

HOW TO MAKE GOOD ACTIVIST VIDEOS

“Lights, Camera, Direct Action!”

The idea of this brief handbook is to give as succinctly as possible a progressive guide to everything you need to know to make good-quality films. It is tailored specifically to the needs of activists who want to make videos about struggles and campaigns they are involved in, rather than more mainstream practices. It does, though, draw heavily on those practices insofar as they help the video beginner to make more watchable films. I've tried to put in everything that you need to know, and leave out everything you don't. If you think I've left something essential out of this guide, put in something tedious and unnecessary, or got something wrong, please let me know (richarddirecttv@yahoo.co.uk).

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1. Making Your First Film

“Learning by Doing”

The best way of learning how to be a film maker is not of course to read books, but to just get on and make a film. A basic piece of reportage can be made straight away with no experience necessary, and uploaded to indymedia as your first distributed film! This is how.....

What's your story?

Start with a very simple film you can sum up in one sentence, like:
“A report on the anti-GM action” or “How to make your first video”

The Script and Storyboard

Which shots will you need to tell the story? For instance, to make “how to make your first video”, you may need an opening wide shot of the video training class. Then maybe a shot of the trainer doing an introduction to the course, etc. Draw a “storyboard” of your film (see template in appendix). This is a very rough cartoon with one picture for each shot (No artistic ability is necessary. Just draw “stick people” and keep it very basic). As this is your first film, limit your script to not more than 12 shots. Have you scripted in close-ups, such as a shot of the camera? Will your storyboard flow as a final edited film, with one shot following naturally after another? Has it got a beginning, a middle and an end? Look for opportunities for humour. Now check: does the script tell the story you originally intended?

Shooting

For now, leave every control on your video camera on automatic, and film the shots on the storyboard one by one, ticking them off as they are done. It may be that, for convenience, the

shooting order is different from the order in the script. For instance, it may be more logical to shoot the close-ups (in the example above: the camera, the microphone, etc) all together at the end. If your film is live action of something happening, it is still very useful to follow a storyboard, to ensure that you've filmed an editable story by the time you get home. If you're shooting live action, take separate, distinct shots, rather than spraying the camera around following the action. And remember: don't take more than 12 shots! Whatever order the film is shot in, when the footage is edited, the original order in the storyboard can be reinstated.

Editing

Use your simple report as a way getting acquainted with some digital editing software, such as Adobe Premiere (version 6 or above, for PCs or Linux), or Final Cut Pro (for Macs).

Digitize your footage into a video editing project on your computer using a firewire connection. Then edit your programme in the timeline, following your original storyboard, but changing it if there is a better option. Add music, view and show your friends. Now go and make another film.

2. Shooting Better Video

Shooting video to professional standards can be boiled down to a few basic skills.

2a. BEGINNERS' LEVEL

Start by using the simple “point and shoot” method as for the above exercise, with all the camera functions on automatic.

Shoot steadily

Don't use a camera as if it were your eyes. Imagine how it would look if you were seeing through your eyes after they'd been transplanted into someone else's head, so that you had no control over their movement. The result would be disorientation and sea-sickness. Shoot straight and steady, holding the shot for at least five seconds before moving on. You don't need a tripod: use the “steady-shot” which is a function on all modern cameras. Get as physically close to the subject as possible (zooming in causes more wobble). If you can't avoid shooting close from far away, breathe in and hold your breath before taking the shot to minimise body movement. You will need a tripod to shoot inanimate objects statically, such as a document (this is called “rostrum camera”). If you haven't got a tripod, put your camera on a table and place the object where the camera can see it.

Things to avoid

- Zooming in and out all the time, and other uncontrolled camera movement (see above)
- Too much “headroom” in the shot. When photographing a person, make sure the top of their head is near the top of the frame. A big gap at the top looks totally amateur.
- Pressing the record button on the camera twice by mistake, effectively stopping the recording, then starting it again at the end of the shot, so that you end up recording all the bits between your shots. (This isn't as unlikely as it sounds!)

2b. INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

Knowing Your Camera

“Know your camera so that it becomes an extra arm.” Get to know where all the controls are, and use your camera a lot, so that it becomes an extension of your own body. Don't feel you have to make a finished film every time you get it out of the case. Don't save it up for your award-winning blockbuster. Get stuck in, make mistakes, and learn from them

Manual functions

Most modern cameras will have the following manual overrides:

FOCUS – manual focus allows you to choose which part of your picture is in focus. Though recent cameras have much better automatic focus than earlier models, if there is a bright area behind your subject, or your subject is not central in the frame, the automatic focus may move in and out, undecided where to fix. Another problem is that the viewfinder on a small camcorder is much lower quality than a television, so that you can't always see if the picture is sharp or not. Setting focus to manual allows you to have pin-sharp pictures every time.

Start by performing this test: put your camera to manual focus and view your subject in long shot. Probably it looks in focus. Now zoom in. Now you see a big blur. So one way to ensure focus is to zoom in to your subject before shooting, “push auto” to set the focus and then zoom out to your desired framing. (N.B. On some cameras the focus will be lost when zooming in low-light conditions, so in this case, don't zoom in. Just “push auto” at your desired shot-size with your subject at the centre of the frame, and then move to the framing you want.)

“Pull focus” is a standard shooting device. In a shot with foreground and background, the foreground goes out of focus to reveal the background sharply behind. For instance, the barbed wire of a detention centre fence is pulled out of focus (OOF) to reveal the guards in long-shot behind. Although DV / Digital-8 video cameras now have electronic rather than mechanical focus, many still have a manually adjustable ring on the lens. Set focus to manual and move the ring to pull focus from foreground to background. (N.B. This takes a few attempts to get it right!)

EXPOSURE – Just as with an SLR camera, the wider the aperture or iris of the lens, the more light is let onto the image. On auto exposure the lens opens automatically when there is less available light, and closes when the available light increases. For most situations, auto exposure will enable you to get images which are correctly exposed, neither too light nor too dark.

There are circumstances, though, where manual control of the aperture is necessary. Let's say your subject is standing in front of a window. S/he will appear dark (under-exposed), as the exposure reader in the camera takes an average of the whole frame, including the bright window behind. (Try this). The best solution for this is to change the camera-angle or move the subject to avoid back-lighting. If you can't, you can use the manual exposure control to “white out” the background, until the person in the foreground is clearly visible.

Another example: in the case of panning (moving the camera sideways) across a room, the exposure will balloon in and out as the camera passes the windows, which looks awful. Once again, the best solution is to change your angle so that there are no windows in shot. If this isn't possible, set the exposure manually for the people in the room, and then the windows will over-expose as the camera pans across them.

N.B. A little under-exposure is rescuable in the edit, but over-exposure, where detail in the image is whited-out, is irrecoverable loss.

WHITE BALANCE – Light is not white to a lens. Daylight is blue, and indoor (tungsten) light is orange. This is called the “colour temperature”. When you get your footage back and it looks blue, there has been a problem with the “white balance”, the function of your camera which makes white look white. For most purposes, the automatic white balance on your camera will be fine for colour correction. The problems often come from mixed light sources, for instance an electric-bulb-lit interior with daylight coming in through the windows. This produces a mixture of orange and blue light. Most video cameras have three different manual settings: a daylight filter (represented by a sun symbol), which makes daylight look white, an indoor light filter (represented by a light bulb), which makes lamp-light look white, and thirdly, a way of setting the white balance manually. In the

example above, of electric lighting mixed with daylight, there are two solutions: one is to switch to the daylight filter, which will warm up the interior light, but remove the nasty cold blueness (the lesser of two evils), or set the daylight as white by the manual white balance control. The best way to do this is to put a white piece of paper under the light you want to be white, and press the manual white balance setting. What you want to avoid is a blue cast over your pictures. If you have a colour viewfinder, be alert to blueness in the image. Another occasion where it's a good idea to set a manual white balance with a white card is when you have more than one camera filming the same scene, such as a gig. If all the cameras treat the same white card as white, then colour will match when you cut the pictures together in the edit.

Camera movement

PANNING AND TILTING – The pan-shot is sideways movement from left to right or from right to left. The tilt-shot is vertical movement up or down. A pan or tilt has a well-framed beginning, but also has a good-looking end. So you'll probably need to “dry-run” the shot before recording. Start with at least 5 seconds still, and then slowly and smoothly move the camera. Come to a smooth stop at your desired end-frame, and hold, counting to 5. Ideally your movement will accelerate slightly towards the middle of the shot, and decelerate towards the end. This enhances the smoothness. Practice this, and play it back on a TV, to see if your pan/tilt is smooth and the right speed.

Looking / walking space

Let's say your interviewee is in profile, looking camera left, rather than head-on to the camera. S/he needs space on the left-hand side to look into. The rule is: end of the nose is centre-frame. Similarly, if you follow someone walking from right to left, aesthetically they need space to their left to walk into.

Interviews

Ask questions which don't give one-word answers: e.g. not “Are you enjoying the demonstration today?”, but “What do you feel about the demonstration today?”

Logging (a verbatim transcript of an interview) is one of the most tedious tasks in film making, so on the whole keep your interviews very short (three questions max). If you've got time, note down any good answers with a rough time code, to save time in the edit. Don't go fishing, recording great long speeches. If someone's not clear or too long-winded, ask them to do it again shorter (20-30 seconds max, or shorter, depending on the film). Try to get people away from treating you as a TV reporter. This makes some people talk unemotionally, or in a cautious and official way (understandably for TV cameras). Instead, explain what you're doing, and approach them in such a way that they treat you as the friendly fellow activist that you are.

Recording Sound

For everything except interviews, you can get away with using the mike built into the camera. It is however better to use a directional (gun) mike clipped to the top of the camera. Some cameras have a lot of machine noise, which makes an external microphone highly desirable.

Professional-quality directional and lapel microphones can be bought for around £160, and much cheaper ones can be picked up which will still improve your recorded sound hugely. So it's an investment really worth making.

For interviews, in absolute emergencies, acceptable sound can be had with the internal mike of a noise-free camera in a quiet room without an echo. In noisier situations, you can ask the person to speak up. But really you need an external mike. If you're working on your own, a directional mike on top of the camera will help a lot. However, a directional mike in this position will pick up the

noise behind the interviewee as well as the interviewee. The best thing to do is to unclip the mike from the top of the camera and hold it with your left hand near the subject's chest and out of shot (OOS), pointing at the subject's mouth. (N.B. For this you will need a longer mike cable than that sufficient for recording from the top of the camera). Or use a lapel mike with a tie-clip, and clip it high up on the interviewee's shirt, with a wind-sock if you're outside.

The standard mic input to a camera is via a mini-jack (3.5mm plug). Some of the cheaper cameras don't have this facility, while some have a "hot-shoe" on the top of the camera for plugging in a directional mike.

Always use headphones. Simple walkman headphones will do. Large ear muff ones make you look like you're from a TV station. Headphones are no use to tell you the actual recorded volume of the interviewee. Most cameras have a volume control for the headphone output, which is separate from the recording level. The purpose of the headphones is to pick up any technical problems, such as a defective, buzzing cable, the cable not plugged in correctly, etc. These problems are quite common, so use of headphones is essential.

Use automatic recording level, which is good on most modern cameras, and saves you a lot of bother.

2c. ADVANCED LEVEL

The skills you have already acquired are enough for you to shoot high-quality video. The "advanced" section below is for those who want to go to the full "documentary film school" level of production values.

The Crew

A documentary filming team is ideally a minimum of two people – a camera operator and a sound recordist to hold the microphone. The sound recordist also looks out for shots and things happening, and acts as lookout in dangerous situations (e.g. cameraperson walking backwards). Quite often it is the sound recordist who asks the interview questions.

More on Recording Sound

There are two basic profiles of microphone recording – omni-directional and uni-directional (also just called directional).

The omni-directional mike records in every direction, not discriminating between front, side and back. Tie-clip (or lavalier) microphones are of this type.

The uni-directional type is often termed cardioid or hyper-cardioid, for the heart-shaped profile it records in the direction it points. The hyper-cardioid is a thinner, longer profile than the cardioid. A directional mike (long and thin in design) will still pick up sound behind it or at the side, but will substantially privilege the cardioid area in front, making it ideal for interviews, or for filming meetings, arguments, etc.

A directional mike can also be mounted on a boom-pole (also called a fish-pole).

There are two basic positions in which to get optimum professional results with a directional mike: the first is under the chest of the interviewee, pointing at their mouth, as described above, where the person's body shields the mike from the sound behind. For meetings, however, where a number of different people are speaking, the proper way to do it is with a boom-pole. The mike is positioned over the head of the speaker, on the end of the pole, pointing at the speakers' mouth. This way it is out-of-shot, but close to the speaker. Then it is moved to the next speaker. This is exhausting for the boom operator, requires a lot of concentration, and can be quite intimidating and invasive for the speakers. A compromise position is to keep the microphone at head level, further back and out of

shot, pointing as accurately as possible at the speaker.

Radio mikes, which do not have to be umbilically connected to the camera, are incredibly useful, but rather expensive.

More on Colour Temperature

The colour of light is measured in degrees Kelvin. The orange light from a tungsten lamp is around 3400°K. Daylight on a sunny day is around 5500°K. The special “coffee commercial” light at dawn or dusk, which film makers call the “magic hour”, is much lower than the light at noon, around 3200°K, which accounts for its warm glow. Candlelight is only 1500°K.

More on Exposure Control

The aperture of the lens is measured in f-stops, the lower the number the wider the aperture. Quite a few DV video cameras will give you an f-stop reading in the viewfinder when you fix the exposure, usually in half-stop steps (f2, f2.8, f4, f5.6, f8, f11, f16). The higher the f-stop, the more closed the lens, the more light is needed for a correct exposure, and the greater the “depth of field” (the distance which can be seen in focus). For broadcast television, camerapeople try to light the scene to get an aperture of at least f2 (otherwise the depth of field is so short that someone's eyes may be in focus, and their nose out!). Modern video cameras have an electronic “video gain” which increases the exposure artificially in low-light situations, where the lens being fully open is not enough to capture the scene. This is measured in decibels (db), usually from 3db up to 18db. The disadvantage with video gain is the massive increase in graininess of the picture. 3db-6db is not too bad. 18db is pretty ugly. In marginal low-light, I prefer to under-expose the footage without using the video gain, and then brighten it up in the edit, which has a less grainy effect than using the crude gain control in the camera. Experiment with your own camera in different low-light situations and see what looks best.

But the basic principle is to shoot with plenty of light, preferably outside on a sunny day. Avoid shooting at night if possible, and make sure your film shoot starts early enough in the day for you to finish before darkness descends.

Finally, the content of your film is more important than any technical quibbles. If you can only shoot that scene at the wrong time of day, in the wrong location, with the wrong equipment, but the scene is vital and important, that's the only thing that matters.

More on Lighting

The basic principle of attractive portrait lighting is to have a stronger light from one side of the person, giving relief and definition to the face and a 3D perspective to an otherwise flat image. One model is 17th century Dutch paintings, many of which have windows down one side, giving classic film lighting to the subjects. Look at films from this point of view only, and work out where the strong light (key-light) is coming from in each scene.

In feature films, a huge lighting kit is used to control how the light falls on the subjects. In television documentary, an interview will often be lit by three hefty lamps of between 800W and 2000W. These three lamps are the key- (giving the definition to the subject), the fill- (lighting the scene overall), and the back-light, (giving sparkle to the hair, and lifting the subject out of the background). When we shoot in activist situations, however, we have to do most of this with natural or available light. Hence, 90% of lighting is location. Try to shoot people out of doors, with the sun neither behind nor in front, but to one side. Look for that nice half-and-half shape to the lighting on the face. Indoors it can be hard to get an “exposure” (a reading that doesn't drop into the “video gain” zone - see above). So look for a better place, but be prepared to compromise if that's the only place you can do it.

Get to love light in all its painterly physicality. Above all, lighting is a question of mood. Do you really want a bright, sunny day if the mood of your scene is sombre?

More on interviewing

In a documentary, it's a good idea to pre-interview people, to see if they're interesting. Don't make notes during the pre-interview, but keep eye-contact with the interviewee, concentrating on how you can draw their story out of them. Make the notes straight afterwards. The bits you remember will be the only interesting bits for the film. Note interesting, expressive phrases they used. You can ask them to say this again in the recorded interview.

If it's a difficult interview, respect your interviewee. Don't make them sit there while you set up the camera. Get someone else to sit in for them. I often try to make the interview more like a conversation by talking about my own experiences, or by making the interviewee feel in control in some way. Be sensitive to the individual, and don't apply a template to your interviewing. Interviewing, like all film making, is invasive. If someone has a tragic story to tell, they will understandably have barriers up. You have to persuade them to re-live the experience in an emotional way. If you feel uncomfortable with this, don't make films. Ethically, there is unlikely to be a problem with your invasiveness if your film is designed to help the person's cause. Film is about going deeply into things, not remaining on the surface.

3. The Language of Film

An absolute basic of learning how to make good videos is to understand something of the peculiar “language” of film. This is not a process that needs years of study on a specialist course. The basic understanding can be acquired quite quickly from your own video collection. One of the best ways of doing this is to look at a film you admire or enjoy on video or DVD. Take one scene – usually a single location and lasting 2-3 minutes. Watch it and watch it again. The second time, count aloud whenever there is a cut or edit. How many edits were there in your chosen scene? Next, watch the scene again and have a look at how the shots are ordered.

Some useful terms:

Big close-up (BCU) – a detail of someone's face, such as the eyes

Close-up (CU) – shot of just a person's face

Medium close-up (MCU) – head and shoulders shot

Medium shot or Mid-shot (MS) – shot from top of head to waist

Long shot (LS) – whole body length shot

Very long shot (VLS) – wider than long shot

Establisher / general view (GV) – a wide shot of the scene used at the beginning of the scene in the case of the establisher to show the viewers the location where the action takes place

Cover – a GV which contains the whole scene, to help with editing

Insert – a close-up of part of the subject, e.g. a hand or a bag

Low-angle / high-angle – the camera looking up at or down on the subject

Pan – movement of the camera from left to right or vice versa

Tilt – movement of camera up or down

Track in/out – movement of whole body of the camera on tracks

Zoom in/out – movement of the lens to go in closer or further away

Reverse – in a scene of you and me talking, the first shot is of you talking, then the reverse is of me talking or listening, i.e. a shot taken from the other side of the scene

So, coming back to your film scene, how is the scene established at the beginning? In a feature / narrative film, each scene moves the story along in one way only. So, how does this scene move

along the drama? What is its climax or turning point, meaning the point where the scene could dramatically go one way or the other? How are the shots “patterned” to tell that story? For instance, are close-ups used more around the climax than at the beginning? How is camera movement and position used to tell the story, and to project the emotion of the scene? By now, you should have looked at the scene at least ten times. To really work out how it is put together, you may have to watch it more than 20 times!

A very useful exercise is to make a “storyboard” of the scene. This will give you a pictorial record of the edits so that you can work out how the patterning of shots tells the story.

(Another exercise – construct a shooting schedule from this scene. For instance, shoot all from one angle before doing the reverses).

It would also be a good idea to look at documentary films in the same way. Take a documentary film you like. What type of documentary is it?

Some documentary genres:

Current affairs reportage – a kind of long-form news report, usually reporter-led, with voice-over commentary, and a journalistic brief. Can be investigative, or merely telling an “objective” news story.

Fly-on-the-wall / observational / vérité – the subjects' story seems to be just unfolding before our eyes, without mediation from a reporter and with a minimum of voice-over, as though the camera was that invisible insect.

“Essay” television – a film that promotes a particular argument.

Agit-propaganda – the genre that I work in, where “objectivity” is not the point, and making people feel something for a cause is. Expect uplifting stories and fast editing!

Watching your chosen documentary, how do the film makers set up the story? This is called the “exposition”. There are many ways of doing this: study the ways. If your film has interviews, how are they edited? For instance, are cut-aways, pictures that paper over the cracks caused by the edits, used? Look at a particular incident in the documentary. How is it told? (For instance, there is an old saw of current affairs producers – “say what you're going to do, do it, then say what you've done”). Overall, how is the story structured so that it is clear to the viewer?

By doing some of the above homework, you have started to get a grip on how film is put together to tell a story. And it makes watching films a lot more fun!

An Exercise

Now practice your camera skills and try out your grasp of film language by filming an event “edit-in-camera”. This means that you could take the video-tape out at the end of shooting and watch it as a finished film. This is quite difficult, but incredibly useful for embedding the stuff in sections 2 and 3. Let's say you film a party: first take a “rostrum” shot of the invite as a title. After 6 seconds, stop recording. Then take an exterior of the venue for five seconds then stop. Inside the party you might decide to interview the host, establish the location with a pan-shot, film a montage of drunk people for 3 seconds each, etc. Think ahead, and never shoot just randomly. Watch it through and see how you've done.

4. Editing

Editing is where your film really comes together. It can take a long time, but is definitely the most exciting and rewarding part of the process.

The software and the hardware

You will need a professional standard editing package, such as Adobe Premiere (version 6 or above) for Windows or Linux, Final Cut Pro for Apple Macintosh, or a number of rapidly-developing open source programmes for Linux. You will need a computer with at least 256MB of RAM, preferably 512 or 1024.

How to organise an edit

These are the stages for the post-production of a film:

LOGGING – All of your footage noted down in the order it has been shot, on one side of the paper only – time-code (the position on the tape in minutes and seconds) on the left, a description of the shot and any dialogue in the middle, and a column on the right to note the quality, so that you can easily find the good bits when you've finished.

During the logging process, you will keep having ideas about how your film could be put together. Note these down as they come to you.

EDIT SCRIPT – Your shots in the “running order” you want them in the edited film. Can be done as a storyboard, or on A4, with pictures on the left and sound on the right. Note the time-code of each shot. A good way of making edit decisions is the “index card method” - put each shot on an index card with a bit of blu-tac on the back, and move them around your wall until you have a good structure. With a longer-form film, start by doing this with a whole scene to each card, so you can see the structure of the film from beginning to end, and then break each scene down into shots.

DIGITIZING – Connect your camera to a computer with a firewire connection (IEEE-1394). Open a new project on your editing software, and open “movie capture”. If your footage is quite brief (say 15 minutes long), you could digitize it all in a single take. If you have a lot of footage on different tapes, then take each shot you need for your edit separately, and give each one the same name as you have given it in your edit script. Record a top and tail with each shot.

How big is your hard drive? Five minutes of DV footage takes up 1GB of space.

ROUGH ASSEMBLY – Roughly cut down each of the shots in your script, and put them in order in the timeline. View this to get an overview of your film.

ROUGH CUT – Tidy up the cuts, and move shots around to improve the edit, but don't be too fastidious.

FINE CUT – Fine up the exact cutting points, add music and sound effects, neaten up the interviews, and watch repeatedly with “first-timer's” eyes.

SOUND MIX – called the “dub” in the industry. Mix all your sound to the right levels. A documentary typically needs four sound-tracks (Sync-sound, voice, effects, music). Music, sync and FX will have to be taken down in volume when voice comes in, for example.

INTERNATIONAL VERSIONS – either get someone to translate it, and do sub-titles, or prepare an international version, which is just music and effects, with no voice. For this reason, it is important to put all your voice on one track, with nothing else, so this track can easily be switched off

VERSIONING FOR THE INTERNET & CD/DVD – there are a number of ways of doing this.

Here's one, which unfortunately uses a microsoft programme / platform. Save your finished film as full-spec movie (an “avi”), then import the file into Windows Movie Maker, where it can easily be compressed to a file size appropriate for the internet. For instance, indymedia has a maximum file size of 20MB, and less is preferable to help people down-loading with slow connections. So try out different qualities until you find one which is an acceptable compromise between quality and file size. Then upload to the indymedia newswire!

The principles of editing

There are only three basic types of edit:

1. By **SCENE**, as in the above section “The Language of Film”, the normal structural unit of the narrative film - a sequence of shots between 1-8 minutes long (usually 2-3 minutes) in a single

location.

2. PARALLEL CUT – two scenes intercut with each other (e.g. the end of the first “Godfather”)
3. MONTAGE – a string of shots not necessarily from the same time and location, such as a “dream sequence”,

Jump-cuts / cut-aways

Let's imagine you'd recorded this interview:

ACTIVIST: “We got into the building by abseiling over the fence, /and...er...well, er.../it wasn't too hard, until the alarm went off.”

You would want to cut out the middle bit where she stumbles over her words. When you do this, a “jump-cut” appears in your edit, where the person moves slightly because of the cut. You need a “cut-away”, another picture, to paste over this crack. Fortunately you have a shot of the fence they climbed over, so you place that over the cut for 3 seconds, and then your edit appears perfectly smooth.

Editing Checklist

Is your film too long? (Most videos are). How long will your viewers stand? Where will it be seen, and how does this impact on the duration? (For instance, it's no good making a 40-minute video for showing at lunch-time trade union meetings). Shorter is almost always better. Sometimes it's possible to make a good 10-minute film from a very boring 50-minuter. “Less is more”.

Imagine yourself as someone else. I have several imaginary viewers in my head, based on people I know. What would they think of it? Would they be right?

Never ever keep someone in a film because they'd be upset if they were left out. Your film is not for them, but for everyone else, including them, when they actually watch it.

Never ever keep a shot just because it took you so much effort to get it. Be ruthless with yourself.

Never ever justify a boring scene intellectually - “it may be a bit dull, but it needs to be there for the argument”. Either make it interesting, or chuck it. By the same argument, if an edit feels wrong, no amount of intellectual justification will make it right. Respect your feelings, not your thoughts.

Don't use cliché - “A cliché is never right even when it is.” (Robert Bresson).

Show your film to people you trust, but who will be honest, before you show it to a wider audience.

5. Making Alternative TV

Finally, here's a somewhat tongue-in-cheek proposal for how alternative documentary can avoid becoming a pale imitation of the corporate media. It takes its inspiration from the Danish “Dogme” school, who in 1995 made a manifesto to try to rescue movies from the dominant Hollywood aesthetic. This is my own attempt to do the same thing for radical factual film.

DOGME 04 MANIFESTO for RADICAL DOCUMENTARY

It is nearly a decade since Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterburg launched their Dogme 95 manifesto with the aim of rescuing the cinematic avant-garde from the “bourgeois perception of art”. Now it is necessary to do the same for the documentary film, for too long submissive to the diktats of corporate media.

Firstly, let us decry the corruption in the digital television age of once-valuable words: “independent” to describe a multi-million pound production company producing “reality TV” pap; “alternative” to describe a film whose content may be grass-roots, but whose form is conservative, prime-time-broadcast and safe.

Throughout its history, radical factual filmmaking has often failed in its mission to change how the world is represented and failed to offer visions of another world that is possible. In the post-68 era, radical films were too often plain, flat, and monotonously realist. Or else they were dope-headed and self-indulgent. In the video revolution of the 1980s, in the UK far too many talking-head programmes were made which failed even to offer a critique of Labourism, or to do more than trot out a knee-jerk anti-Thatcherism without analysis. In the environmental movements of the 90s, direct action provided fresh impetus to radical filmmaking, but too often this became mere “protest porn”. Throughout these decades, and in fact since the beginning of this new art form of film just a century ago, there have nevertheless been many brilliant examples of documentary film imbued with a revolutionary vision that has aimed to turn the capitalist world upside down. How will we take these forward in the 21st century?

Every time you make someone sympathise with a radical cause in a proactive and emotive way, you have ruptured the dominant ideology of broadcast TV. Ask yourself, would they allow my film to be shown on television? If the answer is “yes”, you have not made a DOGME 04 film.

THE VOW

“I swear to submit to the following set of rules drawn up and confirmed by the DOGME 04 (Radical Documentary) collective:

1. Give a voice to the oppressed and the under-represented. We will seek out and work to capture the diverse articulacy of ordinary people.
2. No “representatives”, “spokespeople” or “radical celebrities”. People in struggle represent themselves and each other in a non-hierarchical way. We will make films of the masses in all their diversity.
3. No presenters or reporters, telling the viewer what to think, in other words, what is safe for the dominant ideology for us to think.
4. No “Voice of God” narration. We will allow nothing that mediates the voice of the people, and makes it safe. Also, no “profound and meaningful” voice-overs, usually a mixture of bad poetry and Marxist or Situationist diatribe, that seek to “objectivize”, but actually merely subjectivize and intellectualise. (see 6 below).
5. No “exotic” local colour. We are with the people, not studying them like anthropologists.
6. No earnestness. The manufacturers of consent like us to be po-faced and doctrinaire. It conforms to their myth of us. They hate us to be humorous. There is nothing more subversive than humour. We will use it where possible.
7. Subvert, subvert, subvert. We will send up the corporate mass media wherever possible.
8. This is not a Dogme-95-style hair-shirt “vow of chastity”. We will choose from the full kaleidoscope of filmic techniques as appropriate to our subject and as thrown up by our imagination. Radical content, radical form.
9. Which side are we on? In radical film, this is a physical location, as much as an ideological position. We are with the protestors, rather than behind the police lines.
10. No more demonstrations. They’re boring. We will respect journalism. What is a story? If we really have to film a demonstration, it will have a fresh angle.
11. Make films that empower, not disempower. We will never leave our subjects merely defeated, and will always aim to give our viewers themselves the desire to act.

