

RADICAL MEDIA AND VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ATTICA UPRISING

Intro to MIAP

Group Research Project

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Introduction

On September 9th, 1971, approximately 1,300-2,200 inmates at the Attica Correctional Facility in Attica, New York, led an uprising against the prison's inhumane living conditions. The prisoners took over the facility and held forty guards hostage. Issuing a list of demands--including calls for improvement in prison conditions, as well as educational and training opportunities--they entered into negotiations with state officials. After four days, the negotiations failed, and state police and national guardsmen stormed Attica, killing forty three individuals, including ten hostages.

The media frenzy surrounding the uprising and its tragic aftermath are as much of a window into the times as the historical implications of the rebellion itself, with mainstream news outlets offering competing versions of the events--often at the expense of the inmates, and general objectivity. However, the late 1960s through the mid-1970s saw resurgence in the creation of independent media outlets and guerilla filmmakers who offered alternative accounts of popular narratives. The uprising at Attica served as a launching point for several advocacy groups, in both the social and filmmaking worlds. The films the group have chosen to focus on are Third World Newsreel's *Teach Our Children*, and a group of interviews conducted by Portable Channel; both are non-profit film and video organizations dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge for the general public (albeit while conforming to their own specific mission statements).

Teach Our Children, a film directed by Christine Choy and Susan Robeson and produced by Third World Newsreel (TWN) in 1972, is a 35 minute long manifesto distributed in 16mm that treats the Attica rebellion as a springboard to discuss larger socio-economic and political forms of injustice, not only in the state of New York, but in the world at large.

On the other hand, the Portable Channel videos the group obtained focus primarily on providing an in-depth analyses of the prison uprising itself through interviews with William Kunstler (a civil rights lawyer and self-proclaimed "radical" who defended the inmates against charges brought to them by the state), Reverend Sinclair Scott (a member of the negotiating team that went into Attica), Herman Schwartz (a law professor at the State University of New York Buffalo who testified on the New York State Commission on the Attica rebellion in April 1971), and an interview with two former prison inmates. The total running time for all four videos is approximately 80 minutes, and they were shot on ½" portable equipment.

The purpose of this paper, and the group's project, is to provide an overview of each film, explore the different ways in which they approach essentially the same subject and their

social functions, observe the key players and the impetus behind producing the works, and finally to compare and contrast the inception of each organization, their distribution plans (if any), and how the films are currently being preserved and archived. Both TWN and Portable Channel were a culmination of the experimental filmmaking movements of the 1960s, as well as the autonomous, guerilla-like sensibility which sought to provide different perspectives on important social issues. Thus, the paper will attempt to contextualize the films and the production companies in lieu of the social / political events surrounding their origins, and analyze the efforts currently being made to conserve them.

Teach Our Children

Third World Newsreel was originally part of Newsreel, an organization established in 1967 with the intention of producing primarily newsreels and “agit-prop” films reflecting the ideas of the New Left. The organization had formed various chapters in San Francisco, New York, Ann Arbor, Detroit, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, and Los Angeles, but the activists who formed these collectives had differing political aims and came from disparate backgrounds, and this factionalism became more obvious with the onset of the seventies (Smith, 45). The members eventually splintered between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots,’ where “the haves used a Steenbeck to edit with and the have-nots were stuck with an old Moviola” (Smith, 45). Of all the collectives formed in the late sixties, only the New York and San Francisco chapters survived, and each named themselves New York Newsreel and California Newsreel, respectively.

However, the official split in New York Newsreel itself did not occur until some of its members began to actively recruit people of color to participate in production--until that point, most of the members were primarily white, male, and from middle-class backgrounds, and minority representation was virtually nil (James, 218). Tensions finally reached a boiling point when dissent amongst the members arose with the decision to create a film about the Attica prison rebellion. Most of the original members began to leave New York Newsreel, and it is in this context in which the shooting of *Teach Our Children* began.

Only about three members were left in New York Newsreel at this time, amongst them Susan Robeson (who has half-black), and Christine Choy (a Chinese-born architect). The filming of *Teach Our Children* can be viewed as a culmination of the ideological conflicts plaguing Newsreel at this point, and the members’ struggle to adhere to, and eventually alter, the organization’s mission statement and filmmaking style. At this point, Newsreel was an effective propaganda machine that produced solidly straightforward work which belied the political

urgency their films conveyed (Smith, 45). But the members' call to integrate Third Cinema techniques into Newsreel's practice, as well as raise consciousness about global issues were explicitly made in *Teach Our Children* (Young, 146). The film was the last ever produced before the establishment regrouped and became Third World Newsreel, and perfectly reveals Newsreel's political direction and its role in media activism at that time.

It is worth noting, however, that the exact reasons behind making *Teach Our Children* remain unclear. Via the group's online "interview" with Choy, the filmmaker reveals that the project was assigned to her and Robeson "by the so-called Central Committee of Newsreel," and she implies that her personal stake in the subject matter was not as high as the film's passionate war cry makes it seem. Yet *Soul Power*, a book that devotes several chapters to the inception of Newsreel and its eventual transformation into Third World Newsreel, offers different perspectives from several surviving members who argue that the making *Teach Our Children* was mainly Choy's and Robeson's idea. Because of the very personal nature of the group's disbanding in 1972, an objective account of the reinvention of Newsreel has been hard to find. Ultimately, what we have been able to infer from all the resources culled for this assignment is that *Teach our Children* was in fact made under the auspices of Newsreel, but its making served as the final nail in the organization's coffin since it offered the impetus for the members to disband, regroup, and eventually rename themselves Third World Newsreel (Choy herself had taken over the organization and given it its new name).

Teach Our Children is a 35 minute film shot in black-and-white on 16 mm, and edited with a Moviola--since the two remaining members were part of the "have-nots," they had to make due with exceptionally older equipment. Both Choy and Robeson had very little filmmaking experience, and this contributes to the "roughness" of the finished piece. They had sought training from some of Newsreel's former members, but due to the considerable hostility still remaining, Choy and Robeson ultimately found little cooperation from the "haves" (Young, 173-180). Technical expertise aside (or lack thereof), the film is surprisingly energetic, humorous, and provides a powerful indictment of both living conditions faced by minorities in the U.S., as well as the economic strife faced by third world peoples.

Teach Our Children offers a startling amalgam of newsreel footage culled from various news outlets and other independent filmmakers¹, personal interviews, and cartoons set to a soul

¹ In the group's interview with Christine Choy, she mentions that the scene with the D-yard assault was actually filmed by Larry Bullard, a cameraman for the local TV station.

and gospel inflicted soundtrack that retell the events of the Attica prison rebellion. The film begins with scenes of children playing in the streets, followed by an interview with Carlos, a middle-aged Puerto-Rican man who sits in a crumbling New York apartment, surrounded by his wife and several children. An ex-convict, he contends that third world peoples' civil rights are routinely violated once they are arrested--interestingly, it does not seem as though Carlos served his hard time in Attica, and if he did, the film does not spell this point out for its audience. Whether or not the people Choy and Robeson interviewed had any direct involvement with the Attica uprising is inconsequential since the film's main concern is to link the conditions at Attica--overcrowding, police brutality, labor exploitation--with the conditions in poor black and Latino communities. *Teach Our Children* does not focus solely on the events of the rebellion, but instead attempts to explore its larger socio-political and economic implications. This explains the film's seemingly disjointed ending, which shows footage of protestors taking the streets inter-cut with images of struggles in Vietnam, Latin America, and elsewhere.

About 20 minutes into the film, an interlude consisting of cartoons of Richard Nixon, a map of the U.S., and a scowling Uncle Sam are presented--this is the first instance in which the group's attempt to appropriate Third Cinema technique is made obvious. The influence for this scene is the work of Cuban documentarian Santiago Alvarez, whose "eclectic mix of original and found footage, cartoons and still images, the strategic alternation of color and black-and-white images, and [a] judicious selection of music" (Young, 173) had a vital impact on Newsreel members. The cartoons were drawn by Choy herself on transparent paper, and she shot it frame by frame.

By April 1972, the making of *Teach Our Children* was completed, and Choy had taken over Newsreel and renamed it Third World Newsreel. However, the film would not be distributed for theatrical release until 1973 since the members experienced numerous problems such as equipment theft, eviction from their offices, and increasing debt (James, 218). Eventually the film was shown at local art house theatres later that year (Georgakas, 47)--interestingly, Choy and Robeson never had a specific audience in mind besides fellow revolutionary media workers and leftist activists, although they did screen the film in some community centers in and around the New York area.² Regardless, it can be said that the film did enjoy a somewhat wider audience than the typical left-wing experimental / newsreel-type of film since TWN's distribution unit was still in place. Soon after filming was completed, *Teach Our Children* was bought by Dutch TV³

² Christine Choy interview.

³ The group has been unable to find more information about this network, which Choy mentions in her

and won a prize at the International Black Film Festival in Philadelphia (to which neither Choy or Robeson were invited, since they were not black).

Although much of the film is made up of stock footage, interviews gathered from news sources in Buffalo, and plenty of songs by Curtis Mayfield and Tim Hardin, none of this “outside” material is credited. Actually, like all of the films produced by Newsreel / Third World Newsreel at the time, the film simply ends with the sound of a machine gun, and there are no credits. Consequently, the filmmakers’ names are not listed on the film, which has since affected its distribution rights. According to Choy, neither herself nor Robeson had any specific plans for the film, and what happened to it in the immediate aftermath of its official release is not too clear. Many of Newsreel’s films initially landed in the archives of the University of Wisconsin since TWN was practically bankrupt at the time, and could not keep an archive. Apparently, Allan Siegel (the last white member of TWN, and Choy’s ex-husband), had tried to organize an archive for the collective, but he is unaware of what has happened after their shipment to the university.⁴ Somewhere along the line, the film showed up in the Pacific Film Archives of the Berkeley Art Museum and the University of California in Berkeley, California--apparently California Newsreel (which still had some copies of Newsreel films) and the University of Wisconsin donated the majority of its archives to PFA. TWN currently holds a VHS copy of the film, but not the original. Because the filmmakers did not include their names in the credit roll of *Teach Our Children*, they have refused to release the film back to Choy when she inquired about it for a talk she was giving at UC Berkeley in 2002. The film is currently being preserved by PFA, but the distribution rights are still up for grabs. According to Jonathan Kahana, a Cinema Studies professor at the Tisch School of the Arts⁵, PFA will most likely grant the distribution rights to California Newsreel instead of TWN since they have stronger ties with the former organization. TWN currently rents and sells copies of *Teach Our Children* on it’s website, but it would be interesting to see how the forthcoming changes will affect both the film and TWN’s distribution scheme.

Portable Channel Videos

Portable Channel was founded in Rochester, New York, in 1972 by Bonnie Klein, Gail Lyndon, David Christoff, Josh Kardon, Larry Gale, Sandy Rockowitz, and Mike Brisson. It was

answers to our questionnaire.

⁴ This is the information given to the group by Choy; we have been unable to find any other resources to corroborate her report on TWN’s agreement with the University of Wisconsin.

⁵ Professor Kahana will be presenting the film along with Professor Dan Streible at the 6th Annual Orphans Symposium this coming March, 2008.

formed as a non-profit film and video organization devoted to community service, and its mission was to develop television as a medium for social dialogue and artistic expression (Worden, 2).

The channel's development originates in the Media Equipment Pool, an establishment funded by the New York State Council in 1971 through an award to the Rochester Museum and Science Center. The ½“ portable equipment donated to the Media Equipment pool was meant to be used by local artists and community organizations, and was rented to them at a nominal fee.⁶ The projects ranged from “personal feedback experiences” (or home videos), to “political and cultural documentaries involving the schools’ crisis, police education, the Women’s movement, migrant farm workers, experimental films, and Attica” (Klein, 2). By the Spring of 1972, Portable Channel had incorporated the loaning practices of the Media Equipment Pool, separated from the Rochester Museum and Science Center, and became its own entity. Like Third World Newsreel, the group developed a proposal for training courses for community programming and cable channels, and even began to work on *Feedback:Feedforward*, a regularly published newsletter. Whether or not they were able to follow through with the actual implementation of their plans is hard to say; the little information remaining about Portable Channel seems to indicate that the network’s ongoing financial troubles hindered many of its goals. Unlike TWN, which has had better luck at reincarnating itself several times over the past few decades, Portable Channel was never able to overcome the obstacles facing it--this is due in no small part to the fact that it was primarily a very localized production company with virtually no distribution plan. Any such plan would have been unnecessary for Portable Channel since it did not conform to its mission statement, nor would it have been easy for their work to find a larger audience beyond the Rochester community. However, one cannot escape the feeling that if an alternate funding scheme were set-up, the channel would have survived for much longer than it did since it would not have had to rely solely on the monetary contributions of the state.

The Attica Correctional Facility is located in Attica, a small town right between Buffalo and Rochester. The uprising at the Attica prison became an issue of great importance to the entire country, but it is no wonder that the people of Rochester felt so unsettled by the events, and Portable Channel dedicated much of its efforts to documenting the rebellion. The group obtained four videos from Jonathan Kahana, a Cinema Studies professor at the Tisch School of the Arts, who in turn received the material from an archivist who used to work at the Rochester Museum and Science Center.⁷ The first video contained a 15 minute interview with William Kunstler, a

⁶ Contract written by Sanford Rockowitz, and sent to Chuck McConnell (4-5).

⁷ Professor Kahana could only remember that the archivist’s name was “Richard;” the group has been

civil rights lawyer who was called in on the negotiating team, and who later filed lawsuit on behalf of the prisoners. This tape is of particular interest as it begins with about three minutes of the crew trying to set-up the interview (at one point the camera is obviously set down on a table, and we see only the facing wall for a few seconds), and a visibly irritated Kunstler negotiating with the crew what he would like to say, and for how long he is willing to speak.

The second video had footage of Reverend Sinclair Scott, who was also on the negotiating team--the version the group saw was cut short at 8 minutes, but according to the Video Data Bank, the original running time was actually 30 minutes. The third video contained an interview with two Attica inmates, and the estimated running time was about 35 minutes long. Interestingly, one of the inmates interviewed was not present during the uprising and was released from prison prior to the event. The group has inferred from the interview, and from the other tapes viewed for this project, that they may have brought in that inmate to discuss the impetus behind the rebellion itself, and not necessarily to reiterate the events after they had already become public knowledge. But since the tapes were all cut-off abruptly at different points, it is hard to deduce the crew's exact intention for this work. Notably, the inmates are not presented as idealized heroes as in *Teach Our Children*; in fact, the interviewer continually questions their motives and the stories they tell about abuse at the prison. Despite the interviewer's (seemingly) relative inexperience with the interviewing format, the production produces a rather objective account of the rebellion with little (if any) editorial passages in the films. This is in keeping with the newsreel-style of the videos; they were clearly meant as a source of news for the local viewing public.

The final video contains a 22 minute interview with Herman Schwartz, another member of the negotiating team who also files lawsuits on behalf of the prisoners. The total running time for all four videos is approximately 80 minutes, and as was the custom for all Portable Channel projects, they were filmed using 1/2" portable equipment. One man conducted all the interviews, but we have been unable to locate any information about him--he might be Sandy Rockowitz, one of the organization's founders, but we cannot tell for sure. All the videos are shot in black and white, the footage is rather grainy, and they are clearly unedited rough cuts. Also, each interview was cut-off rather abruptly--Professor Kahana is unsure if a complete and edited version of these films exist. It would be interesting to find out exactly how these videos were shown, and their condition upon the initial release. Unfortunately, we have been unable to track down further information about the Attica tapes, beyond the fact that they were all most likely shown on the

unable to locate any information for him--he probably no longer works at the museum.

Rochester-based PBS affiliate WXXI-TV, Channel 21.

In stark contrast to *Teach Our Children*, and many of TWN's earlier films, no real effort has been made to preserve and archive the videos, mainly due to a lack of patronage. All of Portable Channel's archives now reside at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, but they do not seem to be collected in any meaningful manner. Our consistent attempt to contact someone who knows anything about the Portable Channel videos, and the Attica interviews in particular, have proved fruitless. This can only mean that no concrete effort has been made to catalog the organization's tapes, which is, needless to say, unfortunate.

Portable Channel officially closed its doors in October 1987. Numerous changes in staffing and directorship, constant reductions in NYSCA funding, poor record keeping, changes in its goals and mission statement, and an ill-advised renting scheme (where the heavily debited organization tried to buy more expensive and up-to-date equipment, hoping to increase its' revenue from loans) all contributed to the eventual demise of Portable Channel.

While *Teach Our Children* offered a fascinating look not only into the radical politics of the time, but also into the tensions and frustration amongst the members of Third World Newsreel, the Portable Channel videos were equally intriguing: on the one hand, the interviews are similar to home videos, with little of the professional polish we have come to expect from media / news outlets (be they corporate or independent). But on the other hand, the service they provided to the Rochester community should not be underestimated. The promise of independent media outlets such as Portable Channel--and its more radical counterpart, Third World Newsreel--lies in the possibility of an entirely independent entity completely devoid of commercial influence. Granted, the internet has made the dissemination of information rather easy, and usually free of big-money influence. But it is only a matter of time before websites are eventually swallowed hole by various corporations. It is for this reason, and for the importance of preserving all historical documents, that the archives of Portable Channel find some sort of patronage. Most of the experimental television videos produced during the late sixties and early seventies have been archived on websites such as Radical Software, but Portable Channel is not one of them. As the general public begins to realize the importance of preserving and conserving our visual heritage, and more funding is secured for the undertaking of such projects, perhaps the work of radical filmmakers and producers of independent media outlets will not be forgotten.

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