Participatory Media: Lessons from the 1960s
—Zoë Druick

In trying to puzzle through the relationship of different cultural forms to social and political contexts, I find myself repeatedly returning to the work of Raymond Williams. In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams famously characterizes "forms and conventions in art and literature as inalienable elements of a social material process: not by derivation from other social forms . . . but as social formation of a specific kind which may in turn be seen as the articulation (often the only fully available articulation) of structures of feeling which as living processes are much more widely experienced" (133). In his habitually dense and evocative way, Williams here attributes to cultural forms an organic and intrinsic connection with living processes—everyday life. As to method, he suggests that cultural critics must try to trace the structures of feeling articulated in these material forms while bearing in mind that there is a non-determinative relationship between social forms, aesthetic forms, and structures

of feeling. Articulations specific to one particular historical moment do not last indefinitely; social and aesthetic forms are ultimately independent and may shift alignments over time.

In my work on the history of reality-based forms such as documentary, I have been intrigued by the way in which the concept of participatory media emerges as one of the key social and aesthetic formations of the 1960s' "structure of feeling." It can be said to be, perhaps, a representative semantic figure of the decade. No doubt this is in part a result of new technologies, but I would argue that in that period the human aspect of "communication"—another buzzword of the era—tended to take rhetorical precedence over the technological. As I will argue in what follows, this is a difference that makes a difference. In less than half a century, participation has become commodified and fetishized in the form of digital interactivity. Put simply, to have your hands on some equipment is often

treated as more significant than what you plan to do with it. The result can be clichéd forms, anti-aesthetics, and, one might argue, an impoverished democratic imaginary as well. (For instance, participation on YouTube tends to take one of two forms: mash-ups of glossy corporate culture or hand-held video logs with low production value). What might it mean to return to the examples of the 1960s in order to look again at the concept of participation at a moment before the hegemony of commodified communication (what Jodi Dean calls "communicative capitalism" [2]) that we witness in today's contemporary culture? In this brief offering, I reflect on three examples from the 1960s of media that involved ordinary people and their lives and that were meant to provoke social and political reflection. I use these texts to try to tease apart what is particular to the term "participatory media" that distinguishes it from other related ideas.

Over the years, the term "participatory media" has been heard in conjunction with a series of cognate ideas, including activist media, citizen journalism, witness video, community video, and amateur media. Each of these terms has a distinctive historical and sometimes political valence. The upshot of all of these ideas, however, is the implication that the media—whether they are characterized as mainstream, dominant, or industrial—are run by elites to serve the agendas of large corporations and therefore cannot be used to convey truly, radically democratic purposes.

Even public media have long been tarred by their connections to sponsors, both corporate and state, as unable truly to represent the people in whose name they were established and are, in theory at least, maintained.

Leaving aside the fact that these criticisms may well be accurate, they seem to leave little rhetorical power to fight for public media institutions on different terms. Whether or not we are content to toss the fate of democratic communication in with desktop technologies is a question that cannot be answered here. But the current configuration of digital "participation" is a disappointing one. The Internet displays a vast outpouring of amateur snippets, the equivalent of public photo albums, and the proliferation of performative self-surveillance, very little of which might qualify as "democratic" media, with that term's implication of seeking more equitable ways to communicate and to live. It might fit under the rubric "amateur," a field of studies just coming into its own. However, as with most amateur work, there is a notable lack of resistance to dominant media and family arrangements to be seen in much digital creativity. This fact should be central to our assessments. People do not necessarily reach for cameras to make politically rebellious or experimental work.

I would like to reserve the term "participatory media" for a different purpose. It presumes an intention

of sharing, in a strong sense of contributing to some common project. This prompts the question: What would participatory media texts that attempted through their very form to model a democratic way of being look like?

In the remainder of this essay, I'd like to sketch three experiments with media and participation that might challenge the current emphasis on interactivity that typifies digital capitalism. The examples are from the 1960s, when hand-held 16 mm film technology with synchronized sound was new and portable video was just beginning to emerge. The examples all involve professional filmmakers offering people a way to participate in experiments facilitated by audiovisual technologies. The experimental ethos is intimately connected to the democratic yearnings of each project.

The first example I'd like to give is of the work of British filmmaker and activist Peter Watkins. A young anti-nuclear protester in the 1950s, Watkins was passionate in his belief that people needed to become less apathetic about the reality of global weapons of mass destruction and to call their governments to account for Cold War policies that put them—and their counterparts in the Soviet world—in grave danger. His innovative strategy was to develop a type of filmmaking in which he involved ordinary people as participants in anti-war and anti-imperialist projects. His first two films, *Culloden* and *The War Game*, were made for the BBC in 1964 and 1965, respectively. *Culloden* used members of amateur historical societies to replay the last battle fought between the indentured Scottish farmers led by Charles Edward Stuart and the English army, a Jacobite slaughter on the fields of Culloden. The battle, which took place in 1746, is an ingenious way for Watkins to make links between imperialism on the shores of the United

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Kingdom and postcolonial wars going on two hundred years later in Africa and in Asia. In a final hard-hitting voice-over, spoken by Watkins over images of destitute highlanders, he makes clear the continuity of strategies of enclosure, displacement, conversion, and warfare that have paved the way for the expansion of the global marketplace for centuries.

Given Watkins's vision of history, his decision to use ordinary people to play out this drama of exploitation is even more compelling. Each actor researched a particular person so that all of these voiceless extras on the world-historical stage had names and stories. Watkins innovated the use of the style of television reporting in docudrama not only to lend a sense of immediacy, but to ask the actors about their characters' motivations and reactions. Before, during, and after heated battle scenes, soldiers and officers alike are asked in the film for their perspectives on the conflict by an unseen on-the-spot television reporter.

Watkins went on to make an even more overt condemnation of warfare in *The War Game*. Using ordinary people again, this time enacting the probable aftermath of nuclear war in England, Watkins again raised the questions of citizens' complicity—sometimes because of apathy—with geopolitical forces that might prove catastrophic. As with *Culloden*, Watkins combined the on-the-spot style with what is in effect a community education project. A very similar sentiment can be found in his most recent major work *La*

Commune (2000), a sprawling five-hour video in which amateur actors re-enact the events of the famous 1871 Paris uprising and democratic experiment. Even more than the earlier films, this video gives extensive space for participants to reflect not only on their characters' actions in the scenario being re-enacted, but also on parallels between issues of power, economics, gender, and race in present-day France. Through ingenious direction and thought-provoking editing, including the addition of on-screen text indicting the complicit silence of the media to present-day social injustices, Watkins is able to make these experiments in public education and participatory media extremely engaging to watch, something that is not always the case for community media experiments. By telescoping history in this way, Watkins clearly demonstrates his points about the limits of the mainstream media to explain historical events. Through his participatory ethos, he is able to model the democratic difference in media production he would like to see.

My second example is Allan King's use of the camera as a catalyst in his 1969 film *A Married Couple*. In this experiment in participation, King enlisted a real Toronto couple, Billy and Antoinette Edwards, and their young son Bogart, and asked them to live out their marriage on a daily basis in front of the camera during the summer of 1968. Bogart, only 2½ at the time of shooting and still only partially verbal, provides an at times comic counterpoint to his

parents' antics; viewers are left to speculate to what degree his emerging consciousness is being affected by his parents' narcissism and intermittent care. King and his film editor, Arla Saare, crafted what was shot into the final film, placing emphasis on emotional truth without regard to the order in which events may actually have occurred. The significant thing about this project is that the participants, including the filmmaker, were interested in the role the camera might play in stimulating a heightened intensity in the relationship through which something might be learned about themselves. The film took elements of observational cinema dominant in the 1960s and combined them with ideas prevalent in therapeutic discourse about finding emotional truths through the process of "acting out" (for more on this film, see Druick).

In the same way that Watkins asked people in his films and in his audiences to think about their own relationships to war and to political violence, King asked his participants and his audience the question that was paramount to him: why is intimacy so difficult? I posit that his approach, in which he himself was implicated through his relations of trust with his participants, steers clear of exploiting his actors even though we see them in a range of intimate and unguarded situations. The film's title is a clue that King was interested in the type of relationship that many adults find themselves in, rather than the individuals as such. The film thus demands that its audience become

full-fledged participants in the question about what makes relationships work and why they break down. Bringing a camera into the home to film life unscripted was, at that time, still a risky and provocative act. King boldly used film to explore the silences and social taboos surrounding the most ordinary thing in the world: domestic life. Seen in this light, *A Married Couple* provided a new perspective on the failed democratic yearnings of participants in the institution of marriage. For instance, in a candid encounter that is presented at the end of a lengthy, serious fight near the conclusion of the film, the couple discuss their married state:

> BILLY. You don't want to be married.
> ANTOINETTE. No, I don't.
> BILLY. You can't have it all. . . . The framework isn't the problem. The laws of society are not the problem in this marriage. The problem is you and me.

Throughout the film, we witness the struggles of a couple confused about how to achieve a satisfying, egalitarian relationship in the face of changing social mores and institutions.

My third and final example is the most famous participatory experiment of the 1960s, the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle (CC/SN) program at the National Film Board of Canada. The program was a bridge between professional filmmakers and

community activists, between filmmakers and videomakers, and between works made for mainstream television and works made for closed-circuit screenings in communities. In all of the films and videos, the goal was to put a face on the social issues of poverty and inequality that plagued Canada then as now. *VTR St-Jacques* is an illustration of an activist film: it reveals the bridge between two different streams within the program by using film to document the use of video. As with many other CC/SN films, *VTR* sets up the "culture of poverty" issue and points out that progressive politics must work to give the poor something they do not have: the power to control their lives. In a report on the film from the time, the directors made the link between film and democracy explicit:

> The videotape recording (VTR) project in Saint-Jacques is an attempt to extend to its logical conclusion the conviction that people should participate in shaping their own lives, which means among other things directing and manipulating the tools of modern communication necessary to gaining and exercising that participation. . . . Their experience with video—conceiving, shooting, editing and presenting their own programs—made the citizens particularly aware of the myth of objectivity in mass media reporting and sensitive to conscious and unconscious manipulation. They have become a less gullible public. (Klein and Hénault 24–25, 31–32).

Filmed in an impoverished francophone neighbourhood of Montreal, people on the St-Jacques committee use the video equipment supplied to them by the NFB to clarify their own positions on issues that affect them. This clarification enables them to approach

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people on the street and to generate interest—and possibly larger membership—in their group. Interviewing people coming out of welfare agencies, the citizens committee finds white men angry at the government but also at immigrants and women for having jobs they perceive as rightfully theirs. The film thus addresses the uncomfortable issue of rifts within the working class. After one VTR screening shown in the film, the topic of conversation among the citizens is inadequate housing. Although this is a state-funded project assessing a range of government welfare policies, its strength lay in its ability to provide a forum for a range of dissenting voices. Many of the participants were community activists and social workers in their twenties. Some of the films, such as Rex Tasker's *Halifax Neighbourhood Centre Project*, feature discussions with youth about their views about society. The Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle program is characterized by a variety of youth-led activisms that were prevalent throughout the 1960s.

These examples from the 1960s have some notable similarities. All were made with the participation of institutions—the BBC, CTV, the NFB—by professional filmmakers with a drive to engage ordinary people in the production process. All were social and aesthetic experiments—manifestations, I would argue, of a structure of feeling regarding participation in civic life. The films work from the premise that democratic impulses could be performed at the microlevel of the creation of aesthetic texts. These films function as documents of their own questioning and democratic striving, and their complex and innovative forms are a record of the close connections between aesthetic and social experiments of the decade. The participatory aspect of the projects was not limited to those making the films, but was also conceptualized as an invitation to an imagined spectator. This historically specific social formation of participatory media as publicly supported and funded and as inherently reversible, where the participant on-screen is simply a heightened version of the person watching, is redolent of a 1960s humanistic discourse of communication in which technology could be utilized for and, in theory at least, subordinated to democratic ends. Technologies have changed and access to production and dissemination is today exponentially greater. Such media productions, however, retain the potential to imagine a democratic public and to attempt through this act of imagination to bring one into being, even if this, an earlier form of participatory media, is all too rarely seen today.

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