

# Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited

By Deirdre Boyle

Video pioneers didn't use covered wagons; they built media vans for their cross-country journeys colonizing the vast wasteland of American television. It was the late sixties, and Sony's introduction of the half-inch video Portapak in the United States was like a media version of the Land Grant Act, inspiring a heterogeneous mass of American hippies, avant-garde artists, student-intellectuals, lost souls, budding feminists, militant blacks, flower children, and jaded journalists to take to the streets, if not the road, Portapak in hand, to stake out the new territory of alternative television.

In those early days anyone with a Portapak was called a "video artist." Practitioners of the new medium moved freely within the worlds of conceptual, performance, and imagist art as well as of the documentary. Skip Sweeney of Video Free America, once called the "King of Video Feedback," also designed video environments for avant-garde theater (*AC/DC*, *Kaddish*) and collaborated with Arthur Ginsberg on a fascinating multimonitor documentary portrait of the lives of a porn queen and her bisexual, drug-addict husband, *The Continuing Story of Caryl and Ferd*. Although some artists arrived at video having already established reputations in painting, sculpture, or music, many video pioneers came with no formal art training, attracted to the medium because it had neither history nor hierarchy nor strictures, because one was free to try anything and everything, whether it was interviewing a street bum (one of the first such tapes was made by artist Les Levine in 1965) or exploring the infinite variety of a feedback image. Gradually, two camps emerged: the

video artists and the video documentarists. The reasons for this fissure were complex, involving the competition for funding and exhibition, a changing political and cultural climate, and a certain disdain for nonfiction work as less creative than "art"—an attitude also found in the worlds of film, photography, and literature. But in video's early years, guerrilla television embraced art as documentary and stressed innovation, alternative approaches, and a critical relationship to television.

Just as the invention of movable type in the fifteenth century made books portable and private, video did the same for the televised image; and just as the development of offset printing launched the alternative-press movement in the sixties, video's advent launched an alternative television movement in the seventies. Guerrilla television was actually part of that larger alternative media tide which swept over the country during the sixties, affecting radio, newspapers, magazines, publishing, as well as the fine and performing arts. Molded by the insights of Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller, Norbert Wiener, and Teilhard de Chardin, influenced by the style of New Journalism forged by Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson, and inspired by the content of the agonizing issues of the day, video guerrillas set out to "tell it like it is"—not from the lofty, "objective" viewpoint of TV cameras poised to survey an event but from within the crowd, subjective and involved.

## Video Gangs

For baby boomers who had grown up on TV, having the tools to make your own was heady stuff. Most early videomak-

ers banded together into media groups; it was an era for collective action and communal living, when pooling equipment, energy, and ideas made more than good sense. But for kids raised on "The Mickey Mouse Club"—charter members of Howdy Doody's Peanut Gallery—belonging to a media gang also conferred membership in an extended family that unconsciously imitated the television models of their youth. Some admitted they were attracted by the imagined "outlaw" status of belonging to a video collective, less dangerous than being a member of the Dalton gang—or the Weather Underground—and probably more glamorous. As video collectives sprouted up all over the country, the media gave them considerable play—predictably focusing on groups in New York City like People's Video Theater, the Videofreex, Global Village, and Raindance—in magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *TV Guide*, *New York*, and *The New Yorker*. They celebrated the exploits of the video pioneers in mythic terms curiously reminiscent of the opening narrations of TV Westerns. Here's an example from a 1970 *Newsweek* article:

Television in the U.S. often resembles a drowsy giant, sluggishly repeating itself in both form and content season after season. But out on TV's fringe, where the viewers thus far are few, a group of bold experimenters are engaged in nothing less than an attempt to transform the medium. During the past few years, television has developed a significant avant-garde, a pioneering corps to match the press's underground, the cinema's *vérité*, the theater's off-off-

Broadway. Though its members are still largely unknown, they are active creating imaginative new programs and TV "environments"—not for prime time, but for educational stations, closed-circuit systems in remote lofts and art galleries and, with fingers crossed, even for the major networks.<sup>1</sup>

Video represented a new frontier—a chance to create an alternative to what many considered the slickly civilized, commercially corrupt, and aesthetically bankrupt world of Television. Video offered the dream of creating something new, of staking out a claim to a virgin territory where no one could tell you what to do or how to do it, where you could invent your own rules and build your own forms. Stated in terms that evoke the characteristic American restlessness, boldness, vision, and enterprise that pioneered the West—part adolescent arrogance and part courage and imagination—one discovers a fundamental American ethos behind this radical media movement.

#### **Guerrilla Television Defined**

The term "guerrilla television" came from the 1971 book of the same title by Michael Shamberg.<sup>2</sup> This manifesto outlined a technological radicalism that claimed that commercial television, with its mass audiences, was a conditioning agent rather than a source of enlightenment. Video offered the means to "decentralize" television so that a Whitmanesque democracy of ideas, opinions, and cultural expressions—made both by and for the people—could then be "narrowcast" on cable television. Shamberg, a former *Time* correspondent, had discovered that video was a medium more potent than print while reporting on the historic "TV as a Creative Medium" show at the Howard Wise Gallery in 1969. Banding together with Frank Gillette, Paul Ryan, and Ira Schneider (three of the artists in the show), among others, they formed Raindance Corporation, video's self-proclaimed think-tank equivalent to the Rand Corporation. Raindance produced several volumes of a magazine called *Radical Software*, the video underground's bible, gossip sheet, and chief networking tool during the early seventies. It was in the pages of *Radical Software* and *Guerrilla Television* that a radical media philosophy was articulated, but it was in the documentary tapes, which were first shown closed-circuit, then cablecast, and finally broadcast, that guerrilla television was practiced and revised.

#### **Virtuous Limitations**

Before the federal mandate in 1972 required local origination programming on cable and opened the wires to public access, the only way to see guerrilla television was in "video theaters"—lofts or galleries or a monitor off the back end of a van where videotapes were shown closed-circuit to an "in" crowd of friends, community members, or video enthusiasts. In New York, People's Video Theater, Global Village, the Videofreex, and Raindance showed tapes at their lofts. People's Video Theater was probably the most politically and socially radical of the foursome, regularly screening "street tapes," which might include the philosophic musings of an aging, black, shoeshine man or a video intervention to avert street violence between angry blacks and whites in Harlem. These gritty, black-and-white tapes were generally edited in the camera, since editing was as yet a primitive matter of cut-and-paste or else a maddeningly imprecise backspace method of cuing scenes for "crash" edits. The technological limitations of early video equipment were merely incorporated in the style, thus "real-time video"—whether criticized for being boring and inept or praised for its fidelity to the *cinéma vérité* ethic—was in fact an aesthetic largely dictated by the equipment. Video pioneers of necessity were adept at making a virtue of their limitations. Real-time video became a conscious style praised for being honest in presenting an unreconstructed reality and opposed to conventional television "reality," with its quick, highly edited scenes and narration—whether stand-up or voice-over—by a typically white, male figure of authority. When electronic editing and color video became available later, the aesthetic adapted to the changing technology, but these fundamental stylistic expectations laid down in video's primitive past lingered on through the decade. What these early works may have lacked in technical polish or visual sophistication they frequently made up for in sheer energy and raw immediacy of content matter.

#### **Enter TVTV**

With cable's rise in the early seventies came a new stage in guerrilla television's growth. The prospect of using cable to reach larger audiences and create an alternative to network TV proved a catalytic agent. Video groups sprang up across the country, from rural Appalachia to wealthy Marin County, even to cities like New Orleans where it would be years before cable was ever laid. TVTV, guerrilla television's most medagenic and controversial group, was

formed during this time. Founded by *Guerrilla Television's* Michael Shamberg, TVTV produced its first tapes for cable, then went on to public television, and finally, network TV. TVTV's rise and fall traces a major arc in guerrilla television's history.

Shamberg had been thinking about getting together a group of video freaks to go to Miami to cover the 1972 Presidential nominating conventions. The name TVTV came to him one February morning while doing yoga at the McBurney Y in New York. He realized instantly that Top Value Television—"you know, like in Top Value stamps"—would also read as TVTV.<sup>3</sup> He and Megan Williams joined with Allen Rucker and members of Ant Farm, the Videofreex, and Raindance to form TVTV's first production crew. Shamberg got a commitment from two cable stations and raised \$15,000 to do two, hour-long tapes. The first, a video scrapbook of the Democratic Convention titled *The World's Largest TV Studio*, played on cable and would have been the last of TVTV were it not for an unprecedented review in the *New York Times* by its TV critic John O'Connor, who pronounced it "distinctive and valuable."<sup>4</sup> With that validation, Shamberg was able to raise more money and hold the cable companies to their agreement, going on to cover the Republican Convention the following month. *Four More Years* was the result; it is one of TVTV's best works, demonstrating the hallmarks of their iconoclastic, intimate New Journalism style.

Unlike the Democrats in 1972, chaotic and diffuse, the Republicans had a clear, if uninspired, scenario to reelect Richard Nixon. Instead of pointing their cameras at the podium, TVTV's crew of nineteen threaded their way through delegate caucuses, Young Republican rallies, cocktail parties, antiwar demonstrations, and the frenzy of the convention floor. Capturing the hysteria of political zealots, they focused on the sharp differences between the Young Voters for Nixon and the Vietnam Vets Against the War, all the while entertaining viewers with the foibles of politicians, press, and camp followers alike. One Republican organizer's remark to her staff, "The balloons alone will give us the fun we need," epitomizes the zany, real-life comedy TVTV captured on tape.

Interviewed on the quality of convention coverage are press personalities whose off-the-cuff remarks ("I'm not a big fan of advocacy reporting."—Dan Rather; "What's news? Things that happen."—Herb Kaplow; "Introspection isn't good for a journalist."—Walter Cronkite) culminate with Roger

Mudd's playing mum's the word to Skip Blumberg's futile questions.

Punctuating the carnival atmosphere are venomous verbal attacks on the anti-war vets by onlookers and delegates who charge them with being hopheads, draft dodgers, and unpatriotic—a chilling reminder of the hostility and tragic confrontations of the Vietnam era.

TVTV follows the convention chaos, editing simultaneous events into a dramatic shape that climaxes when delegates and demonstrators alike are gassed by the police. Leavened with humor, irony, and iconoclasm, *Four More Years* is a unique document of the Nixon years. In it TVTV demonstrated journalistic freshness, a sardonic view of our political process and the media that cover it, and a sure feel for the clichés of a distinctive American ritual.

### Forging a Distinctive Style

In forging their distinctive style, TVTV avoided voice-overs like the plague; they experimented with graphics, using campaign buttons to punctuate the tape and give it a certain thematic unity; and they deployed a wide-angle lens, which distorted faces as editorial commentary. The fish-eye look, used at first out of practical necessity, since the Portapak lens often didn't let in enough light and went out of focus in many shooting situations, became a TVTV signature, which led to later charges of exploitation of unsuspecting subjects. But in the beginning, it was all new and fresh and exciting. The critics pronounced that TVTV had covered the conventions better than network TV news, proving that the alternative media could beat the networks at their own game and for the money CBS spent on coffee.

Although the networks had ENG (electronic news gathering) units at the convention, the contrast was striking. Only a beefy cameraman could withstand the enormous apparatus, including scuba-style backpack to transport so-called portable television cameras. Fully equipped, they looked more like moon men than media makers. Compared with this, the lightweight, black-and-white Portapak and recorder in the hands of slim Nancy Cain of the Videofreex looked like a child's toy, which was part of the charm since no one took seriously these low-tech hippies. In video's early days, many didn't believe the tape was rolling because it didn't make the whirring sound of the TV film cameras, and much unguarded dialogue was captured because the medium was new and unfamiliar.

### Television Enters the Picture

Thus established, TVTV went on to make their next "event" tape, but now

for the TV Lab at PBS's WNET in New York. TVTV was not the first to flirt with "Television." After the Woodstock Nation caught the networks' attention in 1969, the Videofreex were hired by CBS to produce a pilot, which failed spectacularly in winning network approval. In 1970 the May Day Collective shot videotape at weeklong antiwar demonstrations in Washington for NBC News although none of it was ever broadcast. The networks did air some newsbreaking Portapak tapes, such as Bill Stephens's 1971 interview with Eldridge Cleaver over the split in the Black Panther party, shown on Walter Cronkite's *Evening News*. They were willing to overlook the primitive quality of tape (which had to be shot off a monitor with a studio camera) if it meant scooping their competitors, but the 1960 network ban on airing independently produced news and public-affairs productions remained in force, and any small-format tapes broadcast were usually excerpted and narrated by network commentators, beyond the editorial reach of their makers.

The introduction of the stand-alone time-base corrector in 1973, a black box that stabilized helical scan tapes and made them broadcastable, changed everything. It was finally possible for small-format video to become a stable television production medium, which paved the way not only for guerrilla television to reach the masses but also for the rise of ENG and, eventually, all-video television production. Given TVTV's unprecedented success with *Four More Years*, it was only logical that they produce the first half-inch video documentary for airing on national public television.

The tape was *Lord of the Universe*, and its subject was the fifteen-year-old guru Maharaj Ji. Millennium '73, a gathering of the guru's faded flower children followers, was scheduled for the Houston Astrodome, which the guru promised would levitate at the close (like the Yippies at the Pentagon in '67, the guru knew how to create a media event). Elon Soltes, whose brother-in-law was a would-be believer, followed him with Portapak from Boston to Houston while other TVTV crew members gathered in Houston to tape the mahatmas and the "premies" (followers), getting embroiled in what was to be the most successful TVTV tape but also the most shattering for its makers. Fearful of mind control and violence (a prankish reporter had been brained by a guru bodyguard not long before) and stricken by the sight of so many of their own generation lost and foundering in the arms of this spiritual Svengali, TVTV determined to expose the sham and get



Fig. 1 Abbie Hoffman, in *Lord of the Universe*, TVTV, 1974.

out unscathed. The tape was the zenith of TVTV's guerrilla-TV style.

Switching back and forth between the preparation for the actual onstage "performances" of the guru, cameras focused on "blissed-out" devotees pathetically seeking stability and guidance in the guru's fold. Neon light, glitter, and rock music furnished by the guru's brother (a rotund rip-off of Elvis Presley) on a Las Vegas-styled stage was the unlikely backdrop for the guru's *satsang* or preaching to his followers. Outside, angry arguments between premies and Hare Krishna followers and one bible-spouting militant fundamentalist exposed the undercurrent of violence, repression, and control in any extremist religion. TVTV cleverly played off two sixties radicals against each other. Having traded in his role of countercultural political leader for that of spokesman for an improbable religion, Rennie Davis sings the guru's praises as Abbie Hoffman, one of guerrilla TV's Superstars, watches Davis on tape and comments on his former colleague's arrogance and skills as a propagandist (Fig. 1). "It's different saying you've found God than saying you know his address and credit card number," Hoffman quips, emphasizing the grasping side of this so-called religion.

Much in evidence is TVTV's creative use of graphics, live music, and wide-angle lens shots. As always there is humor leavening what was for TVTV a tragic situation. At one point, our Boston guide to the "gurunoids" innocently remarks, "I don't know whether it's the air conditioning, but you can really feel something." The humor is a black humor, rife with an irony that dangerously borders on mockery but is checked by an underlying compassion for the desperation of lost souls. At home in the world of spectacle and carnival, ever agile in debunking power seekers, TVTV admirably succeeded in producing a document of the times that remains a classic.

### Film's Hidden Impact

Paul Goldsmith, a well-known 16mm vérité cameraman, had joined TVTV

along with Wendy Appel and was the principal cameraman on this and subsequent tapes, shooting one-inch color for the first time in the Astrodome. Appel, also trained in film but an accomplished videomaker as well, would become TVTV's most versatile editor. Not surprisingly, some of the most critical people in creating the TVTV style came out of film: Stanton Kaye and Ira Schneider, who worked on the convention tapes, were also filmmakers. TVTV's raw vitality was a video and cultural by-product, but their keen visual sense and editing was borrowed, in large measure, from film.

TVTV won the DuPont-Columbia Journalism Award for *Lord of the Universe* and, not long after, a lucrative contract with PBS to produce a series of documentaries for the TV Lab. *Gerald Ford's America*, *In Hiding: Abbie Hoffman*, *The Good Times Are Killing Us*, *Superbowl* (Fig. 2), and *TVTV Looks at the Oscars* were made in the next two years. Some were equal to the TVTV name, like "Chic to Sheik," the second of the four-part *Gerald Ford's America*. But others showed a decline as the diverse group of video freaks who had once converged to make TVTV a reality—all donating time, equipment, and talent to make a program that would show the world what guerrilla television could do—began to stray in their own directions, no longer willing to be subsumed in an egalitarian mass, no longer able to support themselves on good cheer and beer. With the broadcast of *Lord of the Universe* some of the best minds in guerrilla television unwittingly abandoned their utopian dream of creating an alternative to network television. Their hasty marriage with cable was on the rocks when TV—albeit public television—seduced them with the fickle affection of its mass audience.

### *The Beginning of the End*

In 1975, TVTV left San Francisco, which had been home base during the halcyon days, for Los Angeles. This move proved pivotal. They had a contract to develop a fiction idea for the PBS series "Visions." This was not so much a departure from TVTV's orientation as it might seem. They had been mixing fictional elements in their documentary tapes all along, the most notable being the Lily Tomlin character in the *Oscars* show. TVTV's style had been modeled on New Journalism and the flamboyant approaches of writers like Hunter Thompson, of Gonzo Journalism fame, who wrote nonfiction as if it were fiction.

*Supervision* consisted of a number of short tapes, "filler" to round off the "Visions" series' hour. It traced the his-



Fig. 2 Bart Friedman, Nancy Cain, Tom Weinberg, and Elon Soltes shooting *TVTV Superbowl*, at the Orange Bowl, 1975.

tory of television from its early days in the labs of Philo T. Farnsworth to the year 2000 and an imagined guerrilla take-over of a station not unlike CNN. Forsaking the video-documentary form that they had pioneered caused some internal battles, but it wasn't until their pilot for NBC, *The TVTV Show*, that the end was in sight.

Part of the problem was that TVTV knew how to make a video documentary—in a way, they had invented it—but they didn't know the first thing about producing comedy for "Television." In documentary shooting, improvisation on location was TVTV's trademark; the primitive and evolving nature of portable video equipment and the unpredictable power centers that were TVTV's main targets demanded an adaptive and creative attitude towards all new situations, something TVTV excelled at. But shooting actors in a

studio with a set script that never equaled the humor of their documentary "real people" demanded a whole new expertise, which TVTV realized too late they couldn't afford to invent as they went along.

Another part of the problem was that as long as TVTV was making documentaries, the group had its original focus. Once they began making entertainment for mass audiences, their once-radical identity and purpose was gone. For some, the evolution was a gradual and acceptable one. After charges of "checkbook journalism" over the ill-fated interview of Abbie Hoffman, who was then a fugitive, Shamberg lost some of his journalistic zeal. Harsh criticism of the treatment of Cajuns in the *The Good Times Are Killing Me* further tarnished TVTV's reputation. With people like Bill Murray and Harold Ramis (who would later become celebri-

ties on "Saturday Night Live"), eager to work with TVTV, the lure of collaborating with talented actors in an area removed from journalistic criticism, funding battles, and the pressures of producing documentaries for public TV was certainly appealing. But for those who still believed in the dream of changing television, the decision proved a hard one because it meant the dream was dead. And with it went the all-for-one spirit that had knitted together their disparate egos: TVTV no longer had the fire and purpose they needed to weather the rough storm of a midseventies transition.

It took a few years as TVTV paid off its debts before their official demise. In the meantime, Shamberg, who had seen the end coming, was already preparing his next venture. He bought the rights to the Neal and Carolyn Cassidy story and produced the film *Heartbeat*. Although it was a box-office flop, he had the conviction to go on. In 1983, two films later, he produced the Academy Award nominee *The Big Chill*, a reunion film about a group of late-sixties hippies who meet at the funeral of one of their own and reflect on how they've changed and been affected by "the big chill." Although the film was based on its director-writer Larry Kasdan's friends, it could have been about TVTV.

### Changing Times

The fact that TVTV changed along with their times should come as no surprise. TVTV wasn't the only group to pull apart during the late seventies. The media revolutionaries were growing older and changing—assuming responsibilities for marriages, homes, and families—living in a different world from the one that had once celebrated the brash goals and idealistic dreams of guerrilla television. The promise that cable TV would serve as a democratic alternative to corporately owned television was betrayed by federal deregulation and footloose franchise agreements. Public television's early support for experimental documentary and artistic work in video slowed to a virtual halt—the sad demise of WNET's TV Lab is a recent instance. And funding sources that had once lavished support and enthusiasm on guerrilla TV groups now turned a cold shoulder, preferring to support individuals rather than groups and work that stressed art and experimentation rather than controversy and community.

Once the possibility of reaching a mass audience opened up, the very nature of guerrilla television changed. No longer out to create an alternative to television, guerrilla TV was competing on the same airwaves for viewers and

sponsors. As the technical evolution speeded up, video freaks needed access to more expensive production and post-production equipment if they were to make state-of-the-art tapes that were broadcastable. Although some continued making television their own way, pioneering what has since become the world of low-power TV and the terrain of public-access cable, many others yearned to see their work reach a wide audience. Without anyone's noticing it, the rough vitality of guerrilla TV's early days was shed for a slicker, TV look. The "voice of God" narrator, which had been anathema to TVTV and other video pioneers, was heard again. Gone were the innovations—the graphics, the funky style and subjects, the jousting at power centers and scrutiny of the media. Gone was the intimate, amiable camera-person-interviewer style, which was a hallmark of alternative video. Increasingly, video documentaries began looking more and more like "television" documentaries, with stand-up reporters and slide-lecture approaches that skimmed over an issue and took no stance.

Where one could see the impact of guerrilla television was in its parody: sincere documentaries about ordinary people had been absorbed and transformed into mock-u-entertainments like "Real People" and "That's Incredible!" The video *vérité* of the 1976 award-winning *The Police Tapes*, by Alan and Susan Raymond, had become the template for the popular TV series "Hill Street Blues." In the sixties, Raindance's Paul Ryan proclaimed, "VT is not TV,"<sup>5</sup> but by the eighties, VT was TV.

Today, in an era of creeping conservatism, the ideals of guerrilla television are more in need of champions than in its heyday when it was easier to stand up for democratic media that would tell it like it is for ordinary people living in late-twentieth-century America. Few have come along to take up the challenge of guerrilla television's more radical and innovative past. Although the collectives with names like rock groups—Amazing Grace, April Video, and the Underground Vegetables—have long since disappeared, many notable pioneers continue to keep alive their ideals, some working in public-access cable, like DeeDee Halleck (of Paper Tiger Television), or from within the networks, like Ann Volkes (an editor at CBS News) and Greg Pratt (a documentary-video producer for a network affiliate in Minneapolis), or as independent journalists, like Jon Alpert (a freelance correspondent for NBC's "Today Show") and Skip Blumberg (whose portraits of Double Dutch jumpers and Eskimo athletes still appear on public

television). But a younger generation of videomakers eager to draw from this past to forge a new documentary video future has yet to appear on the horizon. Either they are discouraged by the lack of funding and distribution outlets for innovative or controversial work and a cultural milieu content with the new conservatism or they are unaware of the past and unconcerned about the future. The goal is not to re-create that past—no one really wants to see the shaky, black-and-white, out-of-focus, wild shots that suited the primitive equipment and frenzy of video's Wonder Bread years; the goal is to recapture the creativity, exploration, and daring of those formative years. Perhaps the technology and the burning need to communicate and invent new forms will prevail. Independents with Beta and VHS equipment have been documenting the struggles in Central America. Lost amid the home-video boom, a new generation of video guerrillas may be in training yet.

McLuhan's reductionist view that "the medium is the message" was embraced and then rejected by the first video guerrillas, who asserted that content *did* matter; finding a new form and a better means of distributing diverse opinions was the problem. That problem is still with us. How a new wave of video guerrillas will resolve it and carry on that legacy, human and imperfect as it may be, should prove to be interesting and unexpected. More than guerrilla television's future may depend on it.

### Notes

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- 1 "Television's Avant-Garde," *Newsweek*, Feb. 9, 1970.
- 2 Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation, *Guerrilla Television*, New York, 1971.
- 3 Interview with Michael Shamberg, Oct. 19, 1983.
- 4 John E. O'Connor, "TV: A 'Scrapbook' of the Democratic Convention," *The New York Times*, Aug. 17, 1972.
- 5 "Feedback," *Radical Software*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1970).

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