting calls for films on women's liberation. We didn't have one - except for the short *Miss America* - which was shot by New York Newsreel documenting the "burning of bras" agit-prop event staged by early feminists. San Francisco Newsreel was attempting to define itself in relation to the other Newsreels. As the

organization grew in cities throughout the country, attempts were made to share information and avoid duplicating the efforts of each other. At one national meeting, it was decided that San Francisco would produce the needed film on woman's liberation. Our group decided that our approach would be to invest more money than we had on previous projects and produce a scripted in-depth film on this subject that would have a longer shelf life than other Newsreel films. We would not merely document the activities of other movement activists. We would present our own analysis of the issues.

San Francisco had a steering committee which made decisions for the group (first called the HUB - i.e. - the center of the wheel, then the Central Committee). The HUB assigned the three of us to be the production unit for the film. The rest of the group was assigned to either work in the office or to take a working-class job which would give them experience "understanding the people" and provide a way to financially support the rest of us. We were thrilled to

be given this responsibility. None of us had ever had such a responsibility. In addition, none of us considered ourselves feminists. We were more comfortable thinking of ourselves as leftists than feminists. But, our assignment by the group was to make a woman's film and we had to quickly come up to speed.



*The Woman's Film (Newsreel #55), Women's Caucus/San Francisco Newsreel, 1971.*

Our sense of the seriousness of our choice to be involved full-time in the Newsreel collective became shockingly real with the shootings at Kent State. Kent State made the point that the establishment would ultimately

not tolerate a challenge to its status quo and that our little world could be shattered at a moment's notice. Distributing the Newsreel films as widely as possible became even more critical. We watched people dying in Vietnam and at home. We also had to decide what role our group would take in the growing anti-establishment struggle. Our own group divided over loyalties or antagonisms with the Weathermen's politics. For a brief while there were two Newsreel groups.

We begin filming on March 7, 1970 at a rally for International Woman's Day. It was a gorgeous day, brilliant sunshine and the rally was held in Dolores Park in the Mission District. This film was going to be different than other Newsreel films - no voice overs - we would use sync cameras! Newsreel, however, did not have any 16mm sync cameras! So, we had to borrow! We contacted "real" independent filmmakers in the Bay Area to both teach us how to use the equipment and to lend us their equipment...borrowed a 16mm Arriflex and a Nagra. We had our first lessons on the equipment the night before the rally. At the rally, many community women as well as feminists spoke about the need for women's participation in the growing movements against the war, for civil rights and workers' rights.

a Newsreel film. Rather than just documenting the rally and putting voice-overs on top of the rally footage, we decided that we wanted to communicate our organization's point of view on the woman's movement and its relationship to proletarian politics. We saw ourselves as Marxist-Leninists and wanted to ask the question: "Was the woman's liberation movement relevant to working class women?" We did our research by going into the community and interviewing poor and working-class women about their view of themselves as women. We used our contacts with left community organizers such as the Radical Union (RU), the Black Panthers, the Oil

**"... none of us considered ourselves feminists. We were more comfortable thinking of ourselves as leftists than feminists."**

and Chemical Workers and Welfare Rights organizations to get entry into the homes of grassroots leaders, who were women. We interviewed the women without any cameras. We used their stories as the basis for our "script".

We were so excited by the women we met. Many of them lived in San Jose, California. There was Florence, a white woman who organized a welfare

rights organization called "Why Not Whites," Vonda, whose husband had been arrested when he supported the Oil and Chemical Workers strike and Mary, the wife of a Black Panther and a full-time at-home mother. We quickly realized that being an active proletarian leftist did not quiet these women's sense of also being oppressed as women. We began to write a script based on Florence, Vonda and Mary's lives. We wanted to show how they had gained a feminist consciousness and also blended this consciousness with their perceived need to organize men and women against the capitalist system of oppression.

The film we intended to make would broaden the image of the Woman's Movement to include Third World women, working class women and poor women on public assistance. This was radical for 1970 - when the new woman's movement was primarily a "bourgeois" movement of educated white women (like us). We did include one middle-class Consciousness Raising group in the film. Our film aimed to present the struggles of poor women who until our film had never been addressed by the media. Middle-class women were gaining recognition for their needs as women; we were using our film to include the need for poor and working women to also be part of this new feminist revolution. Reviews in the press heralded our radical act of giving voice to working and poor women.

Writing a script was a first for a Newsreel film. Another first was that we circulated the script to women's groups around the country - asking for "criticism" and suggestions and financial support! We wanted to insure that the woman's movement would use our film. We were doing our own version of building a market by inviting future renters to give us their input before the film was shot. We got lots of suggestions back from various women's groups. However, we only received about \$50 in contributions. We had to do fundraising on a much grander scale. Since we were so near Los Angeles, we attempted to tap the "old left" film producers for financial support. One very senior Hollywood producer said he would help us raise \$100,000. This never happened. He did, however, let us work in his wife's film as extras (*Harold and*

*Maude!!*). One contact led us to a Hollywood psychiatrist who hosted a fundraising party for us in his home. Our "worker's theater" group performed various songs such as "I'm Proud to be a Revolutionary (based on "I'm proud to be an Oakie from Muskogee"). At that party was Jack Nicholson! At that point (1970), he had only been in *Easy Rider*. He was friendly and when we followed up with him the next day he invited us to meet with his producer. We brought in the rough-cut of the film. They viewed it - and we walked out of there with a check for \$2,000! This was all we needed to complete the film! The entire budget had only been \$4,500 for a 42 minute film!

The film was now 6 months past scheduled completion. Ellen had a wedding scheduled for June and moved to New York. Louise was pregnant with her first child. Pregnant Louise and Judy finished up the film. By the end of 1971 the film was done! Judy returned home to New York for the holidays and helped get the film distributed. It was shown at the Whitney, Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles Film Expo and won the first prize in the Leipzig Film Festival. Louise had her baby. Judy entered graduate school in social work and Ellen worked as a public school

## **"Reviews in the press heralded our radical act of giving voice to working and poor women."**

teacher. The war in Vietnam was coming to an end. Many of the Black Panthers had been killed or put in jail. The movement began turning against itself. Many of the smaller Newsreel groups closed. In San Francisco and New York Newsreel, there were multiple splits and resplits - based on economic status, race and gender. The three of us, despite our eventual move away from Newsreel, were each transformed. We had become stronger people. We

had become feminists. We now saw ourselves as part of the growing woman's movement and at the same time as part of the growing (although confused) left. There was no either/or - feminists/leftists. We were both. Newsreel was never the same after the making of *The Woman's Film*. Women and Third World members had begun demanding equal participation in the organization and in production.

The women we had met through the production of the film had become a part of each of us. We no longer could think of the woman's movement as faceless. The woman's movement was now known by us to be made up of Florence and Vonda and Mary: people with jobs, families, houses to clean, groceries to buy, as well as struggles at work and personal dreams. The woman's movement had become personalized through our entry into their lives and their commitments to building a better life for themselves and their communities. The making of the film was a defining experience for each of us and continues to affect the choices we make in our lives.

The San Francisco Chronicle wrote "These real women with their real problems were engaging and left one with the feeling that the camera succeeded in capturing a part of the human struggle." The Oakland Tribune wrote "The women whose images fill the screen are all shapes and sizes, colors and ages... They appear to have little in common... They do not fit anyone's image of militant supporters of Women's Liberation... Perhaps this is what makes

*The Woman's Film* so effective.”

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Louise Alamio was born and raised in Brooklyn. She attended Brooklyn College for a couple of years, then after moving to San Francisco and finally Los Angeles she graduated from UCLA as a Film and Television major. Her connection to Newsreel goes back to its creation in New York, and continued in San Francisco, where she worked on *Los Siete de la Raza*, and ultimately, *The Woman's Film*, alongside Judy Smith and Ellen Sorrin. It was the first Newsreel film conceived and produced by women from the collective. Later in her career she worked as a script reader for American Zoetrope and United Artists. In 1982, she joined the nascent video industry, initially with Columbia Pictures, and eventually as senior marketing director for the Home Entertainment Division of New Line Cinema. Louise's other production credits include indie films, *Double Barreled Detective Story* and *Unrelated*, starring Tom Hiddleston.

Louise's husband, Michael is an actor and director. They have two daughters, Gabriella and Giovanna, and two grand-daughters, Isabella and Malia. She lives in Los Angeles, where she continues to support and march for women's rights.

Judy Smith lives in NYC and is a professor of social work. She was a member of San Francisco Newsreel from 1969-1972 and a member of NY Newsreel for one year until 1973. She then became a social worker and eventually a professor at Fordham University. Parallel with her career in social work, she produced several educational films including: *The Separation-Individuation Process* (the work of Margaret S. Mahler); *The Mother's Center*; *Welfare-to-Work Through the Eyes of Mothers*; *Becoming a Social Worker*; *Becoming a Social Worker with Older Adults*; *Human behavior and the Social Environment* and *Social Systems Theory: A video toolkit*.

Ellen Sorrin is Director of the George Balanchine Trust as well as Managing Director of the New York Choreographic Institute (an affiliate of New York City Ballet). Previously she was Director of Education and Director of Special Projects at New York City Ballet. She is president of The Hemsley Lighting Programs, a foundation dedicated to the transition of lighting design students from the academic to the professional world. She is also the author of *Food Matters*, a blog concerned with food and family traditions. She has produced NYCB in-house film tributes for New York City Ballet on George Balanchine, Tanaquil Le Clercq, Lincoln Kirstein and Jerome Robbins. She produced a short film for the CityArts series PBS affiliate WNET/Thirteen about costume maker Barbara Matera. In 1987, prior to coming to NYCB, she produced *Dancing for Life*, the New York dance community's response to AIDS, directed by Jerome Robbins. Before working in the arts, she was a classroom teacher in the New York City Public School system for six years, heading up an alternative classroom in Brooklyn for the school district's Drug Abuse Prevention Program, a concept that led to the creation of specialized charter schools to address the education of children who were served best in smaller classes with more attention to both academic and psychological needs.

# LOS ANGELES NEWSREEL

David E. James

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## I.

In a 1932 *New Masses* review entitled "Movies and Revolution," Harry Potamkin argued that G. W. Pabst's *Kameradschaft* (*Comradeship*) posed a fundamental question of cinema: "Is it possible to create a proletarian cinema in capitalist America? Is it true that of all the media, excepting the radio, the movie is the severest in its resistance? This is due to the very nature of the film, the complications involved in making pictures, the expense of making films and the monopoly vested in Hollywood, Hays, and Wall Street" (1977, 513). Given the cost and material complexity of filmmaking and the integration of finance capital and the entertainment function in the Hollywood industry that Potamkin diagnosed, a Los Angeles cinema of or for the working class has typically seemed a contradiction in terms, an impossibility whose place has always been preoccupied by its opposite, a cinema in the service of capital. And so complete has been the association of Los Angeles with fantasy fictions made in Hollywood that even those cases where a truly popular cinema has existed have been generally overlooked. In Potamkin's review, however, he did find the gleam of a hopeful answer to his question; and he found it in Los Angeles, in a documentary about socialist organizer, Tom Mooney, made by the Los Angeles branch of the Workers' Film and Photo League (WFPL), that he hailed as "one of the finest of dramatic newsreel-clips I have seen," and "the one potential source for an authentic American cinema" (513-14). In the period of the maturation of the WFPL's legacy, the Los Angeles Newsreel in 1968-71 evidenced a similar insurgence whose history, like that of the Los Angeles League itself, has been lost.<sup>2</sup>



As it responded to the national and international political developments that produced the New York, San Francisco, and other Newsreels, the Los Angeles branch lived through essentially the same cinematic possibilities and contradictions as they, and in doing so followed roughly the same overall itinerary—one that Bill Nichols justly characterized when it was still underway, as a “barometric reflection of the progress of the New Left in general” (1972, 51). Since it was clear that existing media would never truthfully report the state repression of popular attempts to end the invasion of Viet Nam and to secure civil rights for ethnic minorities at home, students and other radicals were forced to create new collectives in order to make documentary films on behalf of the Movement and to import and locally distribute other progressive films about contemporary struggles against imperialism, especially those from Cuba and Viet Nam. For both groups of films to perform their envisioned political function, the passive, aestheticized and consumerist response to culture inculcated by the corporate entertainment industry had to be interrupted and replaced by an active involvement in the film material and in the political events it addressed. Along with the extremely heightened politicization of the turn of the decade and the increased political sophistication of the filmmakers themselves, the Newsreels’ attempt to recreate cinema as an interventionist political practice—rather than merely the representation of political activity in some other realm—challenged the fundamental mechanisms of bourgeois culture. Two developments in the filmmaking process were especially significant: the social relations within the filmmaking group and between the filmmakers and the constituencies with which they identified themselves had to be reconstructed; and filmmaking itself was forced into new relationships with other political activities.

In respect to the first of these, when the Newsreel filmmakers brought macro-political questions about identity and power to bear upon their own collectives, they realized that the initial dominance of middle-class white males in them reproduced existing class, race and gender inequities in society at large. In New York especially, attempts to address this led eventually to the group’s traumatic dissolution and reconstruction as Third World Newsreel run primarily by minority women, that is as a democratically but centrally organized collective rather than a loose collection of individuals of heterogeneous politics and filmmaking practices. The Los Angeles Newsreel was always much smaller and more cohesive—lucky to have fifteen at a meeting where New York might have 150—and thought of itself as a non-hierarchical, open and flexible support organization for other political projects. Its internal gender and racial structures were not experienced as such critical issues. The core group included at least four couples (one of whom had a baby during their maximum involvement). Male supremacy in the group and its activities was however addressed, and the chief women members were simultaneously involved with women’s groups; they pursued both feminist and Newsreel projects concurrently, and at one point planned a film about women’s health issues. And instead of attempting to recruit non-white members, the group worked especially closely and productively with the Black Panther Party until the destruction of the latter by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) coincided with developments in the second area—the relation of filmmaking to collateral activities—that caused the group’s demise.

The Newsreels’ subordination of cinema to community organizing precipitated a series of crises in the status and function of film itself that were so categorical that they eventually caused the most committed members of the Los Angeles Newsreel to abandon all work in the medium. First, the ideal of filmmaking itself—the priority of producing new films—was de-fetishized and subordinated to the screening of already existing works. During these screenings, the autonomy of the film was interrupted, and distanced appreciation of its internal aesthetic qualities

replaced by discussion of the extra-aesthetic issues it raised. And finally all activities constructed around cinema were abandoned when most of the Newsreel members took jobs in factories (both heavy industry such as the local branch of GM, and communication industries such as the phone company), to undertake working-class organization without using film.

In light of these developments, what history records as the signal failure of Los Angeles Newsreel to complete a film of its own—a failure especially marked given the presence of the UCLA film school with which many of its members had close relations—should be understood as simultaneously possessing two contrary aspects.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, that failure traces the more radical achievement in which a cinema of product was transcended for a cinema of practice. But on the other, it reflects the city's specific hostility to working-class culture: a heritage of repression of radical politics, a particularly brutal police department, and the segregation of ethnic groups. These combined to make the Los Angeles experience of the attack on emancipatory politics by combined corporate and state power that began in the early 1970's particularly devastating.

## II.

Los Angeles Newsreel began in October 1968 with a visit to the city by Paul Shinoff, a native of the city, who had been active in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) at Valley College. After being beaten by police during an anti-war demonstration, he had left for San Francisco, where



*Black Panther, a.k.a. Off the Pig* (Newsreel #19), San Francisco Newsreel, 1968.

he was active at the beginning of Newsreel, shooting half of one of their earliest and most popular films, *Off the Pig* (a.k.a. *Black Panther*) and several others. In order to publicize the Newsreel project and to raise funds, he brought these and some films from New York Newsreel with him, showing them at community centers and Los Angeles City College, but also to interested parties in Hollywood and the media, including Francis Coppola and contacts at CBS. At a screening advertised in the *LA Free Press* and hosted at the SDS headquarters on Hoover

Street by Jim Fite, the principal local SDS organizer, he showed *Off the Pig* and a rough cut of a film about a riot in Haight-Ashbury, announcing at the screening that if people were interested in forming a Los Angeles Newsreel, San Francisco would help.

Two weeks later, with the encouragement of John Huggins, then a UCLA student but also Deputy Minister of Information for the Los Angeles Panthers, an introductory meeting took place attended by fifteen or so people. Of that group, Ron Abramson, Jonathan Aurthur, Peter Belsito, Bill Kirby (all UCLA film students), Dennis Hicks (a painting student at USC), Steve

Karatzas (an SDS organizer), Michael Murphy, and Barbara Rose formed the nucleus of the new organization, along with Judy Belsito, Bill Floyd (who was principally responsible for one of New York Newsreel's most important films, *Columbia Revolt*, and was sent in spring 1969 to turn the Los Angeles branch away from the supposed effects of Hollywood), Christine Hansen, Tim Hinkle, Elinor Schiffrin, and Stephanie Waxman (a painter). Others, either at the first meeting or who became involved but temporarily or less centrally, included Ron Fleury, Dennis Jakob, Bill Norton and Rol Murrow (also UCLA film students, and the last also manager of the Fox Venice theater), Don Newton (an artist who had studied with Sequieros), Lucy Newton, and Charlie Wilcotz; George Cole, Fred Klonsky, and Marv Treiger became involved later. Intending to make and distribute films, the group set up an office, first in a Movement building at 619 Bonnie Brae Street and then in a storefront at 1331 West Washington Boulevard in Venice, a working-class and bohemian community where most of the members lived.

By early 1969, they had acquired two film projectors, Newsreel catalogues, and a number of films from San Francisco, including *Off the Pig (Black Panther)*, *Threatening Sky* (Joris Ivens, 1965), *Por La Primera Vez (For the First Time)* (Octavio Cortazar, 1967), *A Day of Plane Hunting* (1968), *Cu Chi Guerilla Village* (Vietnamese National Liberation Front), *Madina Boe* (Jose Massip, 1969), *A Luta Continua*, and *Hanoi Martes Tercer* (1967) and *Golpeando en la Selva* (1968) by the great Cuban filmmaker, Santiago Alvarez. From New York Newsreel, they also obtained *Chomsky-Resist* (1968) and *Up Against the Wall Miss America* (1968). They began to distribute these, and very quickly developed a heavy schedule of screenings. Reviving the WFPL's practice of taking films into the workplace, they held screenings in factories, at libraries, welfare and unemployment offices, at union halls and Movement groups, at schools and colleges, including California State College at Los Angeles, Valley College, Los Angeles City College. They also screened films at community centers in the Black and Chicano communities, and at the local art-house theater, the Fox Venice. Occasionally members ventured further afield: a UCSB screening attracted over 500 people a few nights before the Bank of America building was burned there, and in the late summer of 1969, Hicks and Waxman took a projector and films on a 10-day trip through the South West, including Tucson, where they showed films at the opening of an SDS chapter, and Albuquerque, where they showed them at a benefit for custodial workers. The group also engaged in other forms of cultural agitation, most notably plastering the west side of the city one night with an incendiary poster of a Berkeley radical throwing a teargas canister.

With the emphasis on political rather than cultural matters that soon distinguished the group, LA Newsreel had a spokesperson attend the screenings whenever possible. The *Guardian* slogan, "It's not the showing of [the film's] structure that's important, but the structure of the showing," which had some currency within the group, represents their understanding of film as a "pretext for discussion, for the seeking and finding of wills" (Solanas and Gettino [1971] 1976, 62) rather than as an autonomous aesthetic experience. The crucial part of their work became "giving the rap," that is, drawing general political conclusions from the situations portrayed in the various films—and very soon that meant arguing the need for a revolutionary party to overthrow capitalism in the US. This subordination of the film to political education and organization only increased as the group's own rapid political self-education put them so far in advance of other Newsreels that their films could not be presented without analysis of their defects.

Though the LA group had a clear didactic organizing emphasis from their incep-

tion, they also considered making their own films. An early project was a film about pollution; though production on this never really progressed beyond a few rolls shot of factory emissions, news that these were in color (rather than in New York and San Francisco's grainy black and white) earned them the nickname of "Hollywood Newsreel." And a Prospectus for potential contributors in 1969-70 mooted four projects<sup>4</sup>: *Breakfast for Children*—about the Black Panther Party (BPP) and its community work; *Venice*—about the impending urban renewal in Marina del Rey that, it was feared, would destroy the community; *Mexican Rebellion*—about the links between the Mexican Revolution and the situation in the United States; and *Natural Child-birth*—about the Lamaze method, prompted by one member's conflicts with the medical profession during the birth of her child. But the extremely rapid political developments of mid-1969 interrupted these plans.

**“It's not the showing of [the film's] structure that's important, but the structure of the showing.”**

At Christmas 1968, Jonathan Aurthur and Peter Belsito visited New York Newsreel, where they met Robert Machover, Norm Fruchter, and Robert Kramer, and were impressed and stimulated by the raucous energy and political engagement of the discussion there. In June, Abramson and Hicks attended a National Newsreel Convention in Washington DC and accompanied the San Francisco and New York members

back to New York; they too were impressed by the other branches' energy. But in the half-year since Aurthur's trip east, the Los Angeles branch had outstripped the others in its political sophistication and commitment to a disciplined collective structure. Even their more advanced analyses of the relation between art and politics were, however, transformed by the SDS convention in June 1969, which Aurthur also attended. By this point, as it was becoming clear that university and other demonstrations were failing to bring about a withdrawal of US forces from Viet Nam and that the campaigns for peace candidates in 1968 had proved equally ineffectual, the growing sense that only a revolution could bring about progressive social change caused SDS to disintegrate into splinter groups, primarily a Progressive Labor (PL) front faction known as the Worker-Student Alliance, the Revolutionary Youth Movement (RYM), and various anarchist groups such as the Motherfuckers. The principal split occurred over the status of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Panthers. Only RYM embraced both, understanding the BPP as the vanguard of an imminent global revolution. RYM itself almost immediately split into the Weathermen, who were embracing the direct action position that culminated in the Chicago "Days of Rage," and RYM II, which became committed to organizing the working class at the point of production, that is in factories. As these debates reverberated in Los Angeles Newsreel, they came into focus with the group's increased affiliation with the LA Panthers. The crucial event was the murder of Bunchy Carter and John Huggins at UCLA in February 1968, a murder that both the Panthers and Newsreel believed to have been committed by Ron Karenga's US organization.<sup>5</sup> Concurrent developments in the wake of this murder created a crisis that led first to an attempt to create a working-class cinema in Los Angeles— but then, almost immediately, to the repudiation of this attempt.

In response to the murders, L.A. Newsreel decided to devote their filmmaking efforts to a history of the black struggle, one that presented the RYM understanding of the Panthers and that would also be immediately useful to them in recruiting members. The initial treatment, written by Ron Abramson under the title *Two Revolutionary Brothers*, took as its point of departure

**“The crucial part of [LA Newsreel’s] work became ‘giving the wrap,’ that is, drawing general political conclusions from the situations portrayed in various films.”**

the difference between the Panthers’ class analysis of the situation of Black people and the cultural nationalism of the US organization, emphasizing the former’s community services rather than their militarism. This key analytic distinction was sustained through the many revisions to the project developed in collaboration with the L.A. Panthers, a collaboration that also included Newsreel’s attempt to educate the Panthers into an internationalized analysis of their position by screening the Vietnamese films for them. As work proceeded on what was known informally as the

Panther Liberation film, its topics extended to include footage that they discovered of John Huggins speaking at UCLA; newly photographed documentation of the Breakfast Program; a long interview with LA chapter head and Panther Minister of Education, Masai Hewitt; coverage of demonstrations and parades in South Central Los Angeles during summer 1969; material about the US organization; and a closing montage of images of armed Third World revolutionaries marching with guns held high, set to a frenetic recording by John Coltrane.

Early versions were shown to the Panthers, to members of Newsreel and other documentary filmmakers held at the Fox Venice theater with the overall response being favorable, though the film was felt to be extremely explosive. In winter of 1969, Arthur, Schiffrin, Hinkle, and other members of the group went to live in the Black community, setting up a commune in a house on 39th Street near Broadway, close to the Panther headquarters at 4115 South Central. Here they were in regular contact with the Panthers, and the project expanded its scope to include the international dimension of the black struggle, though it still asserted that the Panthers were its revolutionary arm. But even while L.A. Newsreel was subordinating itself to the Panthers, other developments were sowing the seeds of a move in a contrary direction.

At the same time as they were involved in film work, the most politically self-conscious core of the group came to realize that the fragmentation of the Movement in mid-1969 presaged the imminent demise of progressive political initiatives, which in turn persuaded them of the priority of further study along the lines of RYM II’s Maoist advocacy of the integration of radical intellectuals within the working class. Consisting primarily of Jonathan Arthur, Peter and Judy Belsito, George Cole, Christine Hansen, Dennis Hicks, Steve Karatzas, Elinor Schiffrin, Stephanie Waxman, Charlie Wilcotz, and Bill Floyd (who, though sent to reign in ultra-leftism of this kind and keep the group active in film production and distribution, had himself been influenced by the Los Angeles position), this group undertook to educate themselves

in classical and contemporary Marxist theory, working with radicals including Jim Fite (who by this time was affiliated with the Watts-based California Communist League (CCL), Mike Klonsky (of RYM II), Marv Treiger (also of RYM II, and a member of the Maoist Bay Area Revolutionary Union), and David Lamm, (a CCL liaison to Newsreel). By late 1969, the Los Angeles Newsreel had been essentially colonized by ex-SDS members and had developed a critical mass of activists committed to building a revolutionary political party. Given the restructuring of local capital that would take place in the next decade, the selective deindustrialization and the wholesale deunionization that caused unionization rates in Los Angeles county to drop in the 1970s from over 30% to about 23%, a more heroic and inspired decision can hardly be imagined.<sup>6</sup> They formed a preparatory LA Collective, but this also split and many of its members sooner or later joined the CCL.

As Bill Nichols noted, this shift from Newsreel being a loose umbrella for heterogeneous individuals to being a disciplined, democratically-centralized collective happened "six months ahead of San Francisco" (which became dominated by the spontaneist Weatherman faction) and year and a half ahead of New York (248). Once the "Hollywood Newsreel," Los Angeles was now the "Maoist Newsreel," and those members not willing to abandon immediate cultural work in favor of disciplined preparation for long-term political organizing in factories began to drift away.<sup>7</sup> The "Panther Liberation film" was the immediate casualty. As the members with the most serious political commitment began to consider theories of the situation of Black people according to the older, Communist Party model proposed by Harry Haywood (1978) that emphasized the need for Black people to secure their own homeland, they drew away from the Panther position which, as articulated by Eldridge Cleaver, refused to limit the Black nation to a specific geographical area. These developments, not dissimilar to the debates that had split SDS, caused numerous discussions and further recuts of the film. Then disaster struck.

On 8 December 1969, two days after the Illinois police murdered Deputy Chairman, Fred Hampton, the LAPD in collaboration with the FBI destroyed the Los Angeles Panther headquarters. The building had been so well fortified by Geronimo Pratt (using in part materials supplied by Newsreel members) that its occupants were able to hold off the police attack for five hours. Only community presence and support prevented the Panthers from being murdered but, coming after the sustained police offensive of the previous years, the destruction of the building effectively ended Panther leadership of the Black community in Los Angeles, opening the road for the recrudescence of the gangs. The film was again reconstructed, with added footage of the police presence and the destroyed building. The last version, a work print with a separate synchronized sound track, was called *Repression*.<sup>8</sup>

*Repression* opens with a collage of images of black people, alternating scenes of labor and imprisonment (picking cotton, on chain-gangs, working garbage trucks, the arrest of a young black man) with street scenes that include extended close-ups on people's faces. Accompanied by an Ornette Coleman free jazz recording, the sequence culminates with a reverse zoom out from Margaret Bourke-White's 1937 photograph, *Louisville Flood* that depicts a line of destitute black people standing in front of an American Way billboard with cheery white faces and the slogan, "World's Highest Standard of Living." Before a wall of revolutionary posters, Masai Hewitt argues that racism in the United States is fundamentally a by-product of economic structures: the enslavement of black people reflected their function in the cotton industry, just as the oppression of Chinese immigrants followed their utility in building the railroads. The

Cleaver and, over images of Klan atrocities, by the voice of Elaine Brown. Introduced by an Elaine Brown song asserting the need for armed self-defense, the next section juxtaposes images of the breakfast program and other Panther activities in the black community with the invasive presence of the LAPD. Archival footage of John Huggins and Bunchy Carter lead into the indictment of Ron Karenga's responsibility for their murder; they were killed, Brown asserts, not by white or uniformed pigs, but by black pigs. The state's sanction of the US's pro-capitalist and pro-imperialist version of Black Pride is evidenced by Karenga's association with the Rockefellers, who funded his gas station enterprises in the black community. After further footage of the community and the funeral of Huggins and Carter, the film returns to the breakfast program, asserting that it serves all hungry children, not just black ones, with a voice-over attacking the economic system that pays farmers not to grow wheat while children starve. Shots of the LAPD's para-military forces introduce footage of the destroyed Panther headquarters and ongoing police harassment of the community.

The final section assembles shots from other Newsreel-distributed films about armed anti-colonial struggles in Africa, Latin America and Asia, which are accompanied by a sequence of short speeches, three by Newsreel members and one by David Hilliard. Explaining that the police destruction of the Panthers was caused by their political analysis and by their encouraging of all oppressed people to take up arms in their own self-defense, these speeches assert the need for a unified global struggle. As Mao teaches, the working class of capitalist countries must support liberation struggles in colonized countries, and vice-versa. Images of factory workers in the US are included in the collage of Third World resistance fighters, and the final voice concludes: "We have to unite as one people led by the working class: black, brown, yellow, red and white, man and woman."

*Repression's* mix of miscellaneous documentary images (interviews and other original material, archival footage, news photos, etc.) knitted together with a similar collage of voice-overs was the most common form of all Newsreel films. Made when that mode had matured—and by people who had had considerable experience in screening and discussing other Newsreels' films—this one is distinguished by the robust economy of its rhetoric and structure. Where earlier films had sometimes been indulgent and loose, *Repression* is terse and economical; where they had sometimes been diffuse and meandering, this is concise, explicit, and persuasive. The political analysis is fully mature, and the various sections of the film—the historical overview, the murders of Huggins and Carter, the work of the Los Angeles Panthers, and the anti-colonial struggles—are all specifically focused on the analysis of capitalism. In contrast to *Off the Pig*—the film made by San Francisco Newsreel in collaboration with the Oakland BPP in 1968 and the film whose showing in Los Angeles prompted the formation of the Newsreel—the overall frame of analysis is internationalist. Both films fully endorse the Panthers and fully recognize that their socialist affiliations have caused the state to attempt to destroy them. But in *Repression*, support for the Panthers is specifically translated into the need for a global working-class struggle against capital. And such an analysis is reproduced in the film's own form, intrinsic to its material existence. Given the exclusion of the black working class from film schools and other institutions of cinema at the time, *Repression* could not have been made except by an alliance of white students with the Panthers. Nor could the international dimension of the struggle have been fully figured except by means of images from the films from Viet Nam and Africa that the other Newsreels had introduced into the US. By incorporating these into its own body, *Repression* positions itself as part of a global revolt. No other Newsreel work is better structured or more compelling, and none better links the local and the global struggles.

But it was abandoned. *Repression* was left as a work-print along with the original negatives in cardboard boxes that were shuffled from one ex-member to another but not opened for more than a quarter of a century.

When the work-print was screened in Hollywood for the potential sympathizers, they responded that the New Left had become as doctrinaire as the Old, and no funds for completion costs were raised. The California Communist League were also critical, arguing that the film had become too extremely radical a call to revolutionary action to be effective as a union organizing tool among the working class. And the Panthers, who in any case had been distressed that what had started as an overview of them and their role in the liberation struggle had shifted its emphasis onto the industrial proletariat generally, had been effectively destroyed. With the destruction of the Panthers and the ex-Newsreel members' turn to the international working class, there no longer existed any immediate agency who could serve as a focus for organizing; and since the political vision that had fueled it—that is, of the BPP as the domestic vanguard of a global revolution—no longer had any objective existence, *Repression* no longer had a function. By the end of 1970, the formal dissolution of Los Angeles Newsreel was announced to the other branches, though the political study group described above continued until May 1971<sup>9</sup>. Some members drifted away from political movements, while others became avowed communists, taking jobs at General Motors, Union Carbide, and similar local factories, and committing themselves to the long-term strategy of organizing the most exploited members of the industrial working class. The resignation earlier that spring of Stephanie Waxman, one of the branch's earliest members, who had continued her own work as a painter, plangently figures the aesthetic impasse into which history had brought the group. Scheduled to lead a discussion of *Mao Tse-Tung's Talk at the Yen'an*

**“No other Newsreel work [*Repression*] is better structured or more compelling, and none better links the local and the global struggles.”**

*Forum*, she concluded that Mao's imposition of a rigid, party-dictated, political line was inimical to a fully human art practice. She consequently felt obliged to drop out of the rump of an organization which, as completely as any in the West, had attempted to integrate themselves with the working class, simultaneously teaching them and learning from them. The abandonment of *Repression* thus tells the story of its historical moment, one that the film itself could not tell: though there was no real possibility of armed insurrection in the US, the corporate state did everything it could to repress working-class consciousness and working-class culture.

### III.

The specificity of the Los Angeles Newsreel— its rapid politicization, the closeness with which it worked with the Black Panther Party, its failure to complete and distribute *Repression*, and the core members' move into factory organizing— must be understood within the his-



tory of the national Newsreel movement as a whole and the international wave of early 1970's guerrilla cinemas, the "Third Cinemas" of which it was in part the inspiration (Solanas and Gettino [1971] 1976, 45). But it is also necessary that the Los Angeles branch's geographical specificity be recognized, so that it may be understood within the overall history of non-industrial, anti-capitalist cinemas in the city. The historical impossibility of its own completion, and then its own lost history are part of that larger repression.

On the one hand, the trajectory of the group's development reflects the spatiality of the city; the decentered, polynucleated urban structure and the consequent isolation of ethnic and other identity groups that allows local cultural enclaves to flourish clandestinely, also makes the construction of links between them difficult. The geographical segregation inhibited links between, for example, the Panthers and the Chicano and other working-class ethnic communities, and facilitated the LAPD's strategy of isolating and then destroying them. In this context, Newsreel's work with the Panthers was a remarkable achievement, testimony first to the BPP's ability to see beyond the immediacy of their own repression and the issue of race to the fundamental exploitations of capitalist society and second, to the Newsreel members' ability to mobilize across the city's spatial divides and collaborate with different ethnic groups. The coalition demanded a bridge between Venice, where (before gentrification transformed it into a colony for mid-echelon workers in the entertainment industries) bohemians and working-class minorities lived side by side, and South Central, still as ghettoized as it had been in the middle of the decade when riots broke out in Watts. The core members' move from Venice to South Central, and then to the factories figures the transformation in Newsreel's understanding of the terrain of its own political possibilities. But the geography of the original Venice—South Central connection was also important in what it excluded, the spaces that were passed through in the drive from Venice to 39th and Broadway but could not be incorporated into a radical social movement: Beverly Hills, the Westside liberal establishment— and Hollywood.

In the summer of 1969, just as the Newsreel was getting underway, *Easy Rider* was released. Appropriating all the innovations of Underground film and canceling their utopian implications, it showed the industry that, as long as the countercultures were cynically distorted and their failures trumpeted, they too could be successfully exploited and marketed. While Newsreel was photographing the Panthers' breakfast programs, over at MGM, Antonioni was shooting *Zabriskie Point*, his dystopian fantasy about (as the male lead sardonically remarks) "a white man taking up arms with the blacks." In the alienated commercial hollowness of the international bourgeois art film, the result was not the social creativity of revolution but only the spectacle of fucking and destruction, reaching its climax in an ecological catastrophe whose obscenity would not be matched until the firebombing of the Philippine jungles in *Apocalypse Now*, the most obscene apology for the invasion of Viet Nam and the most obscene appropriation of Sixties aesthetics and political radicalism. *Apocalypse Now* was written initially by John Milius and directed by Francis Coppola, graduates respectively of USC and UCLA film schools just a couple of years before some of the original Newsreel members. Clearly, the possibility of Hollywood and its feeder institutions playing a positive role in working-class political movements was no greater in the 1970s than it had been when Potamkin wrote in the 1930s. Hollywood's repressiveness, however, frames the history of LA Newsreel. The smallness of the group, the extremity of its politicization, its singular focus on the most repressed of American people, and even the refusal to finish the film: all these bespeak the absence of any broadly liberal reformist culture in a city where art is in thrall to capital.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Copyright David E. James, 1999. This essay was prepared with the assistance of an Irvine Foundation grant received by the Southern California Studies Center at the University of Southern California.

<sup>2</sup> The only exception, and so the only printed source for information on the L.A. Newsreel is Bill Nichols' UCLA M.A. thesis (1972), which has a chapter on the branch. The present account is based on interviews with several people who were members of the LA Newsreel, conducted in July 1997. For overviews of the Newsreel movement generally see Nichols 1980, and James 1989, 213–36.

<sup>3</sup> UCLA film school, and in particular a special program founded in 1968 for minorities called the Ethno-Communications Program, was instrumental in approximately the same period for the inauguration of important African and Asian American cinemas in Los Angeles.

<sup>4</sup> Descriptions are given by Bill Nichols (1972, 341); no copy of the Prospectus has been found. Nichols also mentions a proposed film on AWOL GI's and the Resistance effort that created a split between "those with pacifist, humanitarian sentiments and those with a more explicit Marxist perspective" (2440). None of these projects were completed, though material shot for the first was included in *Repression*, discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter was Deputy Minister of Defense of the Los Angeles Panthers. Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt was also Deputy Minister of Defense, and Elaine Brown, Deputer Minister of

Communications. Huggins, Cater, Pratt, and Brown were all enrolled in UCLA's High Potential Program, a special program for ghetto youth (Brown 1992, 153). The Los Angeles chapter had a considerable support, not only in the Black community, but also in the liberal academy, "appealing to brothers and sisters from both Slauson and UCLA" in the words of Panther Defense Minister, David Hilliard (Hilliard and Cole 193, 234). US (for United Slaves) was a cultural nationalist organization led by Ron Karenga, violently hostile to the Panthers' trans-racial socialist program. Again according to Hilliard, in the fall of 1969, between the LAPD and US, the [Los Angeles] chapter lived under siege (259).

<sup>6</sup> Figures from Soja 1989, 203.

<sup>7</sup> For New York and San Francisco's, mostly unsympathetic, attitudes to LA's theoretical advances, see Nichols 972, 245–46.

<sup>8</sup> These were discovered in Jonathan Arthur's possession in August 1997.

<sup>9</sup> The films the group possessed continued to be distributed by local radical bookstores, first the Long March then Midnight Special, but without the accompanying speakers that the Newsreel had emphasized. Eventually they were donated to the Southern California Library for Social Studies & Research.

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# AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE CHOY

Scott MacDonald (with collaborators Allan Siegel,  
Worth Long and Renee Tajima)

*A Critical Cinema 3*

University of California Press, 1998

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One of the more significant developments in recent years, at all levels of film production, has been the emergence of films from particular ethnic communities that have traditionally; been left out of film history, except as fodder for stereotyping by mainstream directors. Scholars have begun chronicling not only African-American film, but Chicano film, Native American film, and Asian-American film. For many filmmakers working out of these particular ethnic contexts, the major goals seem to be providing honest testimony about the experience of living within their particular communities and making contact with their cultural heritages. In most cases the resulting films are "critical" primarily on the level of content: they provide cinematic representation for major dimensions of modern experience routinely ignored by the mass media. A distinguished instance of this pattern is Christine Choy's *From Spikes to Spindles* (1976), "the first film ever done on the experience of Chinese-American women," as Choy says in our interview. Choy's film bears witness to contemporary Chinese-American life in New York's Chinatown by focusing on the demonstrations that followed the police beating of Peter Yen and relates this then-current controversy to the history of the Chinese, and especially of Chinese women, in the United States. Produced by Third World Newsreel, *From Spike to Spindles* uses a conven-

tional mixture of narration, archival footage, talking heads, and candid on-the-street footage to bear witness to the complexity of the Chinese-American past and present and to polemicize for broader ethnic representation in American life.

*From Spikes to Spindles* established Choy as a significant force in the development of an Asian-American cinema, but in retrospect, it was also an early landmark in a career that evolved in an unconventional direction, toward forms of critique that often distinguish Choy's work. By the time she made *Mississippi Triangle* (1984), in collaboration with Allan Siegel and Worth Long (both of whom share co-director credits, though Choy is also credited as project director,



*From Spikes to Spindles*, Christine Choy, *Third World Newsreel*, 1976.

producer, and as one of the principal cinematographers), Choy had become less interested in the continuities of particular ethnic heritages than with the intersections of the multiple ethnicities that coexist within virtually any community in America: in this particular film, with the European-Americans, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans living in the Mississippi Delta region. Originally conceived as an inter-ethnic project, in terms of both subject matter and production—those sections focusing on each of the three ethnic groups would be shot by

a director and crew of the same or a closely related ethnicity (Choy had hoped Charles Burnett would take charge of the African-American segment, and Burnett did do some of the original research in Mississippi). The finished film is peppered with moments that provide an unusual, but quite powerful critique of conventional film expectations with regard to ethnicity.

In several instances during *Mississippi Triangle*, we hear stories of life in Mississippi spoken in the thickest good-ol-boy southern accent imaginable, only to discover that the speaker is Chinese-American: the effect is startling and provides a memorable critique both of the Hollywood tradition of marginalizing Asian-Americans by having them speak in stereotypical "Asian-American" accents, and of traditional northern assumptions about southern "good-ol' boys." While much of *Mississippi Triangle* focuses on relatively familiar elements of the American South, Choy's sections focus on various ways in which Chinese-Americans have negotiated a personal, social, and professional space between the European-American and African-American experiences in the Delta. Her particular interest in Arlee Hen, the daughter of a Chinese-American father and an African-American mother, was so controversial among the Delta's Chinese-American community (though long the object of bias and racism, the community has its own biases as well) that some Chinese-American locals wrote letters to PBS asking that *Mississippi Triangle* not be broadcast.

The complex intersections of ethnicity have remained, at least for me, the most interesting and most "critically" effective dimension of Choy's prolific career, and they are central

in her most conventionally successful film (receiving an Academy Award nomination for Best Feature Documentary), *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1988), a collaboration with Renee Tajima. *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* focuses on the case—first a criminal case and subsequently a federal civil rights case—of Chin, who was beaten to death with a baseball bat outside a Detroit bar by Ronald Ebens. Ebens murdered Chin believing he was Japanese and, therefore, responsible for the economic doldrums of the Detroit auto manufacturers: that is, Chin’s death was a result of Ebens’s inability to distinguish between a Japanese and a Chinese person. When Ebens went free, on the grounds that the murder was self defense, Chinese-Americans responded in protest, but the resulting civil rights trial freed Ebens a second time. For Choy the ethnic confusion at the heart of the case, and the larger context of Detroit— with its large economically disenfranchised African-American population and its various European-American communities with their own ethnic heritages— provided an opportunity to explore the relationship between ethnicity and the American Dream, and, at least implicitly, to critique the simplicity of most ethnic representations in commercial film and television.

Choy has continued to explore the intersections of ethnicity in a number of recent films, including *Yellow Tale Blues* (1990), co-made with Renee Tajima, a personal documentary about Choy’s immigrant Chinese/Korean-American family and Tajima’s native Japanese-American family; and *Sa-I-Gu* (“April 29th”), a 1993 documentary about Korean-Americans during the “LA Rebellion” of 1992. She lives in New York City, where in addition to producing films, she is currently the director of the Graduate Film Program at NYU.

I talked with Choy in New York City in April 1994. Since Choy has nearly always worked collaboratively, I have interviewed several of her collaborators. I spoke with Allan Siegel and with Worth Long (about *Mississippi Triangle*) on the phone. I sent Renee Tajima questions about several projects, including *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* Tajima wrote responses. The comments of these collaborators—Siegel’s and Long’s in interview form; Tajima’s in excerpts from her letter of September 27, 1997—are bracketed within my conversation with Choy.

**MacDonald:** I was looking at your vita and was surprised to learn you had studied physics and architecture. How did you get into film?

**Choy:** Long story. I was really good at physics when I was in high school in Korea. We studied physics, chemistry, English, Chinese literature, geography, history, and Korean. But I was in love with fuckin’ physics! That’s why I was good at it, and I studied hard so I could get perfect scores. Actually, I was even better at Chinese language and literature. I read a lot when I was in high school. But no one really encouraged me with that. Of course, physics also made it easier to come here from Korea. My grades were pretty high, but the Americans had no way to evaluate my level of Chinese language and literature, so they looked at my science courses.

**MacDonald:** You’re half Chinese, half Korean, right?

**Choy:** Right. So I was pretty well equipped in Chinese history, geography, and language, but I had no idea about the rest of the world! In 1967, I arrived here. They told me I was too young to be enrolled in college so I got shuffled back into high school, Catholic high school [the High School of the Sacred Heart in New York City], and there I improved my English and tried to learn Western civilization. Basically, I went to classes and didn’t understand a word of what people were saying—except in math class. Then, in 68, I had a physical check-up and they

found a scar in my lung...

**MacDonald:** TB?

**Choy:** Yeah, TB. The TB germ normally takes three to six months to grow so in order to be sure whether mine was active or nonactive, I was shipped to Grassland Hospital in Westchester County and got locked up for six months.

**MacDonald:** Is that how you got to Manhattanville College?

**Choy:** Right. At the hospital, they won't let me read; they don't want me to do this, they don't want me to do that. I'm the youngest person in the ward. Everybody just gets sucked into the television: *As the World Turns*, *General Hospital*. I watch the soaps and I watch people die. I was so bored there. I did ceramics: a little angel, a little bell, a little ashtray—they sold them at Christmas time. Actually, I kind of liked doing that, and some of the nurses thought I was good at it, and that I should be an artist. Later, I came back to Manhattanville where I was pretty much segregated—I didn't even have a roommate—because everybody was scared I was still infected,

though the medical records said I was calcified. The kids were pretty unfriendly, with a few exceptions—especially one girl from Jamaica; she and I are still good friends. And one Chinese girl from a right-wing family from West Virginia and one girl from an Italian neighborhood. I was really miserable there.

**“For Choy the ethnic confusion at the heart of the case... provided an opportunity to explore the relationship between ethnicity and the American Dream.”**

**MacDonald:** Did you have family in the States?

**Choy:** No one. I came all by myself. I arrive at Kennedy Airport with sixty dollars in my pocket, and I wait and wait and, finally,

these two girls in a flaming red sports car are there, screaming at me, saying they come from the school. It was September and I didn't know it got so cold here. I didn't know anything about here. The next day they took me to Macy's and I spent all sixty dollars on clothes.

Anyway, I stayed at Manhattanville for one semester plus a summer; then I transferred. Basically I told them I was born to study architecture. I don't know where I got that. I guess I figured it was something in between physics and art. The nuns helped me choose a school, and I transferred to Barnard. Barnard didn't have an architecture school, so I was taking classes at Columbia and, of course, I couldn't keep up, my grades were terrible. But at Columbia I met Bucky [Buckminster] Fuller, who was teaching there and he had this weird idea that you should go to places in the boondocks and build geodesic domes. The following semester he was teaching in Carbondale, Illinois, and at Washington University in St. Louis. I followed him and registered at Washington University.

After babysitting for a while (it drove me crazy), somehow I got a job at HOK (Helmuth, Obada, and Kassabaum, the biggest architecture company in the Midwest). They designed Pruitt-Igoe, the huge housing complex in St. Louis, where nothing worked and there was such a high crime rate that finally they blew it up. So I work there a little bit, go to school, smoke a lotta pot, drop a lotta acid, and do surrealist drawings, paintings, and sculptures. My best friend was Larry Bullard—he's married to Deborah Shaffer [documentarian whose films include *The Wobblies* (1979), *Witness to War* (1984), *Fire from the Mountain* (1987)] now: small world, right?

**MacDonald:** This is when?

**Choy:** Nineteen sixty-nine to 1971. The Vietnam War was going on, and the Washington University campus was always on strike. I was not political at all and had no idea what was happening. By this time, me and Larry and a whole bunch of other people in St. Louis—we wanted to do a Bauhaus. We had this vision that since Princeton, New Jersey, was in the country, we could get a farm and live and work in a barn there, and manufacture our own art and make a living. We decided I would be the pioneer to go and check out New Jersey. So I went to Princeton. Why Princeton? I don't know: I figured at least it's pretty. They accepted me. But there's no money. So no farms. No barns. No Bauhaus.

At Princeton, I met a bunch of radical philosophers, activists, Marxists. When the Cambodian bombing started, the whole campus shut down (we still did independent study and wrote papers); and I followed the radicals and we demanded a Third World center for minorities. We had these study groups, and we were talking about dialectical materialism, all kinds of things. I had *no* idea what it all meant. *No* idea, honestly! It was fuckin' crazy.

That summer, I went to Asia on a very cheap flight. During the war, World Airlines shipped GIs to Vietnam and back, and sometimes the flights one way or the other were empty, so they would pick up passengers in Asia and bring them here, and vice versa. To fly from San Francisco through Taiwan to Thailand was something like three hundred dollars. I flew back from Thailand to Korea, stayed in Korea for about two months, and then flew back to Taiwan to catch a flight back to San Francisco.

On my way to San Francisco, I'd hitchhiked from New York. I thought it'd be fun to see America. On my way back I hitched from San Francisco to Tijuana and took a bus to Mexico City. I came back from Ajo, Arizona. What a weird place! When I came back from Asia, I brought this cough medicine, made out of pears. It's famous in Asia for coughs: everybody drinks it. So I'm crossing the border from Mexico to Arizona, and the immigration officers don't know what this pear medicine is. They hold me overnight. I looked like a hippy—long hair, sunglasses, bell-bottom pants, camera, little backpack. Finally they released me and I took the Greyhound to New York.

I was fed up with Princeton. I got a job at a place called the Urban Institute, part of Essex Community College in Newark, and somehow drifted in with this radical group. They all lived in a housing complex called Iron Bound, New Jersey. That's where Tom Hayden, Steve Friedman, and Norman Fruchter thought the Revolution was going to start. They were all SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. A huge group of people were living in this compound when I moved in. I was working with the New Jersey chapter of the Black Panthers, leafleting in front of stores



party newspaper, *Seize the Time*. Elaine Brown was there, and Eldridge [Clever]; lots of people came in and out.

I transferred back to Columbia to continue studying architecture, and moved back to New York and worked on the Panther 21 trial and hung around with a lot of Panthers. One day, Norman Fruchter came by my house, and said, "Chris, you draw really well—what do you really want to be?" Absolutely out of the blue, I said, "I want to be a filmmaker."

**MacDonald:** Were you a moviegoer as a child?

**Choy:** When I was a kid in Shanghai, we saw a lot of movies from Russia, and from Central Europe—Czechoslovakia, Poland—and there were also Chinese domestic movies. Not that much: revolutionary stuff with heroes and heroines. Then later, in Korea, I saw a lot of movies imported from the United States, and Korea also made its own domestic films, tragic mostly (it was a good movie if you cried your butt out). When I came to the United States I had no money, no time to see movies.



Photograph of Christine Choy.

So Norman told me if I wanted to learn about filmmaking, I should go check out this organization called Newsreel. At that time, Newsreel was very elite, all white. Robert Kramer was there and John Douglas, Peter Barton, Bob Machover, and Norman, who was sort of the leader of the gang. Also, Deborah Shaffer. Newsreel was up at Thirty-second Street and Seventh Avenue, next to Madison Square Garden. So I went for an interview. Oh my God, it was pretty scary. I wore a fancy outfit: I was going to a

movie company. There was a thick door and I knocked and somebody opened the peephole and looked at me. "Who are you!" he said, and I said, "Norman Fruchter sent me," so they opened the door. It's Propaganda Night, and a bunch of people are sitting around watching a movie: Geri Ashur's *Janie's Janie* [1972, directed by Ashur and Peter Barton]. I'm standing in the back, thinking, "This film is a little strange!"—because it's about a working-class woman from Ironbound, but the funny thing is that every time she talk about her experiences as a single, working mother, she points out her best friend who's a black woman, and the picture cuts to that black woman; but throughout the entire film, the black woman doesn't say a word! So I find that odd, and I raise my hand and say, "How come you don't allow *her* to say something?" And that just blew everybody away. Some thought that I was an agent provocateur; some thought I was correct.

I was accepted by Newsreel, but I had to have PE, political education, twice a week, and I had to clean films at night. After three months of PE, I was accepted as a member of the Newsreel Collective. Newsreel at that time had a lot of chapters. There was Boston, Wash-

ington DC, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, Vermont, Chicago, Montreal, I don't remember where else. They made films every week and traveled around in the "Blue Van": using rear projection, they showed work prints in all kinds of places.

When I arrived, the biggest talk about *Janie's Janie* and *The Woman's Film* [1970], which was made at San Francisco Newsreel by three women [Louise Alaimo, Judy Smith, Ellen Sorin] and had become a hit. Every campus was dying to see that film and *Columbia Revolt* [1969]. A lot of the Vietnam films were big hits, and Newsreel was getting a lot of films from Cuba and North Vietnam. They had a big collection of Santiago Alvarez's films.

Later on, I got promoted to head of distribution and film maintenance, and that's when I got to see all the Newsreel films. But by 1973, Newsreel was beginning to split. Among the whites, there were big fights between the haves and the have-nots. The people who came from Ivy League schools were the haves, those from City College were the have-nots. (I was in an Ivy League school, but I was Third World, so they didn't know how to classify me.)

**MacDonald:** Had you made films by this time?

**Choy:** Yeah. I was allowed to make my first film *Teach Our Children* [1972], with Sue Robeson, using money from the Newsreel trust funds. We worked really cheap! The film cost something like two thousand dollars. During the time I was making that film, Newsreel split into several collectives. There was one on 72nd Street, one in Brooklyn, and Third World Collective, which I started. A National Central Committee was formed, and I was elected. There was a laboratory in Boston. We did all the processing by ourselves, underground.

**MacDonald:** Did the Third World Collective become Third World Newsreel?

**Choy:** Sort of, yeah. In 1974, all the whites left, and that's when I changed the name to Third World Newsreel. It was a big mess. We were trying to unite people along color lines, so of course it didn't work. And then there was robbery: a lot of cameras got stolen by someone in the organization. Sue Robeson and I moved and started to organize it all over again. Then Larry Bullard came in, and Allan Siegel came back from the old Newsreel.

**MacDonald:** So around 1974, '75 you start to make films regularly?

**Choy:** Yeah, we had to because all the trust funds got pulled out. We were left with a bunch of films and very little equipment. A few Bolexes. No sync cameras. We didn't know what to do with the films. A lot of them never got finished, including one on the Black Panther party by Beverly Grant, *Beat of the People*. So I had to apply for grants. In 1974, I applied to the New York State Council on the Arts [NYSCA] for ten thousand dollars to make four fuckin' films. Four! I think I was crazy. One of the films was *From Spikes to Spindles*, and the NYSCA people loved it: it was the first of its kind.

**MacDonald:** "First of its kind" in what way?

**Choy:** The first film ever done on the experience of Asian-American women. It was shown on ABC, Capital City, and on Channel 13, which was a big thing. But I had no idea what I was doing! I didn't know you can't sell a film to two different stations at the same time. And the

rights were not clear. Bob Marley gave me “Stand Up, Get Up” for twenty-five dollars. The film was shot in reversal, real cheap, but it was also the first color film from Newsreel. It went to a lot of festivals—one of the few Newsreel films that did. It was picked up by Bill Sloan at MoMA. There were a lot of reviews of *From Spikes to Spindles* from the Chinatown press and local people thought it was good. Now I look at it and think, “Goddamn, what a piece of junk!” Every year after that, I applied for grants from NYSCA, and we got funding from 1974 to 1984.

**MacDonald:** How did *Inside Women Inside* [1978] do?

**Choy:** That film was also shot really cheap. We went to Rikers Island, and we went to Raleigh, North Carolina, to the maximum security prison where Joanne Little was held (she was accused of killing a guard in self-defense). The camera was really jerky and we had no lights. I don’t know how we did it.

**MacDonald:** So until *Mississippi Triangle*, you made a series of formally similar documentaries...

**Choy:** With the exception of *Loose Pages Bound* [1978], which was commissioned by ABC after *From Spikes to Spindles*. I hate that film. It was about the Asian-American experience in the Delaware Valley. In one fuckin’ hour, they wanted me to do five different nationalities: Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Cambodian, and Vietnamese! But I did it, delivered it, and then went on to

make *To Love, Honor and Obey* [1980], *Bittersweet Survival* [1981], *Mississippi Triangle*, and *Namibia: Independence Now* [1984].

**“[From Spikes to Spindles was] the first ever film done on the experience of Asian-American women.”**

**MacDonald:** All these were funded primarily by grants?

**Choy:** *Namibia: Independence Now* was funded by the United Nations. I got an all-African-American crew to go to Angola, Zambia, Botswana,

Zimbabwe, Mozambique. We tried to get into South Africa, but I was not allowed in because Chinese were classified as colored (Japanese were considered white!). We did have a Japanese kid on the crew—J.T. Takagi—but she couldn’t do the filming by herself. We couldn’t figure out a way in. The film got done and the United Nations liked it, but there were twenty-four different countries supervising me. It was just a propaganda film for Namibia. They show it all over the world—except in the United States—so it served its function.

**MacDonald:** It seems very uncharacteristic of you, especially since it focuses on only one race. What interests me about your work is your mixing and scrambling of ethnic groups. At the Soviet-American Flaherty Film Seminar, you told me my paper on “global cinema” (now “transnational” is a more common term) was “shit” because—I remember verbatim—“You don’t have to go around the world to be international, you just have to cross the street.”

**Choy:** Right, right, right.

**MacDonald:** *Mississippi Triangle* is the first of your films that really speaks to that idea.

**Choy:** Yeah. *Mississippi Triangle* was funded by the NEH, with what was, at that time, a really big budget for me: \$165,000! That film supported the entire staff of Third World Newsreel—salaries, overhead, everything!—for months. Making that film was a big mess, too. I collaborated with Allan Siegel, who was the editor (he also edited *From Spikes to Spindles*, and *To Love, Honor and Obey*). And then we got into a big fight, because he wanted to direct.

**MacDonald:** Formally, it's a conventional documentary—a lot of talking heads. There are some nice formal moments: that opening shot, for example, where we think the train is moving, but then realize it's the camera. But what I find interesting and novel are those almost surreal moments where we hear this down-home southern drawl and then see this Oriental face speaking. It throws all the movie dialogue we've ever heard from Chinese-Americans into a new context, and we confront how limited our sense of ethnic experience is. I assume that these moments are the heart of the film for you.



*Mississippi Triangle*, Christine Choy/Worth Long/Allan Siegel, Third World Newsreel, 1984.

**Choy:** Yes, that was the heart of the film. Unfortunately, things didn't work out the way I originally wanted. The film was extremely well received in Berlin; but in New York, it was disastrous! Too long. Too slow. And people literally asked me to do subtitles.

**MacDonald:** Because of the southern accents?

**Choy:** Because of the southern accents. *Mississippi Triangle* was difficult to distribute. PBS didn't

want to take it in the original length (120 minutes) so we cut it to a shorter version (76 minutes). Again, they turned it down, and they still think it should be subtitled. So that was one problem. The second problem is that the film was originally conceptualized with a focus, but during the process of making the film, the focus got lost. Originally, my idea was not only that the finished film would talk about race relations, but that the process of making the film should speak to the same issues. I would direct the Chinese sections, and use an all-Asian crew— Chinese, some Japanese; Charles Burnett would direct the black sections, using an all-black crew...

**MacDonald:** He has a credit for camera work.

**Choy:** Right. He did the initial research in Mississippi, and at one point was going to do the black section. Allan Siegel was going to do the white section (we weren't going to tell anyone there that Allan is Jewish). It was almost like guerrilla filmmaking. When the Asian crew finished, we passed on the car and the equipment to the black crew in the middle of the night, and they went on to do their thing (Worth Long, not Charles, was in charge). Then they passed the equipment on to the white crew. I wanted to have an insider point of view within each ethnic situation. Wrong! Obviously wrong! And Worth was not really a filmmaker; he was more

interested in the southern black folk arts. And Allan was interested more in southern literature. I was interested in the day-to-day life of the Chinese people caught between blacks and whites. When the material came back, it should have had an outside editor to cut it and give it focus. From my point of view, the narrative structure should have been built around the schizophrenia of the Delta Chinese. They bounce to the white; they bounce to the black. That's the film.

**MacDonald:** And also what we don't know about the South.

**Choy:** Exactly. The audience would learn something new. Allan's footage doesn't mean anything to me; it just drives me crazy. And there's so much to cover among the blacks! Worth should have focused on the blacks' relationship to the Chinese. Unfortunately, the blacks mostly talk about their relationship to the whites. And the white people: their focus should be the Chinese, but they have their own hang-ups. When I first wrote the NEH proposal, it had a very sharp focus on the Mississippi Chinese. My proposal was based on research by James Loewen, who did his doctoral thesis in sociology at Harvard on the Mississippi Chinese [James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Loewen completed his dissertation in 1968].

**MacDonald:** For all your reservations, *Mississippi Triangle* does accomplish a lot of what you had in mind.

**Choy:** Well, maybe people appreciate it more now because these days we're talking multiculturalism. At that time I think it was too early for people to understand the film's dynamics. *Mississippi Triangle* grew out of my personal life. I was very close with the Black Panther party and had a lot of close black friends at Third World Newsreel. Meanwhile, I'm married to Allan, a white guy! So I lived that schizophrenia. When I went to a Chinese restaurant with a white, no problem; but if I'd go with a black, they don't even want to talk to me! In Mississippi, the Chinese community hated *Mississippi Triangle*. We did a tour around the South, and in Mississippi the Chinese protested. They didn't want to deal with the black-Chinese part of their history at all, and they wanted me to focus on the success stories. They wrote a letter to PBS, asking them not to broadcast the film. The same thing happened later with *Homes Apart: The Two Koreas* [1991]: the Korean Cultural Council wrote a letter to PBS and the NEH saying tax money should not pay for that kind of film.

**MacDonald:** I want to get this straight: the Asian-Americans in Mississippi complained that you had focused on the wrong Asian-Americans?

**Choy:** Right. They were angry that I focused on Arlee Hen. And also on the Goons. Mr. Goon is married to a black woman (their kid is a television cameraman now), but unfortunately Mrs. Goon refused to be on camera. There are quite a few black-Chinese. I went back three years ago and visited all those people again. Most of them are still in the same place, and they remembered me, so it was pretty interesting. The young girl who went out with the black guy had a kid and moved to Memphis. She didn't want to talk about her experiences at all.

[I spoke with Allan Siegel on July 27, 1995.]

**MacDonald:** What do you remember about the origin of the *Mississippi Triangle* project?

**Siegel:** I can't remember the exact chronology but there were two critical elements. One was coming across James Loewen's book. The other was this Chinese guy from Mississippi that Chris and I met in Philadelphia when we were working on *Loose Pages Bound*. The *Mississippi Triangle* project was divided into two stages. We got a research grant and later a production grant. During the research phase of the project, the idea of breaking the project up into different teams developed more validity, at least partly because these three communities in the Delta didn't talk to each other a whole lot.

**MacDonald:** During the shooting, were all three of you directors, or was Chris in charge?

**Siegel:** All three of us worked pretty independently, as directors. I mean Chris would review the footage everyone shot but it was not from the point of view of telling us to do this or that. In fact, looking back on that project, I feel that more of that would have helped. One time in Memphis, Chris and I met with Charles Burnett (he's from Vicksburg) to screen footage and to discuss the film. There was always a lot of communication between Chris and myself, just because of our relationship, but I think the other people involved could have used more communication about the project.

**MacDonald:** When the shooting was done, how did the finished film develop? Chris talks about being not completely happy with the final shape of the piece. She feels it needed to focus more specifically on the Chinese-Americans in the Delta.

**Siegel:** Chris and I were collaborators on the editing. During the editing process, we screened one reel of the film at the Independent Feature Project Conference in New York and on the basis of that screening, the film got accepted in Berlin [the Berlin Film Festival] Well, that was it: we were forced to come up with something. We had a tremendous amount of diverse material and we knew that we were not going to resort to a voice-over narration to provide a structure. But an organic structure is difficult to come by. You need time. You have to try different arrangements before you can settle on something that really works. The acceptance at Berlin drastically shortened our time frame, and that was that. You mentioned you were also interviewing Ken Jacobs for your book. I should tell you that after I'd made my first film [*The Grain*, 1966] in Baltimore, and had come to New York, a friend of mine said, "You should take your film over to Ken Jacobs" (this was when Ken was at Millennium Film Workshop). So I did; Ken loved it and, as a result, situated me in New York. I started teaching at the Millennium, and then Ken put the film in this festival of underground film, with Bruce Conner and Bruce Baillie and all the others, a big event at the New Yorker Theater. And then he said there was a friend of his who needed someone to teach film at what was called the Free University of New York over on 14th Street. I began running the film workshop at this free university, and out of that came Newsreel. The first Newsreel film was about the Pentagon demonstration [*Only the Beginning*, 1971]. A group of people from my Free University workshop class had gone to Washington for the demonstration to make a film about it, and Marvin Fishman was making a film about it also. Pieces from those two projects became *No Game* [1967]. There's been a tendency to create a one-dimensional picture of Newsreel, and as a result, the relationship of Newsreel to the underground film movement of that time gets minimized. For example, Jonas Mekas was a pivotal person in the early development of Newsreel.

**MacDonald:** What was his role?

**Siegel:** The first meeting of what became Newsreel took place at Anthology Film Archives, and Jonas came to the first four or five meetings. He'd come with his Nagra and record what was



*No Game* (Newsreel #2), Marvin Fishman/Masanori Oe, Third World Newsreel, 1968.

going on. He still has the original. It was Jonas's style not to be an active participant, but he was an active supporter, and pushed things to happen that allowed a very divergent group of people to coalesce. You had people like Robert Kramer and Norman Fruchter, who were coming from the political filmmaking side of things. But my roots were in experimental film, as were Marvin's. Even today, though I find a lot of experimental film difficult to deal with, I show Bruce Conner and Bruce Baillie and others. I think that's really important work

and not a contradiction to the kind of filmmaker I am. Oh, one last thing about *Mississippi Triangle*. I doubt Mira Nair would admit it, but *Mississippi Masala* (1991) came right out of *Mississippi Triangle*.

**MacDonald:** What's the connection?

**Siegel:** Chris and Mira became friends after Mira came down from Harvard. She had made one documentary, I think, and was working on another, which the Film News Now Foundation, Newsreel's foundation, had become a fiscal sponsor for. We were traveling around the South working on *Mississippi Triangle*, and Mira was coming in and out of the office, hearing all these stories about how every time we go to a motel down in Mississippi, it's run by Indians. We used to talk about how odd it is that different ethnic groups attach themselves to certain occupations in particular parts of the country. You wonder how the hell they got into this. I mean we figured out how the Chinese got to Mississippi, but how did the Indians get to run Mississippi motels! So much gets left out of "film history."

[I spoke with Worth Long on August 4, 1995]

**MacDonald:** I understand that you replaced Charles Burnett on the *Mississippi Triangle* project. I'm curious about how you got involved.

**Long:** They were working in an area where I'd done a lot of work with SNCC (the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) during the sixties. Also, I'd done a film with Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* [1980]. When Chris and Allan asked me to be involved. I said that if we could involve Ludwig Goon (he'd worked with us on *The Land Where the Blues Began*), I'd be willing to co-direct with Allan and Chris.

**MacDonald:** During production how much interaction was there between the three of you.

**Long:** A lot of contact with Chris. In fact Chris went on at least half of our shoots. She was the overall producer. Once you understand that and once you understand her personality [laughter], you realize Chris was in charge. The advantage of breaking up into three groups was that Allan could go into some places, especially to the cotton brokers, and get information they would hesitate to give us. Chris could go into the Chinese communities and have people relax. And I could go into either the African-American or the Afro-Chinese communities. Some people we talked to already knew of my political work in the Delta.

**MacDonald:** Chris expressed reservations about the final structure of the film. She wishes she had focused the whole film more precisely on the Chinese-American community,.

**Long:** I agree with her. *Mississippi Triangle* wasn't scripted, though there was an outline. And her outline, correctly, was to tell the story of the struggles of a Chinese minority in the Delta as it connected to a broader story of exploitation and oppression within the region. I wasn't much

involved in the editing process. Allan and Chris did that. I did review the footage. We were open to doing general footage, not just *Mississippi Triangle*. I remember one time we stopped for a day and shot material of a man on trial for his life. We knew it wasn't going into the film but as

**"So much gets left out of 'film history.'"**

socially conscious filmmakers we had to shoot it. Excellent footage. We also shot material about the political campaign of the first African-American with the opportunity to go to Congress from the district where we were working.

**MacDonald:** Who saw that material?

**Long:** It got archived. Hell, you could have made three films with what we shot but you could make one good film by braiding together material from the three teams.

**MacDonald:** Was *Permanent Wave* [1986] your first attempt at a dramatic fiction film?

**Choy:** No. Before that one, I did a black and white piece with AFI money, *White Flower Passing* [1981], about an older immigrant woman meeting a younger American-born Chinese and the clash of cultures and understanding. Pretty weird film. And then AFI gave me more money and I did *Permanent Wave*. After those two experiences, I thought about moving to narrative for good, so I started working on *Haitian Corner* (1987), directed by Raoul Peck, a feature narrative piece. But I hated doing it – too many people to handle. In narrative you feel so removed, and everybody's ego is so out of control: actors and actresses, camera person, producers, grips. I can't really feel the subject through all that crap. They're all phony—they try to kiss your ass. I hated it!

So I finished *Permanent Wave*, *Monkey King Looks West* [1990], and other odds and ends. Then came *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* It took five years, 1983 to 1985, and was released 1989.

**56 MacDonald:** It took five years because the case lasted so long?



**Choy:** The case lasted years and it took time to raise money and we couldn't get Ronald Ebens to talk with us until the very end. CPB gave us a lot of headaches. By the time I first applied. I had already made a lot of documentaries. But they told me since I didn't have a journalism degree I'm not eligible to do a film on this heavy-duty murder case. I brought Juanita Anderson on board—she has a journalism degree. Then they said I didn't have an audience: "Who's going to watch this film?" The way you secure your immediate audience is by having a television station guarantee to show your film in the area, and Detroit WTVS, Channel 56, was very good about that. The executive director, Bob Larson, was really conscientious, and came in as co-producer. And then the sons-of-bitches at CPB asked me how can I be objective! I said, "I cannot be objective! I can't change my skin!" Blah, blah, blah. So they decided, in order for us to receive CPB money, I have to take along a white story consultant from Frontline, a Mr. Dvasner. I didn't get along with him from Day One. There was a sequence about mud-wrestling: these workers go mud-wrestling on their lunch hour, and they take the mud-wrestling pretty seriously. There they are, drinking their beer and singing the American national anthem. It was a great scene. "You can't use it," he says, "You're degrading the American working class." This Harvard graduate tells me this! He says, "You would never show Chinese that way!" I said, "Bullshit!" A sequence in the film shows the Chinese gambling on mahjong. I told him "To you, I'm degrading the white working class, but to the Chinese. I'm degrading the Chinese community!" Dvasner didn't like the music either. Ultimately, I locked him out of the editing room.

That's when Peter Kinoy was editing. We went through quite a few editors. Peter Kinoy was the first: Molly Smollet was second with Peter as supervising editor. I didn't like Peter's editing because he always argued with me. He wanted to make a propaganda film. Molly didn't know what to do with the material so I got rid of her too. And one day when I was really frustrated, Richard Schmiechen walks in (he produced *The Times of Harvey Milk* [1984], and later died of AIDS) and tells me. 'Three principles: one, the editor should not argue with you about what you want to say politically; two, the editor should really love music; three, the editor should be an experimental filmmaker.' And that's when I found Holly Fisher, an experimental filmmaker, with zero political orientation—or at least she didn't argue politics with me. She knows how to manipulate the nuances of found elements – and she's very eclectic. The first work she did for me was a scene that was shot in a sloppy way, of the girl who was on stage singing this corny Chinese song in a corny dress. Holly cut that sequence together, and I thought it was absolutely brilliant. So Holly stayed.

**MacDonald:** You gave her a particularly emphatic credit.

**Choy:** A single credit, yeah. She worked very well with me. She and Renee hated each other. Big problem. They fought nonstop until the end. Holly wanted to share a co-director credit with me. Renee fought that, and wanted one herself. Neither of them got it!

**MacDonald:** Am I right that part of what drew you to the *Vincent Chin* project was not only the Asian-American issue, but the fact that the events occurred in Detroit, a largely black city?

**Choy:** What drew me into the project was Helen Zia. There was some kind of forum at the NYU Law School, and Helen Zia came. At the time, she was president of American Citizens for Justice. To illustrate her talk, she showed a clip of local television news about a basically open-and-shut case where this Chinese guy, Vincent, got beaten to death. The clip was poorly done. Terrible. I looked at Helen and Helen looked at me, and we remembered each other –

from Princeton – can you believe it? (She was a nerd at that time; I was the crazy one, so we never really spoke.) I said, “Since I’m a filmmaker, why don’t I make a better clip for you to use in raising money for the case.” A little later Mrs. Chin was speaking in San Francisco. I had no money—no money—and this guy from the Asian Ministry of the Presbyterian Church, Wesley Woo, gave me a thousand dollars. With that money, we got equipment from UCLA, brought it to San Francisco, crashed in someone’s home, and filmed a little bit of Mrs. Chin. With that footage, I went to Detroit with Nancy Tong to interview Mrs. Chin (Nancy, who became associate producer on the film, could speak the same dialect as Mrs. Chin). I was putting the sample together when I heard about CPB. So I applied for funding. Also, reading the court transcript of the cases I found it very interesting that no two people had the same story. It was just like *Rashomon* [1950]! That in itself was nice to work with. And then I thought, “Why not interview Ronald Ebens?” I thought it would be a piece of cake. I’d been inside of prison. I’d been all over the place. I figured I could get to Ebens overnight. No way! He wouldn’t do it, for years!

**MacDonald:** Why did he finally say yes?

**Choy:** After the Cincinnati trial [the federal civil rights trial], he was walking down the steps of the courthouse and I went up to him and said, “Congratulations!” He was *shocked*. He looked at me, this little skinny Chinese woman in a T-shirt and shorts and he says, “We’re having a little party at a bar down the block, why don’t you come.” So there it was. I said, “Let’s go get it!” By then, “we” were only three people – myself, Nick Dub and Renee (Renee did all the production managing; Nick and I did sound and camera and lighting). We got to the bar, and they said, “Put the cameras down!” By this time he was familiar with the press. So I schmoozed with him. I practically sat on his lap! He was always bitching about how the press was not fair to him, how the press had drummed up the civil rights case. I said to him, “You’ve been bitching about what the press says about you but you’re not saying anything. You refuse to be interviewed!” He said, “Call me in a week or two.” When I call, he says, “Come over.” We scrounge every penny we can find to get to Detroit. Tape recorder isn’t working. Oh my God, I was a nervous wreck. But we got him! We got him.

**MacDonald:** You were editing as you went, right?

**Choy:** We had a cut already, without the interview, but it didn’t work, it was just a lot of narration PBS kept saying, “Narration, narration, narration!” Even before the Cincinnati *trial*, fuckin’ CPB is saying ‘Where is our product? Cut!’ I’m insisting “No I have to wait for the Cincinnati trial.” They’re saying, “Just put in an epilogue about what happens at the Cincinnati trial.” I’m saying, “No way!” This is what pisses me off about these agencies. They didn’t want me to do the fuckin’ film because I don’t have a fuckin’ journalism degree, but they don’t give a shit about the actual story! What *is* journalism if you don’t go all the way? So I waited and waited. They stopped paying us. No money coming in. We did a big benefit in New York to raise money to cover the Cincinnati trial. And *then*, when I *did* have the complete story, *they didn’t want it!* They just wanted something superficial, so they could say, “We served the minority constituency!” Fuck ‘em! The funny thing is when the Academy Award nomination came, they sent me a telegram saying, “Congratulations! Please don’t forget to mention our funding.” I told them—right to their faces—to fuck themselves, and put their telegram on a dart board.

**MacDonald:** I remember being surprised you didn’t win.

**Choy:** *Hotel Terminus* [1988, directed by Marcel Ophuls] won. It was politics. Every year you've got to have a Holocaust movie win an Academy Award. *The Sorrow and the Pity* [1972, directed by Marcel Ophuls] had been ineligible because of the length. At that time, feature documentaries could only be ninety minutes long. *Shoah* [1986] hadn't been eligible either. The year we went in, they changed the rules and allowed films longer than ninety minutes, and since they didn't have a *Sophie's Choice* [1982], they had to give the documentary award to *Hotel Terminus*. I mean basically it comes down to that. And Ophuls had MGM as distributor, and of course we didn't even have a sponsor. We were penniless.

**MacDonald:** Actually I figured *Vincent Chin*, which I admire, would win out of tokenism, but I'd have given the award to *Hotel Terminus* too.

**Choy:** Well, even the nomination was an honor. But I think that filmically *Vincent Chin* is more interesting than *Hotel Terminus*. Filmically.

**MacDonald:** In what way?

**Choy:** It's more eclectic. There's more energy. It's more like MTV than a straight documentary. I saw *The Sorrow and the Pity* recently. That should have won. That was powerful. After *Vincent Chin*, I did other collaborations with Renee Tajima. *The Best Hotel on Skid Row* (1990), which was heavily financed by HBO, and *Yellow Tale Blues*, a video shot in film, cut in video (it was financed by New England Television). After that, Renee and I mutually decided we should not work together. She went off to Los Angeles and I remained in New York and started to do smaller projects.

**MacDonald:** You did some good work together.

**Choy:** I think *The Best Hotel* was very strong. *Vincent Chin* is very strong. The concept of *Yellow Tale Blues* was interesting, but Renee's parents weren't interesting, so the film isn't either.

**MacDonald:** I don't agree.

**Choy:** You thought it was interesting?

**MacDonald:** Just as in *Mississippi Triangle*, it's an ethnic mix—immigrant Korean-Chinese and native Japanese-American you rarely see in standard American films and TV.

[I asked Renee Tajima to review her involvement in the films she worked on with Choy. What follows is an edited version of her letter in response to my query.]

**Tajima:** In thematic terms, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* was for me the culmination of a political agenda and of the perception of the Asian-America identity I had come to during the seventies and eighties. As a third-generation Japanese-American, I had come of age with the Asian-American arts and political movements—fueled by the battle for ethnic studies, for social, economic, and cultural justice in our communities, and against the war in Vietnam. I had been introduced to this milieu during the late sixties, when my family left a homogenized, predominantly white Chicago suburb for Altadena—an integrated community in Los Angeles and

home at one time or another to Sirhan Sirhan, David Lee Roth, and Rodney King. If my first filmmaking sensibilities had a source—other than growing up on seven-hour-days of television, that is—it was coming of age in Altadena. The social turmoil rocking America during the time invariably swept through the schools. Even the children were mobilized. By the age of fourteen, I had read *The Wretched of the Earth* [by Frantz Fanon] and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

## **“What is journalism if you don’t go all the way?”**

By sixteen, I had already led city-wide student walk-outs over dress codes, ethnic studies, and affirmative action for teachers. I became a cultural nationalist of sorts. I cut neck and armholes in big bags of Asahi Premium Rice to wear over my jeans, as was the style among young Asian-American

rebels of the day. I took a stab at playing the Japanese koto, electrified of course, although no one could tear me away from R&B and the Doors. Toshiro Mifune and Akira Kurosawa became my cultural heroes. I rediscovered my identity and discovered Yellow Power. My high school was, rather absurdly, regarded as an “inner-city school” because half the students were minorities. That was my good fortune, however, because it got me into a federally funded program for “inner city youth.” The program exposed me to a creative world I had never known before. I was assigned a still camera, a tape recorder, and unlimited stock to document social problems in Los Angeles, which I then edited into multi-screen slide shows. I did shows on rape, children’s poverty, race—any subject for which I had a passion. Invariably, I was drawn to Little Tokyo, Chinatown, Manilatown, anywhere where Asians ruled the streets. I became captivated by the faces of the old people, the Issei, the Manong, the pioneers with paper names who came here to seek gam saan, the Gold Mountain.

Although I never went to film school, while an undergraduate at Harvard I did take a couple of production courses across town at MIT. I never felt comfortable as the only woman of color in the class, with Ricky Leacock proclaiming of political filmmaking, “Dahling. It’s passé.” At that time in the late seventies, it was dazzlingly new to us Asian-Americans. It was the first wave of Asian-American independent cinema—urgent, idealistic filmmaking—from groups like Visual Communications in Los Angeles and Third World Newsreel in New York. The seventies were also a time when video was new and hot, and institutions were buying hardware left and right. The Harvard School of Public Health built an entire video studio, replete with Porta-Paks, none of which ever seemed to be used. Along with a group of African-American students (including Reggie “House Party” Hudlin), I organized a Third World video collective. We took over the studio and the equipment, and produced a regular program on closed-circuit television. A couple of us even found our way down to Grenada. Prime Minister Maurice Bishop was my first interview.

After graduating from college, I got my first job as a secretary to *The Mr. Bill Show*, and within a short time ended up in Chinatown as the first paid staff person for Asian Cine-Vision, the organizer of the annual Asian-American International Film Festival and of Chinese Cable TV. I settled into the community of media-activist filmmakers. We spent half of our time fighting Charlie Chan revivals and other assorted racist portrayals from Hollywood, and the other half making up for lost ground by documenting Asian-American reality.

As an Asian-American media activist, I believed that independent filmmaking served as a cultural organ of the Asian-American movement, and that the purpose of film is not only to document reality but to define an Asian-American political identity. The Vincent Chin story fit the criteria. Vincent was a Chinese-American mistaken for Japanese in the midst of a racialized trade war. He was middle-class and Americanized, yet the color of his skin defined him in the eyes of the killers. The movement for justice in this case was the culmination of the pan-Asian-American political efforts that had been building for almost twenty years: the recognition of Asian-Americans as an oppressed racial minority deserving of legal protections under civil rights law. In making *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, I began to explore two approaches to the documentary. First, rather than look to other documentaries or journalism for inspiration, I wanted to find a literary voice. I felt that Asian-American stories could be told to broad audiences by reconstructing lives through storytelling. Although *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* has no overt narration, for its dramatic structure and fractured storytelling approach, I returned to an early influence—Rashomon. The Rashomon approach also solved another problem for me. While I was not interested in a purely journalistic approach, I did want to get at the gray areas that shaded the Vincent Chin story. The project was originally conceived as a fifteen-minute advocacy piece, but as soon as I read the trial transcripts and took my extended research trip to Detroit, I rediscovered what every documentarian knows but sometimes doesn't want to admit. There are two sides to every story. For me, the case went to the heart of the limitations of civil rights law and the legal system itself in sorting through the narratives, the varied interpretations of fact, and the emotions, to get at the truth.

In my work, I have tried to locate the eclectic points of cultural intersection that bind us as Americans, regardless of ethnicity. Although I spent my teenage, cultural nationalist years yearning for a return to roots, in truth, I didn't know from Japan. But I knew the Detroit sound, I knew *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and TV. This kind of cultural eclecticism is in contrast to the "roots" journeys of the 1970s which promoted racial validation by recapturing homeland traditions. I believe it is eclecticism that defines the Asian-American cultural experience, and the American experience as a whole.

For Vincent Chin and his killer, Ron Ebens, this eclecticism reverberates in Motown and Dinah Shore's exhortations to "See the USA in your Chevrolet ..."—the same imagery of America's go-go years I remember as a child, which is used impressionistically throughout the documentary. Rather than direct illustration, these popular musical and media themes emerge organically in the film as metaphors for memories and emotion.

Another example is the use of television news clips, which for me have always provoked drama and emotion: Walter Cronkite's announcement of President Kennedy's assassination is one of my earliest memories. For those of us who grew up on television, broadcast news, with its swelling musical introductions and urgent anchor-speak, means far more than information. An artfully done newsbreak can always send a chill down my spine. From "The President is dead" to "Magic is HIV positive"—these televised moments define my memories in the way my parents remember chasing adventure on the railroad tracks or FDR's fireside chats. So in *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* I wanted to use news clips to signal dramatic turns in the story—with the opening logos, theme music, and all. This is one device I really had to fight for. You'll recall the intense dichotomy between film- and video makers at the time we were making *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* The old guard filmmakers simply hated video. Being younger, not knowing or caring about the rules, and having grown up with video and television, I had a completely

different take. I don't believe film and video are interchangeable, but I do believe that video as popular collective culture, home movies, on-the-spot documentaries and the like, can be a visual and dramatic motif in films. I think problems surface when video is intermixed with film without a clear, consistent dramatic or visual purpose. Television also influenced me in terms of the structure of *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* At that time, *Hill Street Blues* was one of my favorite shows. I was interested in its use of parallel development with several characters' stories playing

out during the same hour. I felt a documentary could sustain the same kind of style, as long as there was a strong narrative spine—in this case, retracing the parallel lives of the Chin and Ebens families. After making *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* I (along with a thousand other young film- and video makers) became quite obsessed with the idea of using popular media as a motif in documentary. Thus in *Yellow Tale Blues* we tried juxtaposing movie

**"... I believed that independent filmmaking served as a cultural organ of the Asian-American movement."**

clips to our family stories in an intuitive way, and in *What Americans Really Think of the Japanese* (1990) a documentary I produced for Japanese television, I tried to integrate television and movie clips to convey the environment of popular culture in the US. My efforts in this particular work were thwarted, however, since my Japanese executive producers were nervous about my critical use of American television commercials.

In my new film, *My America... or Honk If You Love Buddha*, I reveal my obsession with the road movie (in fact I've developed a documentary "Road Trilogy" on American identity, of which *My America* is the first installment and [*La Reunion* is the second). *My America* is an extension of the stylistic concerns I've discussed above, as well as of my thematic search for a collective and individual identity. The film is inspired by the many lives of ex-Beat, Victor Wong, who Kerouac wrote about in the novel, *Big Sur*, as well as by my own memories of a life on the road. In the narration, I recall countless vacations as a child, traveling down old Route 66 in the days when you could cross four states without ever catching a glimpse of another Asian face. Returning two decades later, I meet a cast of characters whose lives symbolize the changing face of Asian America, which has grown dramatically in size and in diversity.

What does it mean to be an Asian-American today? Similar to Wayne Wang's filmic journey through Chinatown in one of my favorite movies, *Chan Is Missing* (1982), my search in *My America* leads to these different territories—political, emotional, socioeconomic, personal—that define Asian America. It reveals a dense, complex landscape, ranging from empirical demographic data to subliminal media messages, to romance, to public policy. These varied threads are anchored in the film by the road trip, which has been a staple of the American narrative. Whereas *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* was a culmination of my political beliefs throughout the seventies and eighties—defining Asian-American as a pan-national, oppressed racial minority—*My America* represents my effort to look at the changes precipitated by post-1965 immigration and the new cultural diversity within Asian America and the United States itself.

**MacDonald:** I see you've actually made an avant-garde film: *Five Chapters* [1992] .

**Choy:** That's not avant-garde! It was commissioned.

**MacDonald:** If I showed it in an experimental film show, it would fit perfectly.

**Choy:** Well, yeah. Asian Women United were putting five artists together for a show, and wanted a film for each one. They said, since you're doing something about an artist [Barbara Takan-ga], the filmic approach should be artistic. They gave me two thousand dollars to make the film. How am I going to make it for that? So I decided to do it MTV style and cut it in the camera. I recorded her first on the voice track (none of the soundtrack is even cut! ), then I played back the soundtrack and shot the footage based on the track, timing it to the exact second. Finished!

**MacDonald:** It's a nice piece.

**Choy:** A one-day shoot! From beginning to end. It was fun. I guess it is pretty experimental.

**MacDonald:** *Sa-I-Gu*, your film about LA's Korea-town within the larger context of the riot rebellion, is another film about ethnic intersections.

**Choy:** I grew up in Shanghai, but I'm not Chinese. I tried to be Chinese as much as possible when I was in Shanghai, but we were not, and everybody knows you're not. Then when we moved to Korea, I'm supposed to be Korean but I'm not. I tried to fit into the Korean community, but I couldn't. Then I go to Japan and the Japanese think I'm a Japanese, and I'm trying not to be Japanese! When you spend the first fourteen years of your life in a Communist regime, then live in a neocolonialized state, then in an advanced capitalist society, you form peculiar ways of thinking. This is reflected in all my work. I'm interested in the conflicts between A and B, but I'm even more interested in dealing with the conflicts that develop within A and within B as a result of the external conflicts.

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Scott MacDonald is author of the series, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*, in five volumes from University of California Press, and ten other books, including *Avant-Garde Film/Motion Studies* (Cambridge), *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (California), *Adventures of Perception* (California, 2009), *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn* (California, 2013), and *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Oxford, 2014). He was named an Academy Scholar by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 2012. He teaches film history at Hamilton College.

Folklorist, cultural worker, and activist Worth Long has been recognized by the National Black Arts Festival's Living Legends Award and the Smithsonian's Lifetime Achievement Award. His accomplishments include a GRAMMY nomination (with Ralph Rinzler and Barry Lee Pearson) for *Roots of Rhythm and Blues: The Robert Johnson Era* (1993), a recording with Columbia Records that grew out of a Smithsonian project of the same name, and a Peabody Award for *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?*, a radio history of the Civil Rights Movement in five Southern cities.

Renee Tajima-Peña is an Academy-award nominated filmmaker whose work focuses on immigrant communities, race, gender and social justice. She has become a chronicler of the American scene with her documentary films "Who Killed Vincent Chin?," the acclaimed investigation into the beating death of a Chinese American in

Detroit and “My America...or Honk if You Love Buddha,” a feature-length road documentary in search of Asian America where she encounters rappers, debutantes, laborers and freedom fighters.

Her other films on the Asian American experience include “Labor Women,” a profile of Jun Chong, Quynh Nguyen, and Karla Zombro, part of a new generation of young labor activists organizing immigrant workers in Los Angeles and “Skate Manzanar,” is a short video collaboration with Giant Robot on the legacy of mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II through the perspective of a young Asian American skateboarder. Tajima-Peña’s newest film is “No Más Bebés,” a documentary about the class action lawsuit, *Madrigal v. Quilligan*, filed by Mexican American women who were sterilized at Los Angeles county hospital during the 1960s and 70s.

In 2008, Tajima-Peña received acclaim as the recipient of the Golden Gate Award for best television documentary at the San Francisco International Film Festival for “Calavera Highway.” In an intimate and elegantly crafted work of cinema verité, “Calavera Highway” encompasses familial tensions, Mexican American identity, the responsibilities of fathers (and sons) and the psychic malleability of map-drawn borders. It is a sweeping family saga told against the backdrop of the Mexican American experience, as seven brothers grapple with the meaning of masculinity and fatherhood, and the nature of family ties.

In 2004, Tajima-Peña directed an episode for the groundbreaking PBS series on immigration of “The New Americans,” a documentary miniseries that traces the journeys of this country’s newest arrivals from their homelands through their first years in the United States. Her film tells the story of Pedro Flores, a Mexican immigrant who works as a meatpacker in rural Kansas to support his wife and six children in rural Mexico, and the family’s tireless efforts to be reunited in the “promised land.”

Tajima-Peña’s films have premiered at worldwide film festivals such as Cannes, Hawaii, Hong Kong, London, New Directors/New Films, Sundance, and Toronto. She is a 2011 Guggenheim Fellow, and has been awarded a USA Broad Fellowship, and the Alpert Award in the Arts.

She is currently a professor of Asian American Studies at UCLA, where she is director of the Center for EthnoCommunications and Endowed Chair in Japanese American Studies. She was a co-founder of the Social Documentation Program at UC Santa Cruz. She was formerly a cultural commentator on NPR and a film critic for *The Village Voice*.



# AN INTERVIEW WITH ALLAN SIEGEL

Jacqueline Stewart

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## INTRODUCTION

As co-founder of New York Newsreel and former member of Third World Newsreel, Allan Siegel has been a witness to and participant in the multiple institutional changes the organization has undergone. Siegel joined the group that would form The Newsreel after launching his career in New York's underground, experimental film scene in the late 1960s. His filmmaking and administrative experiences with New York Newsreel, and then Third World Newsreel, speak not only to his own political and artistic journey, but also to the organization's evolving approach to filmmaking, distribution and exhibition as agents for social change.

Since his days at Newsreel, Siegel has written, directed, edited and produced dozens of films that have examined a vast array of social and political issues. From his work on Newsreel shorts documenting student and community protest (*Columbia Revolt*, *Garbage*, *Chicago Convention Challenge* [1968], *Community Control* [1969]) to his analyses of the American prison system (*We Demand Freedom* [1973], *In the Event that Anyone Disappears* [1974]) to his explorations into a variety of Third World communities (*Impressions*, *Percussions and Reality* [1978], *Nicaragua: Chronicle of Hope* [1984], *Namibia: Independence Now* [1985], *Lifting the Fog: The Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* [1991]), Siegel's films consistently confront questions of race, class, gender and nation in communities across the US and around the world. As a maker, educator and activist, Siegel has used film and video to give voice to issues and communities that tend to be relegated to the margins by the mainstream media.

In the following interview, Siegel describes the emergence of New York Newsreel, how the group financed and produced its films, and the events that led to its evolution into Third World Newsreel. Siegel also discusses his experiences as Third World Newsreel's only white member, and the major shifts in its practices and priorities as it assumed a new identity. In the process, Siegel theorizes the elements that have contributed to Newsreel's staying power, and describes the assets that will ensure its survival into the 21st century.

**Jacqueline Stewart:** When did you become interested in filmmaking?

**Allan Siegel:** I dropped out of college, and I was bumming around Europe around 1963 and '64. All of a sudden all this political activity started happening in the US, like the Free Speech movement at Berkeley. I started getting involved in some political stuff when I was living in Italy. The first student takeover of a school building happened in the architecture school at the University of Florence. It was amazing. So there's this stuff going on there and stuff was going on in this country, so I came back.

I got a job at this architectural firm in Baltimore, the Rouse Company, which was involved in the New Town Movement. And they were designing this "new town" between Baltimore and Washington called Columbia, this huge, planned series of communities. And they brought over a French guy, Pierre, to design sculptures that would go in the playground, a sculpture garden. Pierre got me involved in filmmaking. He just said, "Why don't you make films?" I forget the exact way that he actually hooked me into it, but that's how I started making films.

I bought a Bolex camera, and the earliest films I made were adaptations of poems. I did a poem by Baudelaire and I did another one by Yeats. Those were the first exercises that I did. And then the first real film that I did was this piece that I wrote myself. It was called *The Grain*. I worked on that, finished it, and left Baltimore with this film to go back to New York. I went to stay with this friend of mine in New York who I'd met in Italy. I was there with this film and he said, "Well you've got to go see this guy Ken Jacobs" The whole underground film movement was really big in New York. You know, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Bruce Baillie, Jonas Mekas, and Ken Jacobs were really part of that movement.

So I took this film that I had done and showed it to Ken Jacobs, and he just really loved the film. And he was doing the Millennium Film Workshop, which was an important little incubator for underground, experimental films at that time. There was a movie theater called The Bridge that Jonas ran. So my film got shown, and it became part of this collection of underground films that was shown at the New Yorker Theater. And that sort of established me in this network of experimental filmmakers in New York at that time.

**JS:** What did *The Grain* look like?

**AS:** Some people have described it as being very Brechtian [laughs]. That was the way it was talked about because it was about alienation and had all these industrial landscapes of Baltimore. It was kind of grainy, black and white with some double exposures.

**JS:** So you found that the underground, experimental filmmaking community was really receptive to you and your work?

**66 AS:** Yeah, there were a lot of things that were going on at that time, between what was

going on with the French New Wave and European cinema and this experimental cinema that was going on in the US. There was a whole environment for different forms of filmmaking at that time.

**JS:** And did that group see themselves as producing films that were political? Was that part of the attraction for you?

**AS:** Not particularly. My own political development had taken place when I was in high school. I was involved with CORE (Congress on Racial Equality), and I had gone to some demonstrations when I was in high school. So, I was already politicized. And my family was pretty politicized. My mother was basically a housewife, and my father worked in a wholesale meat business in New York. But my mother was also involved in local politics. She ran for public office, and was elected president of the school board. And my father worked with the Anti-Defamation League, which did a lot of consciousness raising around civil rights issues at that time. He would go around and talk to different people, particularly in the Jewish community, about racism. They were both pretty outspoken in terms of their political beliefs. So there was this sort of political consciousness in my family.

**JS:** How did you connect with the people who would form Newsreel? Did that grow out of the underground film group?

**AS:** There was this place in New York called the Free University which was modeled after a similar institution in Berkeley. And I was teaching a little workshop class over at the Millennium, and Ken [Jacobs] said to me, "Well, you know, they need someone over at the Free University to do a film workshop. Why don't you go over there and talk to them." So I went over there and talked to them and I got it. I had this film workshop at the Free University with a pretty large group of people.

This was in '67. That year there was this demonstration at the Pentagon, the first really major anti-war demonstration on a huge scale. And so we all decided that we were all going to go down to Washington and film this demonstration. There were lots of different people filming there. Chris Marker was there. He did a film on this demonstration where Allen Ginsberg organized this chant to levitate the Pentagon. That was [laughs] quite the high point that Chris Marker captured in his film.

So afterwards, people realized that there were all these people who were doing their own little individual projects on the Pentagon demonstration. Someone in my class, Melvin Margolies talked to Jonas about organizing a meeting of filmmakers at the Anthology Film Archives. And so Jonas called this meeting of filmmakers to talk about people pooling their resources to make a film. That was, ostensibly, one of the reasons. But the other, broader reason, was to try and find a way that people could work together to represent all the different things that were going on in New York and the rest of the country at that particular time. So Jonas and Melvin were actually some of the key people in organizing this meeting. It was a huge meeting with 60-70 people there. Out of that meeting came Newsreel. Almost all of the people who were in my film class at the Free University then became part of Newsreel.

**JS:** And these were people who were making films for the first time?

**AS:** Yeah. There was one person in the class, Shawn Walker, who was African American and lived in Harlem. He was a photographer, and he had some specific skills in relationship to filmmaking. But most of the people in the group didn't have any filmmaking experience.

**JS:** Were they activists?

**AS:** Yeah, they were all activists in the sense that they were all somehow interested in the idea of filmmaking and social change. No one quite knew how they would all fit together, but they all knew that they should somehow fit together.

**JS:** So after that big initial meeting in December of 1967, were the same people meeting to organize what Newsreel would be? Was there a lot of conflict in terms of deciding how the group would work as a collective? Did the group stay as large as it was at that first meeting?

**AS:** Well, the group got whittled down in size. One side of it was people who were pretty politicized, people involved in film who were also involved politically in SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] or had a history of political involvement with SDS. So that group of people was Norman Fruchter, Robert Kramer, Robert Machover. And then there was another group of people who were basically, like myself, more involved in the experimental, underground film movement in New York. And so there were these two extremes of people. In the beginning, there

was always that tension between the group who had a specific sense of a political direction and those people who were involved in just making films.

**"... they were all activists in the sense that they were all somehow interested in the idea of filmmaking and social change."**

**JS:** Describe the kinds of discussions, or conflicts, that took place around what Newsreel's films should look like, since you had people coming from these very different places.

**AS:** There was conflict particularly around language, a critical language. Because those people

who were politicized, who had the political background, had a language to not only talk about politics, but also talk about films, what films should do in representing a political movement or an event within the context of a political movement. So there was that side of things. And then there were people who were more preoccupied with what a film should look like as a film, but didn't necessarily have the language to talk about that. People who were more subjective in terms of, "Oh, I like this because it works. But I don't exactly know why it works or how you would describe how it works." So there was this ongoing tension.

**JS:** Where did you stand in that conflict?

**AS:** I was sort of on both sides of that. I could talk politically about what I thought we should be doing, although not as well as some of the other people, and then I could also talk about

how a film should work stylistically. So I was always back and forth. But what came out of this big meeting was this core group of people who were entrusted with drafting a manifesto, which became the mission statement of Newsreel. That group was myself, Robert Kramer, Shawn Walker, Norm Fruchter, and Marvin Fishman. We basically put together this statement defining Newsreel and that loosely created an identity for the organization.

**JS:** How did the group settle on the name The Newsreel? I understand that other names were kicked around, like Radical Newsreel, Guerilla Newsreel. Why “The Newsreel”?

**AS:** Well, it was a coincidence, because the same year was the demise of newsreels shown in movie theaters. So this one era of newsreel ended, Universal Newsreel, and we sort of picked up on the idea that here was the real Newsreel.

**JS:** I have something that Jonas [Mekas] printed in the *Village Voice* that is an early mission statement about what Newsreel wanted to accomplish. One of the things mentioned is that Newsreel will provide a side of the story that people were not getting from television news. That raises a lot of questions about what audience Newsreel perceived that they could reach, and how they would show films in an alternative way. Could you talk about the role of exhibition in Newsreel’s early discussions. In what kind of exhibition spaces did Newsreel imagine showing films? And how would you draw people who you wanted to see these different kinds of images?

**AS:** Well, the whole concept of an alternative form of distribution was central to Newsreel. Everything that Newsreel did in the beginning was thoroughly discussed. We had interminable meetings that would go on, talking about issues like the one that you just raised and about particular films. They would go on, I mean, these huge, collective critiques of what was good about a particular film, what was bad about a particular film. We understood that distribution was essential and that it wasn’t so much distribution as a way of producing income, although later on that became another element in it. But it was basically, well, if we’re going to make all these films, who is going to see them? And how are they going to see them? So the idea was that basically we had to set up our own distribution network.

Also, parallel to that was the idea that we wanted films not to work simply on their own, but to generate a kind of discourse around the issues that the films talked about. So, for example, there was always this idea that if a film went out, someone would go with the film to talk about it. So you show a film, and then there would be a follow-up discussion that would go with the film because there would invariably be issues that the film raised. And the more successful films, or what would be considered the most successful films, were the ones that actually worked to generate specific kinds of discussions. So the films were never looked at as self-contained entities, but were always looked at in relationship to the issues that the films highlighted and the organizing of people in relationship to those issues.

In creating this distribution network and the whole idea of people going out with the films, basically people were becoming organizers. Political organizers. So they weren’t simply involved in making a film, but they were involved in how the issues that the films raised related to people’s lives. And that’s a pretty critical point, because, for example, if you were going out with the film that was about the Columbia strike, *Columbia Revolt* (1968), then you would try to find a way to talk about all the various issues that the film touched on. So it wasn’t simply showing the films just in terms of their entertainment value, though they had entertainment value.

But it was also how do you talk about the issues that the films presents—in terms of the university, in terms of education, in terms of community development, in terms of racism, in terms of the differences between what happened with the black students and white students at Columbia.

And it wouldn't be just one person that would go out with the film; it would be two or three. Someone who had actual experience talking about the issue would go out with someone who hadn't had the experience and then the person who didn't have the experience would learn from that situation how to be able to present the film and talk about it.

**JS:** So it was a kind of leadership training.

**AS:** Right. Which is why, in a surface sense, a lot of the people who went through or were involved in Newsreel developed a leadership skills and organizing skills in addition to simply being filmmakers. There was always this sort of dialectic between making a film and what kind of effect it had on the audience. And the best way of being able to gauge that was to be able to be present at a screening where people actually interacted with the various issues that the film raised.

**JS:** How diverse were the audiences for these films?

**AS:** The audiences were pretty diverse because we would get calls from schools, colleges all over. We wouldn't establish any criteria for who could or couldn't see the films.

The vehicle for the distribution became all the different kind of nascent political organizations that existed throughout the country, which mainly involved the various forms of the stu-

dent movement, whether it was SDS or a spin-off group from SDS or some other student group. And then the other vehicle was the Black Panther Party network because one of the earliest Newsreel films was a film on them. All the chapters of the Panthers would have a print of the Panther film, and they would show the film and talk about what was in it. So if there were 30 Panther chapters, then there would be 30 prints of the film, each print in one of those chapters. So we'd be running off prints of films and

**"... we wanted films not to work simply on their own, but to generate a kind of discourse around the issues that the films talked about."**

they'd be going out to Oakland, they'd be going out to Ohio or wherever, and that was the way that the distribution network got set up. And the way that we measured the success of it was just the demand for more prints of that particular film.

In *El Pueblo Se Levanta* (1971), the Young Lords film, the issues that were outlined in the film, and the way they were presented in the film, had a lot to do with the kind of organiz-

ing strategies that they had as an organization. It related very much to how they could talk about those issues and what they thought was important when they showed the film.



*El Pueblo Se Levanta* (Newsreel #63), Newsreel, 1971.

We understood that what we were talking about wasn't going to get talked about on television. Or if it did get talked about it certainly wasn't going to get talked about from the same point of view. So there was always this understanding that we had a privileged point of view because we were representing the point of view of activists and couldn't pick the side of one group versus another. For example, the first major Newsreel film, *Columbia Revolt*, was about the student strike at Columbia University. Well there

were a lot of different political groups that participated in that event. The idea of the film was not to represent the point of view of one particular political group but to find a way of critiquing the university as it was represented in that struggle. So whatever political group decided to show that film, they could tailor the discussion in relationship to their own point of view without feeling that the film represented another point of view.

Now the big exception to this was the Panther film because it clearly represented the point of view of the Panthers. It wasn't about the Panthers and SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] or the Panthers and some other organization. It was about selling the Panthers to the public or to people in the Black community to promote the organizing of other chapters of the Panthers. But outside of that film, there wasn't a particular ideology in Newsreel films.

And in terms of the Panthers, there was a whole Left mythology that was created in relationship to the Panthers film. At a certain level everyone was aware that they were creating this kind of mythology, but the political implications of that mythology were never very carefully analyzed.

**JS:** Do you mean the mythology the Panthers were creating for themselves or the mythology others created around them?

**AS:** Both. The Panthers were the clearest example of an organization that had a mythology in terms of their image, in terms of being able to confront authority in a certain kind of way. And that was something that people fed on. They got off on that whole mythology, especially people in the white Left. And because Newsreel had done these films and had this relationship with the Panthers, we had a certain kind of credibility. As a predominantly white Left organization, the fact that we had this relationship with an all Black organization gave us an entre into a lot of other areas of political work that ordinarily might not have been accessible to us.

**JS:** The Panthers not only had this mythology, but also this Panther iconography that visually worked very well. The Panther uniform and all of that.

**AS:** Visually, it worked spectacularly. It was particularly important at that time, coming off of the early struggles in the Civil Rights Movement which were around very specific issues. Then you have this whole other period where the issues in some sense become utopian. In the Panther film, there's the Ten Point Program which is basically this utopian program.

**JS:** Get the police out. Control our own schools.

**AS:** And concurrent with that whole utopian vision of what the society should look like was also this cultural vision of what activists look like. And for the Panthers it was all these guys running around in black berets and leather jackets and this whole very macho image. And I think that had a major effect in other areas where people were doing political organizing. The Young Lords certainly participated in that kind of iconography because they adopted the beret and crafted their own radical posture. And so, on a certain level, in order to be able to assert your legitimacy as a political entity, you had to also create the image that went along with that. And within this marginalized world that Newsreel created in its films, people were very conscious or self-absorbed in the process of creating this kind of iconography without being aware of all its implications.

And then in a sense what happened was the women's movement began to cut through that whole image-making process, the fragility of those illusions. And the mythology that was being projected crumbled in a lot of ways. If you look at all the New Left organizations and the cultural appendages that developed in relationship to the political identities that they assumed, you had sort of this media marginalia that contributed to the media self-images of all these various organizations.

**JS:** And was that in part because people had access to cameras in a way that they didn't before. People could use 16mm cameras and establish an exhibition and distribution network outside of the mainstream image-making industry? How else would people have distributed an image of what a political activist should look like, say, in the 30s? That kind of thing couldn't have been done to the same extent.

**AS:** No, in the 30s it wasn't done to the same extent at all.

**JS:** How much did the changes in media technology impact the phenomenon that you're talking about.

**AS:** Very much. I think you can see correlations between changes in the technology and the accessibility of filmmaking and the media to much larger segments of the population. That was part of the process of giving voice to people who previously didn't have that capacity. And that whole process of image making and representation was something that began to take place within that period of time but without the theoretical tools to be self-critical in terms of what that process was all about because the theoretical tools in terms of the relationship between art and politics were not as developed within the Left in this country. To a large extent, the discourse that was developing on the relationship between art and politics was really taking place outside of this country, in Africa, Latin America, Cuba in particular, and in parts of Europe.



**JS:** Is it any better now in this country?

**AS:** I don't think so. Certainly there's much more of a theoretical understanding in terms of how popular culture works in this society and in other industrialized societies. So the theory is out there. People have always gotten so sucked into this false dichotomy between art and politics that it's hard to make any kind of progress. Art in this society is such a precarious thing. We're fighting for the existence of the NEA. We're fighting for the existence of art and its relevance to society. That in itself is a political struggle. How can art not have anything to do with society? I mean here we are approaching the year 2000, and in this country that's still an issue. Whereas in practically every other country in the world, people don't even think about that.

**JS:** You did camera work on *Columbia Revolt*. Can you talk about how that film was put together? What roles did the various camera operators and the people who served as director and editor play? Did someone make initial decisions about how the film looked, bring it to the group, and then go back and recut? What was the process?

**AS:** Well, in the case of Columbia there was no director. It's an interesting example because even before Newsreel had gotten started, Marvin Fishman knew that there was this movement developing in Harlem to protest the plans of Columbia University to build this gymnasium in a public park. And so there was this movement developing that Marvin on his own was documenting. And that was the initial footage shot before there was even a takeover of any of the buildings at Columbia. There were, I think, vigils that had taken place or candlelight marches at night. Basically the white students at Columbia sort of opportunistically latched on to that movement as a way of attacking the university. So there were these white students in SDS, and then there were Black students who had their own take on what was going on.

So, Marvin had this footage, and then I and a bunch of other people were there when the buildings were taken over, and we were shooting just to record what was going on. And once events began to take place, the question was not who was going to direct his particular film. The question was how to marshal the resources to just keep documenting what was going on. So it was a question of finding enough cameras and getting raw stock together to just keep shooting. There wasn't a vision of what the film was going to look like because no one knew what was going to happen up at Columbia. We just kept shooting.

Afterwards, when it was over then the task was to figure out how we were going to make a film. So the priority was: 1) that we should get something out as quickly as possible; and 2) who would be in the best position in the organization to edit what we had and make it into something? And so there was a woman in the group, Lynn Phillips, who had a really good background as an editor so she was chosen to edit the film. All the footage was put at her disposal, and she would make a cut of the film then the cut would come back to the group; we would screen it then we would discuss it and make other changes in it. And that's the way it would go, back and forth like that until people were satisfied that we had something that could then go out. But speed was of the essence. If you were trying to push an auteur kind of position in relationship to filmmaking, you were basically trashed. Part of the whole ethos was that there was no director.

**JS:** You mentioned the necessity of getting films out as quickly as possible, and that is something that also comes up in the mission statement. Newsreel wanted to turn out short

pieces every week, like the traditional newsreels, in order to stay on top of what was going on. Was Newsreel able to turn films out as frequently as the group wanted?

**AS:** We turned out a lot of films. Newsreel must have produced between 20 and 30 films within the first year of its existence, plus we acquired other films. Within a short period of time, we had a pretty substantial catalogue of films because we had films that we produced; we had films from Cuba; we had films from Vietnam, from Mexico and different parts of the world that we distributed.

**JS:** You didn't get into any trouble for distributing Cuban films and films from Vietnam?

**AS:** No. I mean, no one overtly tried to stop us from distributing any of those films. But we know that we were monitored and scrutinized by the FBI and the IRS. The Newsreel went to North Vietnam in 1968, and we didn't get in trouble for it, but we had the State Department trying to confiscate people's passports and stuff like that. We brought back our own film, plus these films from Vietnam, and they tried to prevent us from bringing that stuff into the country. Actually the way it got brought in was via CBS because we worked out a deal that if they helped us get the material in, then we would give them some of the footage. It was the first footage shot in North Vietnam by any American film crew; that footage later became *People's War* (1969).

**JS:** You talked about running off and distributing all these prints of films and trying to get them into the hands of as many groups as possible across the country. Where was the money coming from?

**AS:** Well, that was always an interesting question. Basically the money was coming from donations, fundraising. People who had money. There was a cross-section of people in the organiza-



*People's War* (Newsreel #43), Newsreel, 1969.

raising network that existed in the Movement at that time that Tom Wolfe wrote about in that book *Radical Chic*. There were all of these little groups of people that would throw little cocktail parties, and the purpose was to hit up the rich folks for whatever you could get your hands on. Initially that's how Newsreel existed. We would get donations of film stock. The money that was being raised was to pay lab bills and stuff like that. Eventually Newsreel created its own underground lab in Boston [laughs].

**JS:** Could you talk about the politics within the group about where money was coming from. Certainly people knew that it took quite a bit of money to make a film, but were people upset about where they money came from?

**AS:** Yeah, there were people who had problems with that. It wasn't across the board. I think it started to become a problem because let's say that you wanted to make a film and you presented it to the group. Let's say a third of the people in the group said, "Yeah, this is a good idea, why don't we do Jackie's film?" Well then the question would become, how will the resources be appropriated so that you can make this particular film. If you didn't have the money yourself or if you didn't have access to the network of people who could help you raise the money, then to a certain extent you had to have a lot of support within the organization to make that particular film. So there was this tension between those people who were keyed into the fundraising network and had enough power within the organization to be able to force the issue. And that was always an underlying tension within the organization. It didn't really change in any kind of significant way until the organization became Third World Newsreel.

**JS:** Would you say that the organization was split along class lines? There were people who had certain kinds of connections, as you suggested, their own personal funds or family funds, and if they wanted to make a particular film they could marshal the financial support to push it through. How did that play out within the dynamics of the group?

**AS:** Strangely enough, not too many films got made that way because those people who were in that position were not necessarily the people who had expertise as filmmakers. So if they were trying to present an idea to make a film, they still had to be able to marshal enough support to actually have people commit to working on the film.

The most dramatic example of this contradiction within the organization had to do with the making of *Finally Got the News* and the creation of Detroit Newsreel. What was going on in Detroit was sort of outside of all these other political movements at that particular time. This was a whole other kind of locus of political activity within the auto plants of Detroit. It wasn't the Panthers; it wasn't SDS; it was this whole other thing. And when it began to get talked about and written about in the Left press, there were people in Newsreel who said, "This is something that we should be doing a film about. This is really important." And there were other people in the organization who weren't so quick to jump on that political bandwagon. So basically the group of people who were interested in starting Detroit Newsreel and making a film about the auto workers raised the money outside of that other network of people. The money was all raised illegally because that was the only way that it could happen. Eventually someone who was part of that group went to jail.

**JS:** John Downing writes about this whole series of events in his book, *Radical Media*, and cites the making of *Finally Got the News* as one of the breaking points of Newsreel for a variety of reasons.

**AS:** The group of people that were involved in making that film and the whole struggle around it . . . some of these underlying tensions that existed just came to the surface. And then around that period of time a number of the original people who were part of Newsreel left.

**JS:** In terms of Newsreel's ideological discussions, were there reading groups? Were people reading and discussing political theory? Or did people just bring their own political knowledge to the organization?

**AS:** There would be these huge teach-ins around particular issues. The reading group and

the discussion of specific political texts didn't actually take place until Third World Newsreel. There was much more of that in the early days of Third World Newsreel than, as far as I can recall, in Newsreel. I mean, there were some people who were really very articulate politically, and they would talk about issues and give a political perspective. And then there was the kind of research that went on around a particular issue if we were doing a film on that subject. But our weakness was in not having a broader political analysis of what it meant to do cultural work. There wasn't the kind of time devoted to that that there should have been.

**JS:** Who was running New York Newsreel? How many people made up the central, coordinating committee, and who were those people? I guess I'm wondering how democratic the decision-making process was?

**AS:** Well, it was sort of the illusion of democracy and the illusion of collectivity. We called ourselves a collective, but from one month to another the definition of what a collective was would shift. So how films got made had to do with who was attached to a particular political issue, and to what extent that political issue became important enough for people to feel that a film should be made about it. There was never any question about Columbia because that was a major event, so we had to make a film about Columbia. Then there was a whole discussion about urban renewal so a film got made about that. There was a core group of people who basically ran the organization on a day to day level. There was myself, Norman [Fruchter], between a half a dozen and a dozen people who would be there and getting things done. So, there was definitely a sort of central coordinating committee.

In terms of New Left mythology, the notion of the collective is a really prime example of the kind of mythology that was created at that period of time. The whole notion of a collective goes back to the earliest days of the Soviet Union, a collective farm or something like that. Somehow or another when the collective came into existence in terms of Newsreel, it was supposed to be this egalitarian model without a hierarchy. And on some level just because we said that we were a collective over and over again, somehow that was supposed to dispel any notions that there was a hierarchy involved. But in fact there was. And by simply saying, "Well, we're a collective," that created this illusion that everyone who was a part of the collective was equal.

**JS:** An illusion that people who joined the group believed or an illusion that outsiders were supposed to believe? Who was being fooled?

**AS:** Both. I mean, it makes good press. Someone asks you, "How do you make decisions." You say, "Oh, we're a collective. We all make decisions." It sounds great. It's pure democracy, right? In fact that's not the way it happened, but that's the way it was constantly being talked about. And to someone who wanted to work within the organization promoting the group as this collective where everyone could participate in the decision-making process, well that was great. That was wonderful.

It relates to the struggle that took place later on in terms of all the various women's issues that were raised. There were lots of women in the group, and there was the notion that everyone could participate equally in the decision-making process. Whereas the fact of the matter was that the men in the group had the power. We were the ones who made the decisions. We were the ones who could frame the discourse that was taking place around any particular issue,

and set the tone of the decision-making process that followed.

I'm painting one side of this picture which is the bleaker side. On the other hand, it wasn't as if people didn't realize that there was something inherently shaky about this assumption or that in fact that the ideals that people espoused about a collective didn't always work out that way in practice. So the issues were talked about; it's not as if people were totally insensitive to this imbalance. But there weren't the tools to deal with it. So in a sense there was always this tension between this anarchy on the one hand because the decision-making process was amorphous, and this shadow government that made the decisions and tried to keep things coherent and moving forward.

**JS:** What do you think about Newsreel's legacy in terms of collective building. Is it possible for a collective to work? What kind of model is Newsreel? What can it teach about whether or not a collective media organization is viable?

**AS:** Well, I think the question becomes, "What really is a collective?" What does that mean? A collective farm, for example, meant that there were all these tractors that all the peasants in a particular area used for the harvesting of crops, and they shared in whatever benefits they derived from the use of this collective technology. The profits are distributed at a certain time because something is being made or produced. Well, the identity of an organization like Newsreel is driven by certain people who have a creative vision to drive the organization in a certain direction. And other people can benefit from that, but you have to recognize that that's what's happening. So you can have an arts organization, for example, that calls itself a collective, but part of its identity is based on the most creative voices who then are in a position to lead the organization.

**JS:** The term "collective" assumes that everybody benefits equally.

**AS:** And that's not the case because as soon as you scrape away the veneer of communalism, you see that there is always this other hierarchy operating.

**JS:** Several writers suggest that because the core committee consisted of educated, white men, white men that eventually women and Third World members began to challenge those who were in control at Newsreel and the kinds of films that were being made. Could you describe in more detail the role that the Women's Movement had on the breakdown of the collective?

**AS:** Newsreel was basically a white male organization. It was no different than the rest of the Movement in any other part of the country. The struggles that were going on in Newsreel reflected the struggles that were going on in other political organizations throughout the country. They were interchangeable. When women's issues began to evolve as a major issue in the movement, well, it became a major issue in Newsreel. And a lot of people couldn't deal with the struggles around male chauvinism. They couldn't deal with that particular struggle or they couldn't deal with giving up power to the extent that it needed to be given up.

**JS:** So did people leave because of that? Was there some attempt to empower the women in Newsreel or recruit more women?

**AS:** Well you had these caucuses. There was a women's caucus, and the women's caucus

would decide on how to struggle with certain issues, like chauvinism within the organization. And those people who couldn't deal with those kinds of struggles left. It had a sort of cleansing effect on the organization.

I left before that really became a major dividing issue in the organization in the same way that class, the division between the Haves and the Have Nots, became a determining issue.

**JS:** When, exactly, did you leave?

**AS:** I left around '70, '70-'71.

**JS:** And what was it that made you leave Newsreel?

**AS:** It was the whole struggle on the last film that I made at Newsreel, *America* (1969). I had a lot of power in the organization. I made a lot of films and worked on a lot of films, and in that particular film, I had a vision of what I wanted the film to look like, and I fought for that vision. A



*America, a.k.a. Amerika, Newsreel, 1969.*

lot of people didn't agree with it; they didn't like the use of music in the film. I was accused of being ultra-Leftist and a bunch of other things. I was being attacked for a certain political point of view and in terms of the whole style of the film.

**JS:** What exactly was it about the film's style that made people so upset? I mean, it does look a lot different from other Newsreel films, especially the pace of the editing in some places.

**AS:** The cutting of the film, the use of music. Some people would say that it operated on too much of a subjective and emotional level and that it was too provocative, almost inciting people to do something, to some kind of action.

**JS:** That was the point though, wasn't it. Wasn't that Newsreel's ultimate political goal?

**AS:** Well, yeah, on some level it was the point. *America* wasn't self-reflective in that sense, in the way that some other films might have been. Through the heavy use of montage in the film it tried to synthesize a lot of things that were going on at that time, tried to present a sort of an overview, to show how it was all connected. And I wasn't going to say how it was all connected, but I felt that it was. One of the people who talks about it in the film says, "Well there's this world movement going on and it's all interconnected." Well, that's kind of a vague notion, but basically that was all you could say. We were all part of this same struggle, and where it was going, no one had the correct answer to that, but it was moving forward at this incredible pace

wanted me to go up to New Haven to organize with them so I left.

There was a big demonstration around Bobby Seale and the Chicago 8 and that's what I went up there to organize. At that point I just dropped filmmaking and was doing just straight political work. After that I went to Boston and was involved with the White Panthers. After Boston I went to Vermont, then I went to Washington to organize the huge demonstration around the invasion of Cambodia in '72. I wasn't doing any film work during that period of time. I went back to Boston and met some people who were doing a film workshop in a prison outside of Boston. So I did this film education class in this prison. I used to bring all these films in, and we would have these discussions with the prisoners. Eventually we decided that we would make a film in the prison. And then I taught some of the guys how to shoot film, and that's how the film *We Demand Freedom* (1974) got started.

I went back to New York, and I was finishing that film, but at that point Newsreel became Third World Newsreel. And I knew some of the people there. I knew Chris [Christine Choy].



*Teach Our Children*, Christine Choy/Sue Robeson, Third World Newsreel, 1972.

Coincidentally, Chris and Susan Robeson were working on this film called *Teach Our Children* (1972) which was about [the] Attica [prison rebellion]. I knew Chris, and they asked me for some advice and help while they were making that film. And so, one thing led to another. Actually at that time Chris and I became involved with each other, and I decided that I wanted to continue making films. After this whole process of teaching films in the prison and starting to shoot again, I knew that I wanted to get back into making films, and I

wanted to work in the context of an organization. And because I had the history with Newsreel, Third World Newsreel was the place for me to do it.

**JS:** So what did you find when you went back to Third World Newsreel? What did that organization look like and what were they doing?

**AS:** I was working independently on my film, and they were doing *Teach Our Children*. Basically there were only three people at Third World Newsreel, Chris, Susan, and this guy Robert Zellner. It was just the three of them. I remember they had this office on 6th Avenue, a huge loft in disarray. They had literally inherited this organization, and were struggling valiantly to keep the whole thing together and finish this film at the same time. So I finished my film and we had developed this rapport so I just gave it to them. And said, "Here, take this film. Make it part of the Third World Newsreel catalogue and distribute it." At that point, I was sort of part of the group, and I think my experience helped them in terms of organizing things.

**JS:** Was there any discussion about what it meant for you to be a part of Third World Newsreel, a group that started out as representing Third World members of the organization?

**AS:** Well, yeah, there was a little. Susan still had a lot of nationalist baggage so she was sort of resistant to it, like “What is this white guy doing in this organization?” You know? And I respected that. I mean, the reasons were legitimate. At first, there was this tension between us because Chris and I were in this relationship and because I was white. But after a while we got over that.

**“... I knew that I wanted to get back into making films... And because I had the history with Newsreel, Third World Newsreel was the place for me to do it.”**

Actually what did it was that I discovered that Robert was embezzling money, and then all the issues got buried and it was about the survival of the organization.

I helped them write the first grant, a \$10,000 grant to the New York State Council on the Arts. When that money came in, Robert had actually skimmed some of the money off. We discovered it completely accidentally. That was the first major infusion of money. It was a lot of money at that time. [Third World] Newsreel – Susan and Robert and

Chris – they didn’t have the connections that any of the older Newsreel people had in terms of raising money. The organization had shifted from an organization that depended primarily on donations and contacts with people to an organization that had to support itself financially. It had to be self-reliant in that way. It had to get money from proposals, from distribution, all those things. The organization had to pay its own way.

**JS:** And that grant was for making films, not for the operating budget, right?

**AS:** That grant was for making three films, and they all got made.

**JS:** Despite the embezzlement?

**AS:** Well, we found the money, and we got the money back. And [Robert] just left the organization.

**JS:** But now it’s just the three of you. When you made the films did you have any additional crew?

**AS:** Yeah, we started recruiting other people and finding other people to work with. And we made all three films. The people who funded us thought that that was amazing so the credibility of the organization increased from that point on. If we got a grant to do a film, we did the film.

**JS:** Was making films a slower process than it had been in the early days of Newsreel? What was the difference between the films you made with Third World Newsreel and the films you made with Newsreel?



**AS:** The whole process was completely different. The whole thing about no credits, and no director and crew responsibilities and so forth, that was all history. When *Teach Our Children* came out, it was Chris and Susan's film. Every other film from then on had a credit in terms of director, producer, cameraman and so forth.

And with a lot of the early Newsreel films, we would edit the workprint, and then you wouldn't even go back to the original negative to conform it; you would just make an internegative off of the work-print, with the splices and everything. That was considered the most expeditious way to do something, plus there was this anti-aesthetic, where people espoused the rough quality of Newsreel films. We weren't aspiring to make these pristine, Hollywood-type movies; the films that we made had a whole different kind of energy.

**JS:** Could you compare the filming process of a New York Newsreel film with one of the later films you worked on with Third World Newsreel?

**AS:** Well, *Garbage* (1968) is a pretty good example of the kind of film that was made by New York Newsreel. There was this garbage strike that was taking place in New York, and I thought it was pretty interesting. There was a group on the Lower East Side that was trying to debate what the significance of this was. It was around the time of the New York Film Festival, and the contradiction was that all this garbage was piling up in the city, while all these people were going to Lincoln Center to watch films. There was this group on the Lower East Side called, Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers, which was one of the anarchist groups like the Yippies. They were really interesting people, and they had this really far-reaching ideology. So I interviewed a couple of people that were in the group, and followed them around, and just made this film of them going to Lincoln Center and creating this protest there. It was non-sync; it was all voice-over interviews. That's how it got made. It was just a little film, a record of these people and this political action that they took. So there was sort of, on some level, an informality to the process. Whereas in Third World Newsreel, it was a very different process.

**JS:** Including the whole proposal-writing process.

**AS:** The whole proposal thing. You could have an idea for a film, and the amount of turnaround time was so much more drawn out. In some cases it would be a year or two years before the film was actually finished just because of the funding cycles. You could request money from the State Council on the Arts, and it would be a year before that money would show up. And in some cases you couldn't wait that long because whatever the event or whatever the issue that you were covering, you couldn't tell them to wait until you got the money. Third World Newsreel was always trying to juggle whatever income was coming from distribution with the priorities of production. And it couldn't produce any of these things without the income from distribution, equipment, and a space that we could work in. Without that, we would have fallen apart.

**JS:** The structure of Third World Newsreel films is different. They're longer, and the whole approach to various issues seems to be very different.

**AS:** Well, there's more analysis, much more analysis, and the movement had changed. Those people who were doing political organizing or people who were progressive became involved in specific issues, and they had some kind of relationship to it. So for example, there were some women who became involved with Third World Newsreel who were in prison. That's how

the women in prison film [*Inside Women Inside* (1978)] got made. And in terms of the day care film, *Fresh Seeds in the Big Apple* was made because my kids were in day care. So I had a relationship to that issue.

**JS:** And there wasn't this huge group critique of everything going on.



*Inside Women Inside*, Christine Choy/Cynthia Maurizio, Third World Newsreel, 1978.

**AS:** No, there was much more attention being paid to the craft of the actual film at that point. And everyone got credit for the work they did. So it was a very different process altogether.

**JS:** What films did you make with Third World Newsreel? Could you describe some of the topics your films covered?

**AS:** Besides *Teach Our Children* and *We Demand Freedom*, there was someone I met in this prison in Massachusetts who asked us

to work with him on another prison film. We did that film called *In the Event That Anyone Disappears* (1974), which was about two prisons in New Jersey. Christine started working on the Chinatown film, *From Spikes to Spindles* (1976) so I edited that. And then there was the film on domestic violence that was also Christine's film, *To Love, Honor and Obey* (1980). There were two other editors who worked on that film, but they couldn't finish it. Part of the conception of the film, which was correct, was that it would be an all women's crew that would work on it. But they couldn't make it work. I don't know whether they couldn't make it work because they couldn't figure out actually what Chris's vision of the film was, or whether they couldn't solve the problem editorially, but I was asked to finish it, and I did.

At that point I was editing a lot of people's films because I had that experience. And then there was another person, Larry, who was a cameraman, and he shot a lot of films. So this other kind of division of labor got created in Third World Newsreel, almost like a rotating directorship. I would edit someone's film and then eventually I would get to work on my own film. And that was supposed to be the process. It didn't always work out that way.

**JS:** Were people satisfied with that arrangement? Did they feel that they got their turn?

**AS:** It was an uneven process. Definitely an uneven process. For example, the proposal for *To Love, Honor and Obey*, to do a film about domestic violence, was not written by Christine. It was written by someone else, and by the time the money came to do that film, the woman who wrote the proposal was no longer in the organization. So in some way it defaulted on Christine to do that film because someone had to do it.

**JS:** What was happening in terms of distribution in Third World Newsreel, and how did that relate to what New York Newsreel had attempted to do? Was there a wider network of

organizations to which films were distributed? Was there a different sense of who the audiences were for Third World Newsreel's films?

**AS:** Yeah, very definitely. The films became much more specifically issue-oriented. For example, *Columbia Revolt* was about political activity on a college campus, and that could reach a wide constituency. Whereas a film like *To Love, Honor and Obey* was about domestic violence; it was about women's issues. So for the distribution for that film, you had to connect with those orga-



*To Love, Honor & Obey*, Christine Choy/Marlene Dann, Third World Newsreel, 1980.

nizations that were interested in that topic. You had to develop the distribution of the film based on the issue that it addressed. People who are interested in a film about domestic violence are not the same people who are interested in prisons. So each film forced you to develop a distribution network for that particular film. You had to create the audience for that film. Each film required a fairly enormous amount of work to develop the distribution, to get it out there and to tap into an audience that you presumed existed. Another thing

that we were interested in that Newsreel was never interested in was distribution on television. So you had to find a way to sell the film to television. There was that whole aspect of distribution, and because we were producing films about a much wider range of subjects, we would develop a mailing list when we'd send our catalogues to people.

On college campuses there were different departments that would be interested in a particular issue, and then you had to reach out into the community also. So there were two tiers of distribution in terms of what people could afford to pay. A college was going to pay top dollar for rental on a film, and a community group couldn't afford that, but we wanted them to have access to it also.

**JS:** In Third World Newsreel were you more satisfied with the audiences that the films were reaching? Or did you always have a sense that the films that you were making were reaching people that you wanted to see them?

**AS:** Well, there was always a question of whether we were actually maximizing the potential for distribution. There was always this tension between distribution and production. So much of people's own individual desire was to produce so a lot of energies got drained from distribution. If we had six people in the organization, and five of those people were focused on production, then the resources would be taken away from distribution, and money that could be allocated for distribution would go to production. So the films would reach their audience, but whether they reached their potential audience, that was always a big question in my mind.

And if you look at the difference between California Newsreel and Third World

Newsreel, California Newsreel had a strategy that was almost solely focused on distribution and the acquisition of films for distribution. Third World Newsreel's distribution network never devel-

oped to the degree that it should have developed. Now I think there's much more of a concerted effort in terms of distribution, creating catalogues, finding resources to reach audiences, making sure that the materials reach the various intended audiences.

**"... each film forced you to develop a distribution network for that particular film. You had to create the audience for that film."**

A lot of our resources were very divided. We were trying to accomplish a lot of different things. We had a theater, the Higher Ground Cinema, which was designed to develop audi-

ences for different films, for example, African Cinema. Pearl Bowser was directly responsible for a lot of that.

**JS:** Where was the theater located?

**AS:** We had a loft on 20th Street, and we built a theater in it which seated between 50 and 75 people. We would do screenings of a whole range of films. A lot of them were very interesting.

**JS:** What kind of audience did you attract? How did you advertise, and what kind of attendance did you get for the screenings?

**AS:** It varied a lot. Some films we would have tremendous attendance and for others it was very disappointing. The reason that we developed it was because there were lots of films that were being produced in different parts of the world, but in the United States there was no venue for them.

**JS:** And so would you target different audiences depending on what kinds of films you were showing?

**AS:** Well, we would advertise in the *Village Voice* to a general audience, and then for specific films we would try to target that audience. If we showed films from Africa then we would target the Black community, for Latin films, the Latin community, wherever we thought there was a potential audience. It was the kind of thing that could only exist because it was partially subsidized from NEA grants. It couldn't exist solely based on income.

**JS:** How long was it in operation?

**AS:** Two or three years. Late 70s, early 80s. When we moved our office, we still felt that it was important to do that kind of exhibition work, but instead of doing it at our own theater, Pearl developed a whole touring exhibition. She brought many of the earliest African films over

here with speakers. That was really important, and that got a lot of support. We would show them at more established venues like the Public Theater in New York. So the viewing situation was very different, and programming became an important element in what we were doing. Pearl had been doing programming to a certain extent on her own, but this gave her the institutional support that she hadn't had before. *Ganja and Hess* (Bill Gunn, 1970) was one of the films that we exhibited. Third World Newsreel actually paid for the restoration of that film. So we were doing that, and we had the production workshop.

**JS:** I wanted to ask you about that, because you mentioned that it seemed to you sometimes that there was an overemphasis on production, but Third World Newsreel did establish a production workshop. Did you create that?

**AS:** Yes. People in different organizations felt we had a responsibility to train people to make films. And that was part of the impetus of creating this workshop. And it also became a way that we could recruit new people into the organization, because people would come to the workshop and then some of them then wanted to work with the organization. That's how Ada [Gay Griffin] joined Third World Newsreel. She was in one of the workshops, and she stayed on and took over the organization. So, the workshops were important, because they helped to rejuvenate the organization with new people so that it didn't stagnate and so that the power within the organization was always being challenged by these infusions of new blood. The workshop went through various manifestations and reorganizations, but it still exists now.

**JS:** So the workshop started around the same time you had the theater?

**AS:** Actually it was part of a proposal that included exhibition space; we got funding for both of those things. So we were doing distribution, production, the workshop and we were doing the exhibition space. It was a lot of things to be responsible for. We were trying to do all these different things so in some ways the focus of the organization kept shifting from year to year.

**JS:** Newsreel doesn't seem to be doing the same amount of production they were doing in the 70s and 80s.

**AS:** Well if you had someone who was a really good cameraman who was a part of the organization, for part of their time they would work on projects for Third World Newsreel and the other part of the time they would be working basically as a freelance cameraman. And the pull to work as a freelance person where you could earn a living, as opposed to working with Third World Newsreel where you would earn a marginal living, that tension was always there. So the people who had the technical resources to produce things couldn't devote the same kind of energy to producing material in the organization as before. Plus it's just a much more competitive environment now in terms of raising money, and it's a much more individualistic environment. There's not the same sense of pooling resources in some kind of collective manner that there was 10 or 15 years ago. So the organization doesn't have the same kind of ability to produce as it did before. I mean, for a period of time within Third World Newsreel, there was actually a nucleus of people who produced a good amount of films. We had the equipment; we had the experience. We could basically do whatever it is that we felt we ought to do, and it would be able to compete within this larger arena of the film world.

**JS:** When did you leave Third World Newsreel and why did you leave?

**AS:** I left in '87, '88. I needed to move on. In terms of my own film work, I couldn't really develop in the direction that I wanted to go within the organization. The old guard was burnt out and looking for other directions.

**JS:** As you look back on your experiences with Newsreel, what kind of impact do you think it has had in terms of documentary filmmaking in America. What kind of legacy do you think it has left?

**AS:** Well, it has had a tremendous legacy. It's hard to really evaluate the extent of the legacy. It was an incubator for a lot of people whose whole careers were formed in Newsreel in one way or the other. There's probably no other organization where you could say that the number of award-winning filmmakers grew out of that one group of people. More Academy Awards have been won by people who were associated with Newsreel or Third World Newsreel than probably any other organization.

It became a place where people could formulate and experiment with a whole range of filmmaking styles. The equipment that we had enabled people to do things without the same kind of fundraising pressures that most people are confronted with when they go about making a film. A lot of the reason that people go to film school is because they want access to equipment, and they have access to a group of people who will work with them on their project. Well in Third World Newsreel there was equipment, and there were people to help you make the film. So that was just an incredible opportunity for people. To get interested in a political topic

or issue and develop the idea and begin shooting without a lot of the constraints that exist. You could sit and discuss a topic and if people decided the topic was important, you could actually just go out and begin filming it without having to go to some foundation and beg them for money.

**“There’s probably no other organization [Newsreel] where you could say that the number of award-winning filmmakers grew out of that one group of people.”**

At Third World Newsreel, you didn't have to convince someone to give you money to go out and rent the camera. You had a camera. It was more or less a discussion of whether this was a worthwhile subject to commit our resources to. You can make a list of filmmakers who Third World Newsreel was influential in the

early stages of their career. Some went through the production workshop and are now getting grants to make films or are people whose initial films were distributed by Third World Newsreel and have since developed some recognition. Their early films would never have been distributed by anyone else. All those factors contribute to the kind of legacy that Third World Newsreel has left and continues to leave.

**JS:** What have previous histories about Newsreel gotten wrong? What has been misrepresented about Newsreel's development and its activities?

**AS:** Well, there's a tendency to look at Newsreel simply from the point of view of the films that were produced, rather than from all these other processes that took place that allowed the films to be produced.

**JS:** Like what?

**AS:** For example, Newsreel grew out of a very specific period of time and the convergence of all these different forces and different events. You had developments in technology that made filmmaking more accessible to people, a movement of experimental filmmaking, the movement in terms of social activism and so forth. It evolved at this particular historical moment, and was very much a factor in that. And what motivated people and kept the organization alive was this multiplicity of forces. Social activism was very much the gel that allowed the group to exist and to produce as much it did within a relatively short period of time. Unless you are constantly aware of the totality of all those forces at that time, then you can't get a full picture of how it all happened and how it came about.

It's wrong to say, "OK, well, it happened because of these three films." That's an uneven picture. Or, "This person was the key factor in Third World Newsreel." That's unfair also. To me what's amazing and what's important is that this organization has undergone transformation in terms of the people who are involved in it and so forth and actually is a viable entity to this day. Why is that? Certain people played a key role in making that happen, but what were the values that allowed that to happen? Sure the films are important, but it's also that there was this institutional vision about filmmaking, the role of filmmaking in society, training people to make films, all those things. It's not just: "Three people sit down and make a film and then they have a product." Third World Newsreel, *The Newsreel*, was always about more than that. The fact that individuals' careers grew out of that, that's a byproduct, and it's a good byproduct. But if it was simply about that, then Third World Newsreel wouldn't be around.

**JS:** What do you feel are the strengths and weaknesses of the organization as it moves into the 21st century? Looking forward, what role do you see Third World Newsreel playing in future decades? Do you see it as an organization that has the staying power to continue to do the kinds of things you've been describing?

**AS:** I think so. First of all, the people who are in the organization are very much aware of its legacy and its history. And if we look at cultural organizations and institutions that arose in this century, very few of them have survived the way Third World Newsreel has. You can look at organizations that existed in this country in the 1930s or organizations in other parts of the world that came about at different periods of time, they came and they disappeared. Somehow or another this organization has been able to make the changes and adjustments necessary for it to continue to survive and be relevant. Partly it's because Third World Newsreel has a sense of the importance of its history as an institution and the contributions it has made to giving voice to a vast segment of the population that previously didn't have a voice. And that's an amazing thing when you think about it.

Here's something that should have died, by all stretches of the imagination, years ago. When the Reagan administration began attacking the arts and the NEA and so forth, we thought that this was the end. All the money was going to dry up and that was going to be the end of Third World Newsreel. But it wasn't. Partly it was because of the distribution; there was always this flow of money that kept things going, even if it just to pay the rent. And it had this vast library of materials that continued to produce income. If you look at major media institutions that

**"... Third World Newsreel has a sense of the importance of its history as an institution and the contributions it has made to giving a voice to a vast segment of the population that previously didn't have a voice."**

control things now, it's because they have the ability to draw on a library of material, and to distribute that material in a variety of formats that continues to make money. Third World Newsreel has to make that kind of adjustment in terms of changing technologies and changing ways that audiences relate to media today. And I think they should be able to do that.

**JS:** So do you think that primarily it is Third World Newsreel's archive that will ensure its relevance in the future, or are there other elements that are just as important?

**AS:** Well, the archive is one element. The second element is the ability to be able to attract new filmmakers to its distribution network. I think Third World News-

reel has to come to terms with what that distribution apparatus is and how it functions and how it's able to generate money for the organization. It's essential that it figure that out. Otherwise it will collapse without that income. It has to deal with all the various technologies that exist and are developing in terms of the delivery of information and ideas to people through the Internet, on video or on film. Third World Newsreel has to figure that out. The fact that they have a library to draw on gives them an advantage in figuring that out. Because people are aware of the organization and what its purposes are, I think it will continue to attract filmmakers or video makers who want to have their material distributed by Third World Newsreel.

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(About **Allan Siegel**, by Allan Siegel:) The veneer of civility and social equality that had framed the assumptions of democracy, pluralism and global benevolence in post-WWII America had been stripped away by the Civil Rights movement, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Kennedy assassination and now finally the escalation of the war in Vietnam. In disenfranchised communities, in the pockets of the disillusioned on campuses there was a growing impetus toward a massive social transformation of a full spectrum of institutions. In American cities, a whole gamut of the anti-war movement was gaining momentum and was moving from the social fringes to a mass movement.

Unknown to each other and in the midst of all the activity directed toward the Pentagon Demonstration event, were various groups of filmmakers clustered in their own areas but also concerned about the forthcoming Washington D.C. demonstration. One group was centred on Blue Van Films and included Robert Kramer, Norman Fruchter, Robert Machover, and Robert Lacativa. Another, was based in my filmmaking workshop at the Free University of New York. This group included Nick Doob, Rene Lichtman, Shawn Walker, Stu Bird, Karen Mitnick, and Melvin Margolis. A third group was based out of Marvin Fishman's film studio on East 3rd St with Marvin and Oe Masanori. Newsreel was formed out of these three basic nuclei. And, the catalyst that brought them together was the Pentagon Demonstration in 1967.

In Washington, in the streets, on the steps of the Pentagon, filmmakers from around the world—including Chris Marker from France whose *Pentagon* and *Paris '68* films were on in the Newsreel distribution network—coalesced to produce a massive collective ephemeral portrait of a country undergoing the paroxysms of change. In the weeks following, Jonas Mekas and Melvin Margolis were the ones instrumental in organizing the first filmmakers meeting, at the original Anthology Film Archives cinema in SoHo. From this gathering Newsreel was formed. There, 60-70 filmmakers and interested parties met at the Mercer St. theatre (I think that's where it was) to talk about making a film about the recent events.

I was the organiser of the Free University workshop group and all of us became Newsreel members except for Nick. As cameraman or editor I was associated with many of the early Newsreel films. My last film was *America* which also became the subject of considerable controversy. At this point I became more involved in political organising and lived in Vermont and Cambridge where I joined a collective showing films in prisons in the Boston area. From this experience I directed the film *We Demand Freedom* about prisons in the United States. It was one of the reasons that I reconnected with what had become Third World Newsreel: a small energetic collective of three people working out of a loft on 23rd Street in Manhattan; the group was finishing *Teach Our Children* about the Attica Prison Rebellion. Subsequently, I began working with Third World Newsreel. I worked on a number of films and was instrumental in getting some of the initial funding and help transition the organisation into more of a self-sustaining entity. The last film I did at Third World Newsreel was *No Time to Lose* (broadcast on PBS) which I co-directed with Patricia Benoit.

In 1991 I moved to Chicago where I began teaching video at the School of the Art Institute and where I produced and directed a number of documentaries—*Lifting the Fog: Intrigue in the Middle East* and *The Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* as well as a short dramatic film based on the Ernest Hemingway short story *A Clean Well-Lighted Place*. I also worked with Iñigo Manglano on the video installations for the Mies van der Rohe exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art and Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. I left Chicago with an unfinished film project about the assassination of Malcolm X.

In 2001 I moved to Budapest and began teaching in the Intermedia Department at the Hungarian University of Fine Arts. Here I directed the feature length documentary *Usti Opre* about Roma musicians in Central and Eastern Europe. I have curated, and produced artwork for a number of exhibitions in Hungary, Russia and the UK about market halls. In 2016 I received a PhD in curatorial studies from the University of Reading, UK. Now, I'm working on a book entitled: *Close Encounters of the Food Kind: Cities, Public Space and Democracy* and I'm finally completing the film about Malcolm X.

# NEWSREEL OLD AND NEW: TOWARDS A HISTORICAL PROFILE

Michael Renov

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Our films remind some people of battle footage: grainy, camera weaving around trying to get the material and still not get beaten/trapped. Well, we and many others are at war. We not only document that war, but try to find ways to bring that war to places which have managed so far to buy themselves isolation from it...Our propaganda is one of confrontation. Using film—using our voices with and after films—using our bodies with and without camera—to provoke confrontation...Therefore, we keep moving. We keep hacking out films, as quickly as we can, in whatever way we can.

— Robert Kramer, *New York Newsreel*, 1968<sup>1</sup>

Documentary remains the major form of political filmmaking in this country. It has always been and probably will be in the foreseeable future. And yet, there has been very, very little discussion of how documentary films actually function. The political efficacy of documentary is derived from the relationship of the audience to the film—not the relationship of the filmmaker to the subject.

— Larry Daressa, *California Newsreel*, 1983<sup>2</sup>

December 1987 will mark the twenty-year anniversary of the formation of Newsreel, a radical film-making collective conceived during the last flush of New Left activism. Once boasting offices in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, and Atlanta, Newsreel now survives in two versions: California Newsreel, San Francisco, producers and distributors of films about the workplace as well as South Africa and apartheid, with a new focus on media education (educating Americans about rather than through media); and Third World Newsreel, New York, vortex of film and video activities intended as the cultural interventions of the disenfranchised. In the following pages, I hope to suggest areas of conceptual as well as functional continuity and discontinuity between the two extant Newsreel organizations, as well as between the present enterprises and their Newsreel predecessors. In doing so, I seek to draw attention both to the achievements of a generation of American film activists and to the necessarily altered requirements for survival for politically committed documentarists in the late eighties. A historical profile of this sort can only point to a few of the most dramatic tendencies across decades of activity; this account will be supplemented by the soon-to-be-updated Third World Newsreel catalogue featuring descriptions of the Newsreel films in circulation (in addition to the hundred or so independently produced films and tapes they distribute) and by more in-depth accounts of the Newsreel infrastructure and output during its several phases.<sup>3</sup>

## NEWSREEL PRE-HISTORY

The counterculture of the New Left tended toward negation, the issuing of shocks against presumed middle class sensibilities, all the while reinforcing oppositional ties. Consequently, one must look elsewhere than to the culture of the American Left of the thirties for radical antecedents, perhaps to the surrealist or constructivist positions earlier in the century. If one may judge from the rhetoric of first-generation Newsreelers such as Robert Kramer, it is the utopian socialism of the immediately post-revolutionary Soviet Union that resonates most deeply with the cultural radicalism of the New Left, not the populist humanism of the American thirties.

“It is the combination of youthfulness, enthusiasm, and volatility that links the work and writing of Dziga Vertov with the first wave of Newsreel practitioners. Both were dedicated to the concept of a continuing revolution and the potential of the cinema to mobilize a shared political identity necessary for broad-based social change. What separates the two and forces us to pose them in dialectical tension are their respective relations to state power and to technology. Vertov and his comrades worked at the cutting edge of a state-run revolution. Newsreel was a manifestation of the counterculture, defining itself always in opposition to the dominant, generating and encouraging resistance to the authority of the prevailing system of social, political and economic relations.”<sup>4</sup>

Vertov, trained as were so many other Soviet film artists for a scientific vocation, envisioned cinema as a technological vehicle for extending human powers of observation and cognition. His kinoki were labeled as “pilots” or “engineers” whose machine eye and radio ear could transform history. A child of his time, Vertov praised the beauty and perfection of the mechanical world and of chemical processes as the triumphant extension of natural forces.

A half-century later, the relationship of New Left media activists to technology was chiefly one of negation. Early Newsreelers harbored little hope of appropriating or re-routing channels of communication to further their political goals. (“None of us are old enough to have

any illusions about infiltrating the major media to reach mass consciousness and change it—we grew up on TV and fifties Hollywood.”<sup>5</sup> Unlike Vertov and his kinoki, or even the American Old Left, the founders of Newsreel in late 1967 could claim no institutional or mass-based source of support. Rather, as suggested earlier, mass base had become mass culture; party was replaced by a constituency-in-media. An yet, as with Vertov, there was within the early Newsreel movement a feverish impulse toward an elemental reconstruction for its audience—if not of perception, at least of consciousness. These radical cineasts were inspired by the enforced aesthetic privations of true guerrilla footage, documents of forces fighting wars of liberation in Vietnam, Africa, or Latin America, or by the pre-industrialized methods of the American underground film, which also offered refuge from the seamless, ideologically complicit products of the culture industry.

There is a further point of historical tangency between early Newsreel and Vertov’s efforts in the pre-dawn of radical cinema. Just as the Soviet agit-trains, armed with camera equipment, film lab and projector, traversed the land from 1919 to 1921 helping to forge a nascent cultural identity, so too did early Newsreelers mobilize their own community outreach program. Recent Academy Award recipient Deborah Schaffer (*Witness to War*, 1985) has spoken of the methods of distribution and exhibition in the Ann Arbor, Michigan chapter of newsreel in 1969-70:

“We had two motorcycles and we put this box on the back of the motorcycle to hold the projector. We’d go off on motorcycles with the projector and films. We would show them in dormitories, churches, people’s living rooms, union halls, high school auditoriums.”<sup>6</sup>

Vertov and his New Left cousins shared the zeal and inventiveness of the bricoleur-evangelist.

The reconstruction of consciousness for the Newsreel audience was to be achieved by a willed abdication from the standards of quality or craft; the intention was a return to an essential cinema dedicated to the requirements of building an adversarial culture. The simplicity of the appellation “Newsreel” figures a desire for a fundamental reinscription of values and practices. The unstinting revisionism which underlies this naming and its return to the blank slate of historical representation is both an act of youthful bravery and of a willing forgetfulness which breaks ties with a set of complex histories. The popular frontism of the American Left in the late 1930s and early 1940s was rooted in a hope of base-building and eventual unification while the political radicalisms of the late 1960s implied a contrary motive—the intensification of social contradictions to the point of rupture. For while the founding membership of Newsreel in New York included a core of veterans of mid-sixties community-organizing campaigns, the organization was forged in a moment of communal anger and indignation following the October 1967 March on the Pentagon. The agenda for a grass-roots, participatory democracy was buckling under the weight of a growing militancy.<sup>7</sup>

The altered agenda of an increasingly apocalyptic moment is expressed quite succinctly in *Garbage* (Newsreel, 1968), a film which examines a planned provocation by the members of a New York anarchist group calling itself “Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers.” During a prolonged strike of garbage collection workers, the Motherfuckers devise a plan to bring rotting garbage to the bastions of high culture and political power. They therefore dump enormous heaps of trash at the entranceways of Lincoln Center, home of the Metropolitan Opera and New

tor observes in voice-over that the difference between the Old Left and the New is expressed by their differing approaches to problems—the former sought to solve them, the latter to intensify them.

## INSTITUTIONAL TIES—THE MYTH OF CREATION

As interviews with early New York Newsreel members indicate, the first generation of this radical film-making group represented a convergence of disparate impulses and constituencies.<sup>8</sup> There were the former SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] activists whose political sensibilities had been forged through a decade of community-based activism and programmatic wrangling. Of this number, Robert Kramer and Norm Fruchter, with his ties to such influential journals as *Studies on the Left* and *New Left Review*, remain the prototypes. These were the ideologues, the political “heavies,” whose Movement credentials and rhetorical skills were capable of intimidating opposition in mass meetings. In addition, there were the “underground” film-makers whose concerns were loosely tied to notions of alternative art-making and self-expression, products of the boom period of the New American Cinema when the Brakhages and the Baillies commanded a sizable audience in the museums and on the campuses. The former Newsreel faction was likely to give priority to the construction of correct political positions expressed in filmic terms while the latter tendency defined itself more directly in terms of its craft, guided by political concerns but not subsumed by them. This is, of course, a rough

approximation or profile of some forty or fifty people whose idiosyncracies tended to obscure any such general tendencies.<sup>9</sup>

**“The simplicity of the appellation ‘Newsreel’ figures a desire for a fundamental reinscription of values and practices.”**

There is a larger and quite striking commonality decipherable, however; neither faction could claim for itself an organized or structurally coherent base of support—in short, an audience. Neither the Marxists nor the underground film-makers could presume to know their constituencies

in any but the most abstract terms, the political activists because the Movement was undergoing a painful process of fragmentation typified by the SDS splits while the film artisans were rooted in a tradition of expressivity which valued the isolation of the artist within the hegemony of mass culture. The very values which united every Newsreel audience or potential audience were based on a fundamental negation of institutionalized frameworks (alienation from accepted social and political forms, cynicism toward the trade unionism that had been the bastion of the Old Left, a preference for vaguely articulated rather than explicit associations). A politically inflected cultural group like Newsreel, in bearing what Bill Nichols has characterized as a barometric relationship to the Left<sup>10</sup>, could only reproduce the soft boundaries and conceptual dissonance of late Sixties political dissent typified by the rainbow of orientations and agendas that combined to protest the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention—from the Dave Dellinger-style anti-war pacifists to the anarchic Yippie contingent.

Despite the conceptual pluralism of Newsreel's position in the early years, we can discern certain frequently unstated premises of the organization. From an interview with a range of Newsreelers published in a 1968 *Film Quarterly*, Marilyn Buck and Karen Ross gave voice to the mythic origins of the collective: "And all the TV channels and American films speak from the same mouth of control and power. We looked around...and Newsreel was conceived and born."<sup>11</sup> There is the suggestion of a kind of autochthony here, of a cleansing oracle arisen from within the belly of the mass-cultural beast. The two films which catapulted Newsreel to success in countercultural terms (*Columbia Revolt*, *Black Panther* – both 1968) offer further evidence of such a mythos of spontaneous generation. The films share an aura of revolutionary romanticism, offering direct contact with what appeared at the time to be the most advanced elements of the struggle—in short, news from the front. The Panther film, alternately titled *Off the Pig* (a phrase hypnotically chanted by a phalanx of Panthers during a demonstration at the Alameda County Courthouse), brought the words and images of Huey P. Newton, Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale to Movement audiences everywhere. More importantly, by its mise-en-scene and incantatory music track accompanying bereted and leather-jacketed Panthers-in-training, the film manages to suggest a great deal more than it can show. "Nor more brothers in jail/The pigs are gonna catch hell" sing the militant brothers and sisters while Cleaver speaks of the bald-headed businessmen in the Chamber of Commerce whose exploitation will be countered by mass insurgency as soon as the rest of America catches on (which Cleaver assures us will be very soon). Here is a mixture of buoyant militancy and a political optimism which is well nigh infectious—or would have been for a sympathetic 1968 audience. In any case, hundreds of prints sold in a matter of months.

As for *Columbia Revolt*, one need only consult the published responses of student audiences to be found in the underground press of the day. According to an October 1969 account appearing in *Rat*, a New York-based organ of the radical counterculture, *Revolt* was responsible for an incendiary outburst at a college campus in Buffalo: "At the end of the second film, with no discussion, five hundred members of the audience arose and made their way to the University ROTC building (the Reserve Officer Training Corps, target of much campus protest during the Vietnam War). They proceeded to smash windows, tear up furniture and destroy machines until the office was a total wreck; and then they burned the remaining paper and flammable parts of the structure to charcoal."<sup>12</sup> What the Buffalo student body had observed (and the apocryphal nature of the tale is no hindrance to a discussion of mythic contours) was the vanguard action of their Ivy League cousins, a model of energetic but sustained resistance to malign authority. The analysis contained in *Columbia Revolt* is muted in comparison to the spectacle of solidarity and community it offers. The New Age marriage rites of two students, the support marches of sympathetic members, the pitch-and-catch of food stuffs holding intact the supply lines which, like the Ho Chi Minh Trail, meant sustenance for the guerrillas under siege—all these depictions of newly conceived social relations live on long after the immediate gymnasium construction issue is forgotten.

The efforts of the early Newsreel collectives aimed to inform and inspire their Movement audiences, with the balance between the two functions always in question. While a pre-Newsreel film like *Troublemakers* (1966), which follows the struggles of a community organizing group in a black neighborhood in Newark before the riots (examining the project's achievements and defeats), explores the contradictions inherent in grass-roots political activism, the post-'68 Newsreel film was likely to stress action and elicit engaged (if not educated) response.

**94** In a pronouncement that echoes the Surrealist position of the 1920s, Robert Kramer out-

lined the Newsreel program circa 1968: "We strive for confrontation, we prefer disgust/violent disagreement/painful recognition/jolts—all these to slow liberal head-nodding and general wonderment at the complexity of these times and their being out of joint."<sup>13</sup>

Given the avowedly confrontational status of the work, the emphasis upon a collective scheme of organization and production ("Newsreel is a collective rather than a cooperative; we are not together merely to help each other out as filmmakers but we are working together for a common purpose"<sup>14</sup>), what can be said about the precise division of labor of the groups in question and the material conditions of production? As every Marxist knows, consciousness does not anticipate productive relations but is conditioned and determined by them. But a major philosopher of the New Left like Herbert Marcuse was quite willing to theorize (in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) that, in a stage of advanced capitalism, imagination could show reason the way. Artists and free thinkers could reshape the horizons of a society soured and desensitized by an overrationalized ethos of thought and action. As a loosely-bound group of like-minded cultural interventionists, Newsreel was the ideal manifestation of this New Age dogma.

Decision-making and the setting of policy were matters of some contestation given the lack of clear lines of authority and the diverse, backgrounds of the participants. At a time that felt like a crisis period, specific goals (even ill-defined ones like "stop the war") offered sufficient binding power to keep the wheels turning and the Movement audience served. Those who, like Norm Fruchter, were accustomed to a greater precision of shared principles and a more disciplined group dynamic found the Newsreel experience a trying one. "I was...more of a Marxist, I think, than a lot of people in Newsreel," says Fruchter, "and so I was both interested in those congeries of different folks, and at the same time skeptical about whether we were going to hold together. The energy was awesome."<sup>15</sup>

So far as the mechanism for production decisions was concerned, the pattern was erratic at best. The most fundamental decisions always surrounded the initial question—what films should be made. But a second question—how to finance a given project—often proved determinant. Films could be made if there were those within the collective who could manage to make them by whatever means might present themselves. If the final result was unacceptable to the group, the film could not receive the "Newsreel" imprimatur. Several funding routes seem to have recurred in the early days. There was a core elite within the New York collective who matched the profile of the SDS leadership throughout the sixties—college educated white males, verbal, assertive, confident, with access to funding sources both personal and institutional. Robert Kramer and Robert Machover could call upon family resources to finance projects. (Indeed, this pattern is a time-honored one in American Left circles, most recently exemplified by Haskell Wexler's anti-Contra feature, *Latino* – bankrolled in part by his mother.) The Fruchters, Kramers, and Machovers of Newsreel were the bright and persuasive young men who could function within the world of capital, either by virtue of birthright or by acquired expertise. Fruchter, for example, was well-suited for fundraising given his scholarly and literary credentials (as a published novelist) and his first-hand experience with Left funding networks. Fruchter has estimated that he succeeded in raising more money for *Troublemakers*, his film about the Newark Community Union Project, than had the Project itself over its several year lifespan. There were simmering animosities over this relative monopoly of capital-access, rooted as it was in class background. Furthermore, this same group of men (who were a key faction of the New York collective's coordinating committee) possessed far greater technical skills and experience; Fruchter, Kramer and Machover had formed Blue Van Films several years before.

A second faction consisted of yet another group of white males who, though less likely candidates for institutional support, were well under way as independent film-makers. By 1968, Marvin Fishman and Allan Siegel had both organized film-making workshops at the Free University in New York and were able to translate their expertise into Newsreel product. At the mo-

**“As a loosely-bound group of like-minded cultural interventionists, Newsreel was the ideal manifestation of this New Age dogma.”**

ment of Newsreel’s formation in December 1967, it was decided that a film was needed to chronicle the October 1967 March on the Pentagon; Fishman was farthest along with a personal project along those lines. Newsreel #1 (1968) entitled *No Game*, was the result, despite the fact that the film bears only a passing resemblance to the “Newsreel style” familiar from the later works—scenes of conflict; lively, non-synch music interspersed with multiple voice-over narrations from impassioned partici-

pants. There were concerted efforts made to disseminate the technical skills, but the difficulties were more deeply embedded than these well-intentioned attempts could hope to rectify. Women and minorities—after lifetimes of limited access to resources, possessing severely stunted self-images as producers of culture—were incapable of closing the gap overnight. Frustration and unspoken critiques festered beneath the surface of the organization.

And yet a necessary pragmatism reigned. In the words of Allan Siegel: “It was the kind of thing that if you came up with the money to do it (make a film), well then, you could do it. You made a film. I always used to stash myself away someplace and make things out of nothing. So I kept turning things out...”<sup>16</sup> Power and status were thus linked to the ability to produce despite the unequal distribution of the requisite tools for the task. In his discussion of Newsreel’s collective process in the early days, Norm Fruchter recalls the inequities with some regret:

Your participation depended on having another means to finance yourself. There was a group of people who worked and therefore could never stay up all night...and couldn’t shoot certain sequences...And there were a lot of arguments about the contradictions of being in, not a rich person’s organization, but certainly an organization which required the leisure to be full time in it. We talked about income-sharing but never did it. We talked about finding some way to subsidize the people who had to work and never did that. All the income that was brought in and all the fundraising that was done went right into the production of more films and that perpetuated the reign of the people who had self-sufficient resources or could somehow juggle their lives or jobs or whatever so that they could do that. And I don’t think it bothered us that much at the time. I remember thinking that, yeah, it was absolutely unfair and there was nothing to be done about it.”<sup>17</sup>

Problems arising from inequities internal to the collective—income differentials, housing , or childcare needs—were viewed as secondary to the pressing struggle for social change.



The politics of sexuality and of everyday life remained issues to be addressed in a later phase of the organization.

By the early seventies, although the first generation Newsreelers had left the organization, factionalism based on differences of privilege and access enjoyed by collective members prevailed. From 1971 to 1973, New York Newsreel members split themselves into “haves” and “have-nots,” with the distinctions among ethnicity, class background, and functional class position somewhat blurred. Thus, Christine Choy, a Chinese woman, at 22 the holder of a master’s degree in architecture from Columbia University, was a have-not, due in part to her activities within the organization’s Third World Caucus. While salary differentials posed no basis for contention—minimal stipends and rent support for collective dwellings were the extent of financial support—stratification was expressed in subtle forms: the haves edited on a Steenbeck while the have-nots made do with an old Moviola.<sup>18</sup>

But the rift within the collective evidenced by the have/have-not division was only one stage among a series of convulsions that left New York Newsreel a three-person collective by 1973. The success of the San Francisco-shot *The Woman’s Film* (1971) had coincided with the emergence of an outspoken feminist faction within the New York organization, which began to control distribution and exhibition; most of the men left the collective in the months that followed.

As the Third World faction within the group began to focus on recruiting minorities and passing on production skills, the rift between white members and those of color intensified to the breaking point. With the dwindling of the membership, the resources capable of sustaining the collective enterprise were near exhaustion. Gone were the human resources—years of experience in shooting and assembling footage under pressure for no money, and the financial reserves—family wealth to be tapped, as well as most of the equipment.

It should be noted that while the schisms that developed within Newsreel during the early seventies around class, gender, and race effected a series of ruptures at the localized, institutional level, these organizational convulsions serve to reinforce a sense of continuity at a broader historical level. For indeed, these were the same issues (gender, race, class) that increasingly split the always tenuous coalition of New Left/countercultural forces as the focus on war resistance waned. As debates over contradictions, primary and secondary, came to occupy center stage within Movement organizations, consensus collapsed. Newsreel was never merely a reflection or conduit, that is, about Movement tactics and sensibilities; it has always remained of the Movement, a palpable index of shifting fortunes and newfound necessities.

The single factor that ensured New York Newsreel’s viability in 1973 remains the material basis for twenty years of continuity despite convulsions from within—that is, the collection of films themselves. The resurgence of production in New York did not occur until 1975 when work began on *From Spikes to Spindles* (1976), a project that established Third World Newsreel’s reputation for compact, historically situated overviews of ethnic minorities in crisis (in this case, Chinese Americans in New York). Until that time, the focus of collective activity remained the revival of distribution of the original Newsreel collection (achieved in part through the issuing of a new catalogue) which was recognized as the backbone of the organization. The films were the sole resources that remained to the New York organization in 1973; they have sustained the Newsreel effort since that time as financial asset and historical legacy even as the New

York and San Francisco collectives move toward a reordering of goals and priorities.

## CALIFORNIA NEWSREEL

The film-making collective calling itself California Newsreel was formed in 1975 from the ashes of a San Francisco Newsreel branch which had absorbed the sort of gut-wrenching political upheavals and bitter factionalism that shook the New York group during the same period. (The chief source of San Francisco's division was a move toward the Revolutionary Communist Party by certain influential Newsreel members.) By 1978 California Newsreel was comprised of three white males—Larry Daressa Larry Adelman and Bruce Schmiechen—none of whom had been a part of the earlier incarnation of the San Francisco Newsreel collective that produced *Black Panther* and other militant films from 1968-73. Several years later another collective member was brought on to deal exclusively with archival and distribution matters (a black man Cornelius Moore) while only recently Schmiechen has left the collective to pursue independent projects.

No greater contrast could prevail between California Newsreel and its predecessors with regard to its financial underpinnings, organizational precision and concentration on distribution over production. Unlike New York Newsreel of the early years (and to a lesser extent Third World Newsreel) California Newsreel has emphasized distribution over production. Indeed in the twelve years of its existence the collective has produced only two films of its own while becoming a major player within a clearly demarcated sector of the educational film market. California Newsreel distributes films of particular interest to an audience of economists, sociologists and labor historians for classroom use; to labor educators and organizers within the trade union movement; and to various progressive and special interest; groups at the grass-roots level (churches, action groups, campus organizations). The two films produced, *Controlling Interest* and *The Business of America...*, were the results of the collective's perception of a felt need within this clearly defined audience and within the Left in general. *Controlling Interest* attempts in its 45 minutes to explain the complex nature and operating procedures of the multinational corporation and was produced at a time when no such study was available for purposes of political education. The film has sold over 800 prints since its release in 1978.

*The Business of America...* likewise aimed to fill a gap in the available public-educational resources. It was conceived in the aftermath of the Reagan victory and was intended as a more personalized treatise than the data-heavy *Controlling Interest*, capable of exposing the massive failures of the Reagan economic program and its supply-side trickle-down ethos. Both films found their audience precisely because they were tailored to its particular needs— arrived at through a variety of feed-back mechanisms and close contact with the client groups .

No longer can the Newsreel audience be defined as an amorphous mass of like-minded individuals concerned to stay abreast of breaking stories of exploitation and political victories. It's now a discrete body of buyers or renters of a media product deemed vital to the educational needs of their organization or curriculum. What is interesting about this shift is that to a certain extent these two audiences overlap inasmuch as the 1980s generation of Left academics organizers and educators arc largely drawn from that ill-defined body of radicalized spectators of the late sixties/early seventies. If California Newsreel seems a more briskly functional and business-like version of its progenitors, the same can be said of its audience, the Left activists who

ishing numbers and the nation's mood-swing to the right.

Since I have discussed the two California Newsreel productions at length elsewhere, it seems more appropriate to concentrate here on the significant features of the organization as a business enterprise.<sup>19</sup> The San Francisco group has remained profitable by a combination of prescience and hard work. In the months after the Soweto uprisings in South Africa (June 1976), a collective decision was made to choose a Southern African focus—to purchase the distribution rights to a variety of films about Southern Africa and related issues in order to distribute them to interested parties worldwide. At the time, no such collection of films existed; even now, California Newsreel is the world's principal source of films on apartheid, divestment, and related issues with a total of 21 documentaries acquired from independents and BBC alike.

The escalation of apartheid aggression throughout Southern Africa over the past several years and the upswing of world interest in countering the brutality of the Botha government through sanctions and strategies of resistance have subsequently rendered these films a resource in high demand. During the recent nationwide surge of campus protests against corporate investment in South Africa, California Newsreel played a vital role in boosting the level of educated debate simply by providing a range of relevant films as well as printed material researched and developed over nearly a decade.<sup>20</sup> Once again, although perhaps in a less dramatic fashion than in 1968, Newsreel was in the right place at the right time.

California Newsreel's formula for fiscal success combines business acumen with a knack for low budget production made possible by the shrewd recycling of archival footage and, in the beginning at least, the ability to attract donated labor (crew members, editing assistants, etc.). *Controlling Interest* was made for \$30,000 with only 10% of that figure generated internally. The Methodist Church, small foundations, and concerned individuals provided the bulk with the funding for that project while *The Business of America...* was financed largely (2/3 of the \$120,000 total cost) by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the corporate arm of the Public Broadcasting System now firmly controlled by Reagan acolytes. In first year of its circulation, more than 250 prints of the film were sold to what can only be considered its secondary market (a series of nationwide PBS air dates broadcast the films to approximately four million Americans).

The remarkable truth is that California Newsreel can boast liquid assets sufficient to ensure its existence for years to come. In spite of its bountiful resources, each collective member draws the same salary (\$25,000 annually) and will continue to do so, no matter how bullish the Left-wing educational film market may become. In fact, all workers from Daressa and Adelman to the person who sweeps the floors at the crumbling warehouse-district office perched its San Francisco alleyway— receive the same base pay. This feature of the organization is its clearest link with Newsreel's past. There is one additional point of tangency with the early days, at least with one faction of the first New York collective. California Newsreel's activities as producer and distributor are deeply tied to the perceived requirements of the American Left and are calculated in pragmatic, politically sophisticated terms. Like the core membership of New Left ideologues of the late sixties, California Newsreel (and Daressa in particular), is equal to the task of mastering the vagaries of contemporary Marxist theory as well as mainstream economic thought and of offering cogently argued, conceptually sound analyses and critiques of national labor policies and long-term economic programs.

In something of a departure from its past achievements, California Newsreel has

chosen to mark its twentieth anniversary year by launching a major five-year project aimed at deconstructing media as conventionally produced and received. This "Media on Media" project will attempt to use the prevailing technology (namely, broadcast television) to generate a meta-discourse on communications, an anti-television capable of exploring new modes of expression as well as new techniques for reading—in effect, to establish a context for exchange between media products and their audiences. California Newsreel thus commits itself to the creation of an environment favorable to a rejuvenated experimental reflexive documentary form at a moment of flagging hopes among American independent producers.

California Newsreel thus announces a dramatic shift of emphasis from "point of production" (the work place) to "point of reception" (the home) consistent with its analysis of the political/cultural focus that Left organizations need to develop in present circumstances. But the concern for engaging a nationwide rather than Movement audience is in accord with the organization's public profile for nearly a decade. As co-chair of the National Coalition of Independent Public Television Producers, Larry Daressa has lobbied strenuously in Washington for a more meaningful role for independent producers within public broadcasting's program schedule as a way of insuring the vitality of contestation within an ever more uniform cultural climate. The present "Media on Media" project while unique to the American airwaves is clearly consistent with the efforts of British Channel Four's Michael Jackson, producer of "Open the Box" (1986), a six-part series exploring the complexities and social effects of television, and Jean-Luc Godard whose groundbreaking videoworks of the seventies (*Six Fois Deux* and *France/Tour/De-tour/Deux Enfants*) radically challenged the French viewing public's media expectations at formal and thematic levels. Indeed California Newsreel's ultimate aim is to intervene in the viewing habits of America, to alter not so much what we see but how we see it. This will mean working to establish a space for innovation and experimentation on American television perhaps through the creation of an Independent Programming Service on the order of Britain's Channel Four to explore new dissemination technologies and sponsor unconventional programming. Perhaps it is the sheer scale of such aspirations that provides the clearest vector of continuity with the New Left utopianism of Newsreel's founding moment.

### **THIRD WORLD NEWSREEL**

As we have seen, the early Newsreel operation was able to offer battlefield coverage of contemporary struggles from a recognizably Left perspective—quickly and in vast number. If that function has been lost at California Newsreel it lives on at the Manhattan headquarters of Third World Newsreel. At a time when politically oriented documentary filmmaking in the United States has suffered a near catastrophic decline, Third World has remained capable of producing films at a dizzying pace. The garment district offices of the collective are always alive with production activities at several stages; the editing rooms arc in constant use for in-house projects while visiting independent filmmakers frequently avail themselves of the facilities and expertise at hand. In 1985 Third World shot and completed two 30-minute films both of them commissioned or initiated by outside sources rather than generated from within the organization. *Namibia: Independence Now* was commissioned by the United Nations Council on Namibia; distributed by Third World Newsreel, the film has been translated into seven languages. *Chronicle of Hope: Nicaragua* was a project developed in coordination with the Nicaraguan Peace Fleet, a Florida-based organization that regularly ships clothing and medical supplies donated by concerned Americans. The film traces a single journey from its source in upstate New

York through a series of American communities, to the point of embarkation in Florida and at last to safe harbor in Nicaragua, thus establishing a human bridge among nations.



*Chronicle of Hope: Nicaragua*, Allan Siegel, Third World Newsreel, 1985.

The primary sources of this productive momentum remain Christine Choy and Allan Siegel who, while maintaining a long-standing personal relationship, manage to stay involved in countless projects simultaneously, all at different stages of completion. Siegel's relationship with Newsreel extends from the original December 1967 meeting through 1970 and from 1974 to the present. During that time, he has worked in a range of capacities: shooting much of *Columbia Revolt*; editing and directing such

early works as *Garbage, America, Community Control, Pig Power*, and *We Demand Freedom*. Siegel's recent credits include the Nicaraguan film and one of the three segments of *The Mississippi Triangle*, a 1984 film that examines a particularly eccentric ethnic conjuncture— Chinese/black intermarriage in white Mississippi—with filmmakers of each ethnic background directing the appropriate segments .

Choy has directed at a furious pace for the past decade, receiving in the process fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Film Institute, and the National Endowment of the Arts. Having come to the US as a teenager from the People's Republic of China to attend school, Choy retains something of the outsider's view of American culture and politics. She has a photographer's eye and the skills of a graphic artist refined during her years of architectural training; she designs many of the layouts for the pamphlets and booklets which Third World distributes. Choy has also maintained a high profile in the Asian-American film and art-making communities and is active in a range of related organizations, coalitions, and support groups.

Unlike their San Francisco cousins, Third World Newsreel cannot begin to support its many projects through the sales and rentals of its films. Films are financed on an ad hoc basis, each one having a life and history of its own. In answer to a question concerning the economic health of the organization, Siegel replied: "Generally we survive. There's a certain tension to that survival which just has to do with being a marginal-type arts organization. Basically, we're a small business. It's taken us a while to figure out how you survive as a small business, and in that sense, California Newsreel is much more adept.... We've been somewhat more anarchistic in that regard."<sup>21</sup>

And yet, the track record of Third World Newsreel is a tremendously solid one. When increased funding for women's and minority arts projects began to become available in the late seventies, Third World Newsreel was already a veteran organization with an impressive roster of completed films to its credit. Choy's enduring advocacy in the field of Asian—Ameri-

can cultural studies and her high visibility within ongoing lobbying efforts for minority access to public funding have helped to secure for Third World Newsreel and other minority media groups some measure of financial stability. Another avenue of Newsreel's sponsorship has been the establishment of the Third World Producers Project administered by the Film News Now Foundation, conduit for a variety of Newsreel-related projects. Under the leadership of Choy and Renee Tajima (a frequent Third World Newsreel collaborator), the program provides one-on-one consultation to Third World and women media producers in all aspects of their work (fundraising, film and video production skills, distribution). Still another increasingly significant component of the Third World Newsreel portfolio is the Advanced Production Workshop. Begun in 1978, the workshop offers ten to fifteen people a year-long experience in film and video production, through weekly classroom sessions culminating in several finished works. The workshops offer valuable training and experience, a community-based alternative to the competitive, industry-oriented film school model.

On another front, Third World Newsreel exhibition programs constitute a vital sector of the collective's activities. Former Newsreel member Pearl Bowser was responsible for conceiving and programming a series of traveling film exhibitions. "Independent Black American Cinema 1920-1980" began as a retrospective of more than forty films and videotapes showcased in France in 1980 which then toured the United States over a two year period. Other major efforts of this type have included the publication (in 1982) of a booklet entitled "In Color: Sixty Years of Images of Minority Women in the Media," which offers a series of essays intended as a contribution to the dialogue around the imaging of Third World women and the position occupied by women within the media. A related program of a dozen films ranging from Ousmane Sembene's *Ceddo* to short independent works such as Sylvia Morales's *Chicana* was organized as an exhibition event in the New York area. A more ambitious exhibition series and accompanying publication was completed in 1983 - "Journey Across Three Continents," which combined a diverse selection of films by African cineasts and film-makers of the black diaspora with a lecture series and 70-page catalogue. The series toured 35 cities over a three year period in an attempt to expose new audiences to the work as well as to convey the richness and diversity of the black experience in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. "Journey Across Three Continents," assembled and curated once again by Pearl Bowser, drew upon the research contributions of seven Black Studies scholars. Through its exhibition projects, Third World Newsreel has sought to facilitate dialogue between minority artists and concerned spectators, to develop an American audience for black and Third World media works outside the major urban centers. In this sense, Third World Newsreel shares California Newsreel's emphasis upon organizing at the "point of reception."

Spearheaded by Ada Gay Griffin, who joined Third World Newsreel through the Advanced Production Workshop, distribution has become an area of intensified focus with the collection including more than 150 films and tapes. In addition to the early Newsreels, Cuban and Vietnamese films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the subsequent Newsreel projects of Siegel and Choy, the Third World Newsreel catalogue features the work of such independent producers as Arthur Dong, Charles Burnett, Steve Ning, Lourdes Portillo, and numerous lesser-known artists. By opting for nonexclusive contracts with minority producer, Third World seeks further coverage and heightened visibility for producers, while offering an average 50% return to the film-maker. Griffin has emphasized outreach to educational and community groups on a sliding scale. "I use discretion to give discounts to people I know should have access to the film."<sup>22</sup> The priority here is to promote the work of minority artists unable to find distri-

butional outlets elsewhere due to the limited appeal or controversial nature of the work—or its aesthetic roughness. In Griffin's opinion, the time has not yet arrived when aesthetic standards alone can be allowed to determine the life of socially concerned programming. Training programs and consultational services rather than elitist distributional practices have been chosen as the way to raise the level of professionalism within the minority media community.

The Anthology of Asian-American Film and Video functions as an additional and ongoing distribution project for the collective. Begun in 1984, the Anthology houses some thirty films by and about Asian-Americans making this the most significant collection of such work. Like the larger Third World distributional scheme of which it is a part, the Anthology functions as a clearinghouse and organizational vehicle for independent productions, both documentary and fiction, which would be hard-pressed to find their appropriate audiences. The Anthology is a serious contribution toward the redress of an historical imbalance, the exclusion from public view of the dreams, aspirations and achievements of minority populations within the United States. Given its history and the tenacity of the core collective members, Third World Newsreel's position in the vanguard of cultural-political change seems assured.

## CONCLUSION

In assessing the complex contributions of Newsreel in its various incarnations, we must note the relationship of the local and cultural to the macro-economic or infrastructural level which is, in the end, determination. The unceremonious retreat of progressive forces in this decade has by now convinced us that a Marcusian analysis sacrifices explanatory or predictive power for inspi-

rationational zeal.<sup>23</sup> Fredric Jameson, in a recent ambitious attempt to periodize the sixties, concludes that the turbulent decade represented, after all, a moment of transition from one infrastructural or systemic stage of capitalism to another. The eighties can, according to Jameson, be characterized as global capitalism's moment of retrenchment, the era in which the unbound social forces and liberating energies of the prior moment must be brought to heel. The sixties unleashing of prodigious and unexpected new forces, issuing from the social movements of blacks, students,

**“Given its history and the tenacity of the core collective members, Third World Newsreel's position in the vanguard of cultural-political change seems assured.”**

feminists and Third Worlders, produced a kind of “surplus consciousness” disinclined to forward the multinational corporate agenda.<sup>24</sup> It is these emergent, relatively maverick constituencies that late capitalism must now attempt to proletarianize. But Newsreel has, from its beginnings, remained an active contributor to the development and dissemination of this “surplus consciousness,” advocating resistance to the hegemonic while cultivating the values of a nascent political culture. Amidst the conservative backsliding and backlashing of the eighties,

Newsreel has emerged as America's most consistent radical documentary voice. If, in the early years, its films spoke primarily to the Movement vanguard, Newsreel has moved toward a deepening of its ties with a broad spectrum of working Americans, offering a coherent Left perspective for an analysis-starved audience as well as a route to public access for minority artists. And finally, through continuing distribution of the early films of struggle and confrontation, the Newsreel enterprise has sustained the popular memory of concerted, energetic political activism. If the efforts of the sixties are to escape recuperation, to survive and, in time, to be renewed, it will be through cultural as well as political agitation. Given the history of the organization and its achievements to date, one can reasonable look to Newsreel for leadership in the struggle ahead.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From a series of interviews with Newsreel members in *Film Quarterly* XX, No. 2 (Winter 1968–69), 47–48.

<sup>2</sup> Author's interview with Larry Daressa, 22 December 1983.

<sup>3</sup> See Bill Nichols, *Newsreel: Film and Revolution*, unpublished master's thesis, UCLA, 1972. Nichols has, to date, produced the most valuable and extensive scholarship on Newsreel. In addition to the fine master's thesis cited here: see his *Newsreel: Documentary Filmmaking on the American Left* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Newsreel was but one of many Movement manifestations of the "Great Refusal." Identifying with the dispossessed, the relatively affluent first generation Newsreelers cast their lot with those systematically excluded from privilege. By the end of the decade, the lumpen ranks were swelled by middle-class youth who rejected their birthright in order to effect meaningful social change.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Norm Fruchter in *Film Quarterly*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with Deborah Schaffer, 19 August 1986.

<sup>7</sup> A particularly striking index of the shift of organizing focus and radical sensibility from 1965 to 1969 is provided by contrasting two films by Norman Fruchter, one of the central figures of Newsreel's "first generation." *Troublemakers* (Fruchter and Robert Machover, 1966) chronicles an SDS organizing effort (the Newark Community Union Project led by Tom Hayden) that brought the skills and energy of middle-class college student to a black ghetto of the urban north. The film's brilliance lies in its willingness to consider the movement's shortcomings and limitations in the period preceding the outbreaks of violence and confrontation. For further discussion of this phase of New left realpolitick, see Wini Breines, *The Great Refusal: Community and Organization in the New Left 1962–1969* (New York: Praeger, 1982). The second film, *Summer '68* (Fruchter and John Douglas, 1969), focuses on the several facets of cultural and political struggle within the ranks of a foundering New Left coalition (the G.I. coffee house movement, the underground press, draft resistance organizing) which culminated in the August 1968 confrontation on the streets of Chicago at the Democratic National Convention. The shift is from community organizing to mass agitation, from fighting small battles using non-violent tactics to waging mass-mediated war with Daley's shock troops.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with two founding New York Newsreel members, Allan Siegel and Norm Fruchter.

<sup>9</sup> This political/aesthetic bifurcation, though significant, obscures the relative homogeneity of the



class, race, and gender composition of both factions. Neither women nor people of color tended to occupy positions of leadership in the organization prior to 1971.

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, *Newsreel: Film and Revolution*, 73.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Marilyn Buck and Karen Ross in *Film Quarterly*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> *Rat* (October 29–November 12, 1969), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Robert Kramer, *Film Quarterly*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Marilyn Buck and Karen Ross in *Film Quarterly*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Author's interview with Norm Fruchter, 18 June 1985.

<sup>16</sup> Author's interview with Allan Siegel, 18 June 1985.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Fruchter. In addition to the ideologues and the underground filmmakers, another smaller faction of Newsreel producers exists—still primarily male—composed of those who raised funds necessary for production through illicit activities, principally drug-dealing. Pot was the ritual cornerstone of the counterculture; funds generated by its sale, when turned to the public good, were viewed as a fully legitimate source of income. The fall-out from that method of fundraising was a small but painful rate of attrition as Newsreelers were sent to prison on drug charges.

<sup>18</sup> Author's interview with Christine Choy, 20 August 1986. Choy noted that her first Newsreel paycheck was not drawn until 1981, a full ten years after her arrival. A two-year CETA grant, welfare and unemployment compensation furnished her means of survival for a decade.

<sup>19</sup> See my "The Imaging of Analysis: Newsreel's Re-Search for a Radical Film Practice," *Wide Angle* 6, No. 3 (1984), 76–84.

<sup>20</sup> Over its 12-year lifespan, California Newsreel has published eight separate catalogues and five books including an 88-page text entitled *Planning Work*, a manual of resources on technology and investment for labor education funded by the Ford Foundation and the German Marshall Fund. *Using Films in South Africa: An Activation Kit on Investment* contains suggestions for post-film discussions, a series of fact sheets exposing the scope of U.S. investment in South Africa and a packet of reprinted articles covering precise, related topics culled from newspapers, scholarly journals and pamphlets.

<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Siegel.

<sup>22</sup> Author's interview with Ada Gay Griffin, 8 August 1986.

<sup>23</sup> See in particular Herbert Marcuse's *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), which contains the following succinct formulation of the "aesthetic ethos" of the sixties, a theoretical position that validated the realm of the creative imagination and independent quotidian (and frequently neglected) efforts towards mass base-building: "... the development of the productive forces beyond their capitalist organization suggests the possibility of freedom *within* the realm of necessity. The quantitative reduction of necessary labor could turn into quality (freedom)... But the construction of such a society re-purposes a type of man with a different sensitivity as well as consciousness: men who would speak a different language, have different gestures, follow different impulses... The imagination of such men and women would fashion their reason and tend to make the process of production a process of creation." Herbert Marcuse,

*An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 21.

<sup>24</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Periodizing the 60's," in *The 60's Without Apology*, 208–209.

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# FILMOGRAPHY

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## **NEWSREEL (1968–1972)**

1. *38 Families*
2. *139X* (Newsreel #20)
3. *America*, a.k.a. *Amerika*
4. *The April Film*, a.k.a. *Chicago, April 27th* (Newsreel #13)
5. *Army*, a.k.a. *The Army Film* (Newsreel #36)
6. *Black Panther*, a.k.a. *Off the Pig* (Newsreel #19)
7. *Bobby Seale*, a.k.a. *Interview with Bobby Seale* (Newsreel #44)
8. *Boston Draft Resistance Group*, a.k.a. *BDRG* (Newsreel #7)
9. *Break and Enter*, a.k.a. *Squatters* (Newsreel #62)
10. *The Case Against Lincoln Center* (Newsreel #17)
11. *Catonsville Nine* (Newsreel #18)
12. *Chicago* (Newsreel #12)
13. *Chicago Convention Challenge* (Newsreel #17)
14. *Childcare: People's Liberation* (Newsreel #56)
15. *Columbia Revolt* (Newsreel #14)
16. *Community Control* (Newsreel #24)
17. *The Earth Belongs to the People* (Newsreel #57)
18. *Felix Revolts*, a.k.a. *Felix the Cat*
19. *Four American Soldiers*, a.k.a. *Four Americans* (Newsreel #3)
20. *Garbage*, a.k.a. *Garbage Demonstration* (Newsreel #5)
21. *The Haight* (Newsreel #21)
22. *Herman B. Ferguson, Candidate for U.S. Senate* (Newsreel #15)
23. *Herstory* (Newsreel #61)
24. *High School Rising* (Newsreel #38)
25. *I.S. 201 and Report from Newark* (Newsreel #10)
26. *Imperialism U.S.A. (1776–1969)*
27. *Janie's Janie*
28. *Jeannette Rankin Brigade* (Newsreel #4)
29. *Lincoln Hospital* (Newsreel #35)
30. *Make It Real*
31. *Make-Out* (Newsreel #49)

32. *Mark of a Man* (Newsreel #28)
33. *May Day Panther*, a.k.a. *May Day* (Newsreel #29)
34. *Meat-Cooperative*, a.k.a. *A 6th Street Meat Club* (Newsreel #11)
35. *Medical Committee for Human Rights* (Newsreel #40)
36. *Mill-In*, a.k.a. *The Christmas Mill-In* (Newsreel #6)
37. *My Country Occupied* (Newsreel #151)
38. *No Game* (Newsreel #2)
39. *Only the Beginning* (Newsreel #59)
40. *People's Park* (Newsreel #33)
41. *People's War* (Newsreel #43)
42. *Pig Power* (Newsreel #23)
43. *El Pueblo Se Levanta* (Newsreel #63)
44. *R.O.T.C.* (Newsreel #34)
45. *Resist - With Noam Chomsky*, a.k.a. *Chomsky-Resist* (Newsreel #1)
46. *Resist-Resistance*, a.k.a. *Resist and the New England Resistance* (Newsreel #8)
47. *Revolution Until Victory*, a.k.a. *We Are the Palestinian People* (Newsreel #65)
48. *Riot-Control Weapons* (Newsreel #9)
49. *San Francisco State: On Strike*, a.k.a. *On Strike* (Newsreel #26)
50. *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* (Newsreel #48)
51. *Los Siete de la Raza* (Newsreel #39)
52. *Summer '68* (Newsreel #505)
53. *Union*, a.k.a. *Oil Strike*, a.k.a. *Richmond Oil Strike* (Newsreel #25)
54. *United Front Against Racism* (Newsreel #37)
55. *Up Against the Wall Ms. America* (Newsreel #22)
56. *Venceremos Brigade*
57. *Wilmington* (Newsreel #30)
58. *The Woman's Film* (Newsreel #55)
59. *The Wreck of the New York Subways* (Newsreel #47)

#### **EARLY THIRD WORLD NEWSREEL (1972–1980)**

1. *A Dream Is What You Wake Up From*
2. *Fresh Seeds in the Big Apple*
3. *From Spikes to Spindles*
4. *Inside Women Inside*
5. *In the Event Anyone Disappears*

- 6.** *Mohawk Nation*
- 7.** *Percussion, Impressions and Reality*
- 8.** *People's Firehouse #1*
- 9.** *Teach Our Children*
- 10.** *To Love, Honor & Obey*
- 11.** *We Demand Freedom*







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