

Self-Organisation and Counter Public in the Alternative Media Scene of the 1970s

There are quite a few important films exemplifying the history of political film in the 1970s, including by film auteurs such as Helke Sander and Claudia Alemann who, in the course of the 1968 revolt, made their contributions to denouncing the persistent fascism of the generation of parents, the continued existence of Nazi cliques in the judiciary and government, and the new imperialisms in Vietnam and elsewhere. However, this discussion focuses on a movement for grassroots culture which, in the early 1970s, had magniloquently and with utopian zeal started out from a different culture and media reality in the metropolises, as people would have said back then. One of the starting points were seminars at the University of Fine Arts (Hochschule für bildende Künste, HfBK) in Hamburg, which in the wake of 1968 were committed to self-organisation. Many a professor was then banned from entering the school building, while others (the author included) were, by signature, allowed to provide outside legitimisation for the seminars.

In 1973, one such seminar gave rise to the Centre of Media Pedagogy (Medienpädagogik-Zentrum, MPZ), which still exists today. This was followed by the *Medienladen* ("media store" or "media workshop"), primarily supported by students and lecturers of Visual Communication, and the smaller *Medienzentrum Fuhlsbüttel*. The Hamburg centres then served as models for the formation of other groups in Berlin, Freiburg, Erlangen, Stuttgart, Zürich, etc. These pursued a different approach from that of, say, the film collectives, such as the one on Brüderstrasse in Hamburg, whose immediate concern was the experimental approach to film. It was now no longer about auteur film but about a counter-cultural movement in which media consumers were to be turned into producers – an agenda set by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge in their book *Public Sphere and Experience*.¹

Thus, seminars, indeed entire departments, of the art academy consistently turned outward. Spaces were leased and equipped with hardware that could then be borrowed. In this way, cameras, projectors, printing machines were released for general use. These centres were to be independent of state and economic institutions, and filmmakers preferred to see themselves as media workers, with the media magazine of the MPZ consequently calling itself *Medienarbeit*.

It must be said here that media centres were, in fact, the order of the day in the context of the cultural debate of the 1970s. Hilmar Hoffmann, the Frankfurt city councillor in charge of cultural affairs, had just presented his concept of a "media centre serving local cultural activities," which involved establishing media libraries, audio-visual information centres, including, eventually, the establishment of *Kommunale Kinos* (local cinemas) which led, for example, to the founding of the Metropolis cinema in Hamburg in the late 1970s. Yet the "alternative media centres" criticised Hoffmann's

¹ Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

concept as purely technical, if not technocratic, arguing that without emancipatory use of media it was bound to remain sterile.

Especially *Videomagazin*, a publication of the Hamburg *Medienladen*, then committed itself to the promotion of alternative media centres. Its November 1977 issue featured a quote from Oskar Negt on the cover: "A media centre could contribute in exemplary ways to help the populace get past its reserve towards media which can be used for their purposes and thereby overcome the passive behaviour taught by television." Yet the very editorial already qualified this by saying that, "in terms of perspective, independent media centres would be dependent on broad political movements backing them." And it continued: "It would be important to learn from historical efforts. The conception and failure of the workers' clubs in the Soviet Union in the 1920s may be an interesting example in this regard, albeit one that still remain largely unresearched specifically for the medium of film."

It is therefore not surprising that the Russian writer and theorist Sergei Tretyakov was a key model for the efforts to promote grassroots culture: "A true art for all should absolutely not involve turning all people into spectators but, to the contrary, that all acquire the qualities and skill to construct and organise the raw materials specific to the specialists of art, ... by including the masses into the process of creation hitherto celebrated by individualists."² He differentiates between various artistic and journalistic processes which played an important role following the theoretical debates: "Discovering something important is reportage; constructing something important is operativism." Paraphrasing this, one could say that, on the one hand, we're dealing with a political, journalistic process and, on the other, with the striving for an alternative grassroots culture.

Both approaches have a long tradition in the labour movement – activities which tended to start out from the parties and their public presentation, and such that (in council-democratic terms) focused not so on much counter-information as on counter-culture. Yet largely independent of such connections, an opening up towards grassroots cultural movements had taken place in the institution of television itself after 1968. In this, Bertolt Brecht's radio theory of 1928 played a not insignificant role: "Radio must be transformed from a distribution apparatus into a communications apparatus. The radio could be the finest communications apparatus in public life, a vast system of channels. That is, it could be so, if it understood how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a network rather than isolating him."³

Following the 1968 cultural revolt, it was widely expected that the consumer would be "integrated into the system as an active and above all individualised element."⁴ First steps in this direction were made by television series such as *Schüler machen Filme* (Students Make Films), *direkt* or *Vor-Ort* (On Site) with their concept of aiming to give a voice to the people concerned. Usually, however, this aspiration was realised only in reduced form, as the camera ultimately would remain in the hands of the editors, no matter how much they believed themselves to be intermediaries. Still, their interest in innovations did lead to some programmes about the Hamburg media centres. In 1977 alone, for example, the Hamburg media

² Heiner Boehncke (ed.), *Sergej Tretyakov: Die Arbeit des Schriftstellers. Aufsätze, Reportagen, Porträts* (Reinbek near Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1972).

³ Bertolt Brecht, "The radio as communications apparatus", in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. M. Silverman (London, Methuen, 2001), p. 42.

⁴ Florian Rötzer, "Interaktion – das Ende herkömmlicher Massenmedien", in Rudolf Maresch (ed.), *Medien und Öffentlichkeit* (Munich: Boer, 1996), p. 126.

centres were the subject of multiple features on NDR radio, in *Kulturspiegel*, and even of a film in the WDR series *Wortwechsel*.

During this time, a now odd-seeming factional dispute flared up among the media centres between those who defined themselves as "journalistic" and those who were "operatively" oriented. Allegations of "pathetic militancy" on the one hand and accusations of socio-pedagogical reduction on the other went around. As a matter of fact, the life concepts of the protagonists were linked to such decisions. Even the so-called German Autumn in 1977 had initially brought little change to this rigid confrontation. To again quote the Hamburg media workshop: "Alternative media work has (thus far) been realised largely within the framework of a target-group concept whose primary focus was creating counter public It was not until the ineffectiveness of many target-group films became obvious and the general deterioration of political conditions in the *Bundesrepublik* increased the need for longer-term approaches, that the issue of initiating and organising political media work became imperative."

Yet the all too euphoric expectations faded quickly in the now frosty political and cultural climate, both among those interested in grassroots culture and the more journalistically oriented target-group filmmakers. It therefore became necessary to think about longer-term cultural strategies. After 1968, consideration had been given to the question of how to forge a closer relationship between everyday experience and culture, but such a concept of fostering articulation, creativity and self-confidence was said to overlook the obstruction of the individual in everyday life. Now the attempt was made to somehow keep both aspects in play: "Since there are no models for the practical development of media centres in the *Bundesrepublik*, it is more necessary than ever, given the prevailing conditions and the lack of a political mass movement, to test political media work in practice taking into account both aspects (counter public and self-organisation)" (*Videomagazin* nos. 6/7).

It was now emphasised that the success of counter-culture essentially depended on "historical fissures ... within which a proletarian public sphere develops" (Negt and Kluge). Accordingly, little was said to have been realised to date of the comprehensive concept envisaging "critical media consumption" and "emancipatory media use". Except for some campaign films on labour conflicts, the burgeoning anti-nuclear movement and free radio stations, not much was being created, and if, then mainly formally unassuming video tapes which, what is more, required every cut in the substandard half-inch technology to be made with a stopwatch and in fast forward mode.

Nevertheless, almost all video groups and media centres in Hamburg attended a joint meeting in the autumn of 1979. Once again, the videotapes being created were to be circulated and, of course, screened for the purpose of effective counter public by using simple copying and overall low-cost production. But many of the tapes were too specific, and the project quickly petered out, as films were not passed on or lost. Another somewhat bizarre story is worth mentioning in this context: *Videomagazin* had a subscriber in East Berlin, the writer Mader who had written book titled *Who is who beim CIA* and later admitted that he had been a Stasi

collaborator. He proposed that he be included in the circulation list of the video tapes (which, of course, would have been very useful for the Stasi with regard to the alternative movement). In return, he offered the video groups free access to the State Film Archive of the GDR (which obviously would have been very lucrative for them, too).

To make things worse, video by that time had also become the epitome of state surveillance. There is a special issue of *Videomagazin* (nos. 16/17, 1979) about this with video cameras everywhere where there is something to conceal, protect or defend: at intersections and in supermarkets, at bank counters and mansion entrances; pin-size cameras hidden in lamp posts and behind cladding in railway stations. And every amateur video maker had turned into a potential collaborator of the state authorities, as his or her recordings could be seized and utilised anytime. The right to one's own image had become something only policemen could claim anymore. Within a short period of time, the emancipatory medium had thus turned into the dirtiest one, responsible for all that the stolid Big Brother television had left to the alert, unscrupulous smaller brother.⁵

It was really a paradox situation. The left-wing cultural movement of the 1920s was only useful as a model to a limited extent, since almost all technical and financial resources for film from the bottom up had still been lacking at the time. Now these resources were available but there was no relevant opposition movement it could have harnessed. As a result, the hoped-for counter-culture was hardly visible, and the media workers unexpectedly found themselves in a niche. In 1979, the video groups then gathered for a "Video in crisis" meeting in Erlangen. Gerhardt Schumm put the debate in a nutshell: "The question now is whether, given the rather compartmentalised social conditions of today and the lack of broad political movements capable of supporting media work, a classical, documentary media practice is once again gaining ground and whether the media specialist with his reflected and often lavish use of media is returning to his function" (*Videomagazin* nos. 14/15, p. 58).

The inspiration for these considerations was a passage from Klaus Wildenhahn's book *Über synthetischen und dokumentarischen Film*⁶: "As long as a perspective in society is unclear or controversial, making documentary films should be a priority." Before long, however, this position sparked the so-called Kreimeier-Wildenhahn debate, one of the few film theory debates in Germany that continued for years. On one side was the tradition of "direct cinema" which calls for "participatory observation" as the basis for a depiction of actual conditions that is as objective as possible. And, on the other, Klaus Kreimeier who argued that film should "understand its subjectivity, indeed its arbitrariness, as part of a processual reality."⁷ Even the latter position, of course, presumed to alone be able to develop perspectives in socially distorted times.

Then, in the midst of this debate (and the crisis) in the early 1980s, video films unexpectedly turned up from Zürich, Freiburg, Vienna and, later, Berlin, which gave expression to the culture of the urban youth revolts – of squatters, punks, people in the youth centres. This also gave rise to a new generation of videomakers who had found an immediate life context in this cultural revolt: an ideal case, so to speak, of counter-cultural video work.

⁵ See also the film *Video – Ein anderes Fernsehen* by G. Oberstenfeld, W. Uka and G. Roscher, WDR, 1979.

⁶ Klaus Wildenhahn, *Über synthetischen und dokumentarischen Film* (Berlin: DFFB, 1975), p. 198.

⁷ Klaus Kreimeier, "Darstellen und Eingreifen," in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 16 November 1979.

The ubiquitous culture-industrial templates were now to be confronted with their own – distorted and destructive – structures. Video stood for image destruction and visual outcry. Squatter cafés and small cinemas provided a previously non-existent type of screening basis for video.

Yet the explosion of images aiming to be an expression of the movement was based on video tapes which had been technically and formally adapted. Image collages like "PASST BLOSS AUF" and "ZÜRI BRÄNNT" were created. The imagery is very much determined by the auteurs themselves: after "video of the people concerned" came auteur video, with the two being combined in the new youth culture. Yet high product standards also entailed? a high degree of specialisation. And the video specialists wanted to make a living from their work. Thus, they were queuing up in front of the few television editorial departments that were actually interested. All the more so, since time base correctors and sound mixers were now quite naturally part of the standard equipment of the video centres ... as was the new U-matic editing equipment which, for the first time, allowed for the kind of editing familiar from film. Accordingly, an adaptation to the traditional medium of film followed, until eventually HD cameras and computer editing, as well as the new generation of beamers, started to technologically supersede the medium of film and turned the emancipatory aspiration of the medium of video into a distant nimbus. As part of the turnaround in the early 1980s, the Hamburg *Medienladen* became the "Bildwechsel" ("Scene Change") Women's Media Workshop, just as the new and not very expensive medium of video, in general, gave many women access of their own, one that was not the preserve of men. We know what role women have played in the new video art (Ulrike Rosenbach, Rebecca Horn, Friederike Pezold). What we could learn from the movement of the early media centres is that – and in what way – new, as yet unappropriated technical media can be used for innovations at times of new (cultural) beginnings. (And how, in the case of the Hamburg media centres, development possibilities can be blocked due to a big-city craving for differentiation.)

And what do things look like today with the Internet and the "social fissures" claimed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge?

