# On the Reinvention of Video in the 1980s

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It was when Thatcherism and Reaganism were at their peaks, so that influenced the way everybody thought and talked about everything. There was definitely a sense that you weren’t alone. You knew you were part of something.

(Jeremy Welsh, *Rewind* interview[[1]](#endnote-1))

The opening broadcast of Channel 4 on 2 November 1982 can serve as a signpost. On the one hand, as others in this collection have noted, the new service would open up new opportunities for video art in the broadcast arena. At the same time, Channel 4 was a flagship in the large-scale overhaul of television undertaken by the Thatcher government, which had come to power in 1979. In a series of landmark policy initiatives which included the Cable and Broadcasting Act of 1984 and the Peacock Commission on financing of the BBC (1985–6) culminating in the 1990 Broadcasting Act, the Conservatives separated the production and distribution functions of terrestrial channels, requiring them to buy in a minimum of twenty-five per cent of their programming from independent contractors. The multi-channel future arrived with the widespread dissemination of direct broadcasting by satellite, while the old hegemony of the BBC and ITV companies was broken up in favour of a competitive landscape. The process caused much heart-searching. The Old Left had long accused television of being the mouthpiece of the ruling class. Now they found themselves trying, in the words of one commentator, to defend the indefensible. It was a quandary quite typical of the Thatcher years.

Old hopes for revolution, whether political or aesthetic, were largely dashed by the apparent triumph of the new Conservatism. Old faiths and old strategies crumbled in front of the innovative if destructive drive towards a monetarised, free-market vision of a share-owning citizenry, no longer tied to the apron strings of the ‘nanny state’. Old satirical clichés about Auntie BBC were suddenly turned into political attacks on its public service remit, in parallel with assaults on the welfare state, all couched in the language of privileged childhood that the new competitive environment would force us to grow out of. It was in this climate that some of the hallmark styles of the 80s came into existence: synth-pop, Blitz kids, the typographic aesthetic of Neville Brody’s designs for *The Face*.

But perhaps the most significant act of the Conservatives in the 80s was the deregulation of the London Stock Exchange, which took effect on 27 October 1986. The ‘Big Bang’ removed constraints on who could trade, introduced 24-hour trading, and linked finance capital directly to the high-speed computer networks which have provided the global infrastructure for global capital ever since. In conjunction with a move from direct to indirect taxation, which hurt manufacturing and increased unemployment dramatically in the early 80s, this move created not only the terms for a new mode of globalisation, but the conditions for the ascendancy of finance over the old manufacturing and newer service industries, and the consequent arrival of a new class of wealthy speculators, a boom in London property prices, and a culture of easy money and entrepreneurialism.

At the same time, the new wealth was concentrated in London and, despite creeping gentrification, among a small part of London’s population. Intense regionalisation of wealth in the capital city, collapsing pubic services, assaults on the old trades unions and mass unemployment created a climate of despondency, only exacerbated by the Conservatives’ continuing electoral success. For many video practitioners this would provide the anger that fueled such remarkable projects as the *Miners Campaign Tapes*, drawing together workshops across the country in support of the National Union of Mineworkers’ strike actions of 1984–5.[[2]](#endnote-2) Chris Reeves and Lin Solomon of Platform Films in London and Stuart McKinnon of Trade Films in Newcastle were among the founders of the project. They represented a new organisational structure that had come into being with the birth of Channel 4: the franchised workshops. These were grant-aided cooperative ventures dotted across the country (eventually there would be a total of twenty-five of them by the late 80s) supported with revenue (rather than project) grants through an agreement signed between Channel 4, the film and television union ACTT, the regional arts associations and the Independent Filmmakers’ Association (IFA). Unionisation drew many film and video makers not only the financial security of being able to broadcast their products, but a working environment closely involved with the unions at a time of crisis.

Many video centres outside London, such as Cardiff’s Chapter Workshop, were primarily concerned with promoting a radical television model, where the central characteristic of video was its cheapness, its ease of use, and therefore its openness to allowing communities to produce their own ‘television’. Some of these groups came in under the Workshop agreement, providing guaranteed wages and autonomy from commissioning agencies. Others, like Liverpool’s Open Eye, the Leicester Film Collective, and the East Anglia Filmmakers Coop, did not, and survived in the same way that they had before the Declaration. Nonetheless, the Workshops did finally receive recognition from the union of what then Deputy General Secretary Roy Lockett called ‘the cinema of social practice’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The *Miners Campaign Tapes* were a particular result of this movement. They also reflected the history of video as not only an artistic but also a campaigning medium, as it had been in some of its earliest uses, by Sue Hall and John ‘Hoppy’ Hopkins in support of squatters’ activism in 1968–9. In cities like Manchester, Cardiff and Liverpool, video meant activism, as indeed it did for many of those who trained with Hall and Hopkins’ Fantasy Factory facility, and went on to work in the community sector and in development. The *Tapes* were particular for two reasons. Firstly, the urgency of their production, shared by participating workshops, in the heat of ‘the longest epic of collective resistance in the annals of British labour’;[[4]](#endnote-4) another campaign tape of the time, made by video crew from Nottingham, was called *Get It Shown!* Secondly, the equally intense distribution they received through the National Union of Mineworkers and the network of support groups developed to raise funds and support for the strike. Though the best known of the activist video projects, the *Miners Campaign Tapes* were far from unique, and the model of activist video was both an integral part of the UK video scene and became a critical element of schools of development studies, such as the one based in the 80s at the University of Reading. As we will see, such issues were also visibly concerns of video art. Indeed, in the pages of *Screen*, a number of articles articulated the goals of the IFA and the kinds of aesthetic concerns (anti-narrative, anti-illusionistic, anti-ideological) which animated at least some sections of the art sector. But there was nonetheless a blurred yet effective distinction between the video art world and the world of video activism.

For artists, few of whom were members of franchised workshops, a complex set of reactions began to take form, fueled by the arrival of new digital equipment. The radicalism of the Film Coop avant-garde seemed alienating, and while political sympathies were common to artists and activists, artists began to look not for negations of contemporary popular culture – as the *Miners Campaign* tapes were bound to, in reaction to often deeply biased news coverage. The loose current of renewed populism known at the time as post-modernism had a subtle, sometimes invigorating influence. The problem arose from the concern that new ideas could not necessarily be poured into familiar forms. Jeremy Welsh caught the mood in a reflective essay for *Undercut*: ‘The over-riding effect of television – a kind of tautological democracy – is a process of evening out … Although it is possible to intervene, to introduce new ideas or alternative viewpoints, the context somehow militates against the efficacy of content.’[[5]](#endnote-5) Populism was, Welsh observed, at once a way of escaping from the ‘cultural ghetto’ and a way of moving into the media in order to critique them. Most of all, the post-modern populist turn meant that video was no longer bound to its own frame, the medium specificity critiqued in this collection by Emile Shemilt; it was open to its multiple, changing and inter-relating contexts.

The phrase ‘cultural ghetto’ is perhaps especially poignant. Much work of the 60s – from Beuys to Youngblood’s *Expanded Cinema*[[6]](#endnote-6)– had sought to extend creativity beyond the walls of the gallery, but without necessarily abandoning the attempt to take control of gallery-type spaces. By the 80s, the philistinism espoused by Thatcherite government, along with the old boys network of the Stock Exchange, had launched a right-wing anti-elitist attack on the Governors of the BBC, again putting the Old Left on the back foot, unable either to defend the outgoing order, or to welcome the new. Welsh’s essay is caught in this dilemma, ending with the observation that ‘the Post Modernist idea of Populism will either result in a further de-specialisation of cultural production, or it will simply deliver up another load of willing compliants to the waiting arms of the media industry.’[[7]](#endnote-7)

Welsh’s own move was towards a brilliantly superficial art of constant change, packed with references to the media and popular culture, mimicking the kinds of flips, rolls and tumbles that had begun to pour out of infographic and music video edit suites in the early 80s. With *I.O.D.*, whose title evoked simultaneously the universal debtors’ language of the IOU and a premonition of information overload as ‘I overdose’, Welsh moved towards what Chris Meigh-Andrews has described as a pre-digital medium: ‘it was absolutely non-digital. The piece was produced by projecting 35mm slides on to sheets of rotating cardboard, shooting it with a video camera and then re-scanning it off a monitor.’[[8]](#endnote-8) Unlike the news programs with their shiny presentations of pie charts and swingometers, Welsh’s work eschewed the apparent depth of meaning, grasping instead the phenomenal surface, the sheen under which there lay only the pretense at meaning.

< Fig 8.01 Jeremy Welsh, *I.O.D.*, 1984 >

That slippage of meaning was one of the great discoveries of scratch video, a loose grouping of artists and activists in the mid-80s which ranged from self-consciously artistic montages to political satire. Gorilla Tapes (Gavin Hodge and Jean McClements of the Luton 33 Video Workshop with Jon Dovey and Tim Morrison), formed in 1984, used found footage to create short, funny political clips inspired in part by the cut-up techniques pioneered by Bryon Geesin and William S. Burroughs in the 60s. According to a group statement, ‘*Commander in Chief* reveals the true message behind the manufactured mediation of news and politics.’[[9]](#endnote-9) The idea of truth lying behind the surface of television had once been a marker of the Marxist theory of ideology. What seemed to happen here, however, was that the slippage between appearance and reality, once started, became a landslide. In other tapes collected in the anthology *Death Valley Days* (1985), the group posited an illicit affair between Thatcher and Reagan, pieced together from official footage of the American president’s state visit to the UK in 1984. If on the one hand, as Dovey noted in an article in *Screen* in 1986, the deft use of copyright to prevent broadcasts of the tapes seemed to indicate that the group had indeed struck a nerve, still the wedge they had pushed between televisual image and political reality also seemed to suggest that the reality might include the obviously fantastic (an affair between world leaders). The notion of a truth which could be revealed by intervening in the audiovisual flow seemed as unlikely as that the self-referential experiments of the previous generation might change television viewing habits. Reviewing the work of contemporary scratch artists, Catherine Elwes noted pointedly in the pages of *Independent Video*,

Some artists are now trying to make direct social comments with scratch. The Duvet Brothers for instance, cut together urban wastelands and well-fed conservative politicians. The pace is snappy and the images are well oiled by the inevitable disco soundtrack. We are left wondering whether to debate the evils of unemployment or get up and dance.[[10]](#endnote-10)

At the same time, however, as Clive Gillman recalls in his *Rewind* interview,

The National Video Festival would be showing a lot of work that was essentially single issue, politically generated video work alongside work by artists from around the globe. Often there was quite a lot of crossover. There were obviously a lot of artists for whom that was a very special attraction, who wanted to make works that did cross over between those genres, like Tina Keane and Sandra Lahire. They were making works that were fairly overt political statements at the same time as making works that were referencing contemporary art practice.[[11]](#endnote-11)

< Fig 8.02 Clive Gillman, *W.A.R. (Warning, Attack & Recovery)*, 1983 >

< Fig 8.03 Clive Gillman, *W.A.R. (Warning, Attack & Recovery)*, 1983 >

This political edge to both the scratch video and the wider video art scene in the mid-80s is very visible in Gillman’s early work *Warning, Attack & Recovery* *(W.A.R.)* of 1984.Originally prepared as an accompaniment to a performance, as a result of which there is a lengthy passage during which there is no activity on the video screen, *W.A.R.* uses extensive tracts of found footage, much of it of military hardware in action. But it opens with footage derived from family home movies, especially shots of children playing at the beach. In the third passage, following the militaria, a hand-held camera swoops through a tangled scene of greenery. Throughout, the liberal use of vision mixing provides a broad palette of video effects, which as with Welsh’s *I.O.D.* is suggestive of a pre-digital sensibility in the making. But where Welsh had embarked on a quasi-political critique of the capability of the media to address the political at all, Gillman placed his work in relation to the resurgent anti-nuclear ‘Protest and Survive’ movement of the early 80s.

< Fig 8.04 Tina Keane, *In Our Hands Greenham*, 1983 >

< Fig 8.05 Tina Keane, *In Our Hands Greenham*, 1983 >

That Cold War climate was very apparent in many of the works undertaken at the time, such as Tina Keane’s *In Our Hands Greenham*, another work making great use of vision mixing. Here Keane’s long-time fascination with play as a mode of expression linking people generally – but women in particular – back to ancient times and rituals, meets the demands of a campaign video. Established in 1981, the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp protested the siting of US Air Force Cruise missiles at the RAF base. Finally successful in 1991, the camp was a central experience for a generation of feminists, and a model of both peaceful protest and innovative use of the legal system to extend the grounds of protest. Keane’s tape used the motif of hands which she had already deployed in an early piece from 1974 called *Hands*. In the earlier tape, the hands suggested both the ancient and magic string game of cat’s cradle and the actions of weaving, an ancient women’s art remade by the Greenham women, who wove peace messages into the wire fences around the base. The hands form masks for the layered video images (though Keane also recalls projecting Super 8 footage onto Sandra Lahire’s hands to acquire effects), while the soundtrack replays recordings of singing, chanting, conversation and domestic sounds from the camp. At forty minutes one of the longer tapes of the period, the work used footage acquired by Keane and her collaborators at Greenham, but since the camp was extremely successful at attracting news interest, in many instances the effect was similar to that of the use of found footage by Gillman, the Duvet Brothers and Gorilla Tapes. But the hands motif altered the framing radically.

Hands seemed to be the most important thing, for the whole demonstration. We were holding hands around the fence. It was all about communication and hands and linking up… It wasn’t just the footage. It wasn’t of someone being there, it was about the link up. It was about how the hands represent all women around the world. I think about it, but nobody had ever really seen technology used like that … ‘Is this not just an ordinary film? How can I get the meaning and the experience of all these women who are round a huge diameter of fence that went for miles and miles and miles all holding hands?’ The videotape for me was a continuum of their hands.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Describing *In Our Hands Greenham* and the near-contemporary *Faded Wallpaper* as ‘process tapes in the uses of technology’, Keane discovered in the mid-80s the possibilities of video as a technology capable of multiplying the image track in ways that Super 8 film seemed not to allow, even though much of the imagery was generated in Super 8. Like Welsh’s inventive use of projections on spinning cardboard sheets, Keane’s improvisations using projections on hands secured the kind of complex layering of images associated with digital tools which only began to become available to video artists in the later years of the decade.

< Fig 8.06 Tina Keane, *Faded Wallpaper*, 1986 >

In this mid-80s period of technological experiment, the problematic relation of the image (and by extension soundtracks) to any kind of reality remained in dispute. It would be unfair to situate these artists as opponents or extremes on a scale. The politicised art of Keane and Gillman happily coexisted with Welsh’s more conceptual work, and all three had strong links with London Video Arts (LVA), the cornerstone institution for video production, and with the National Video Festival at the South Hill Park Centre in Bracknell, which became the key venue for exhibition and exchange from 1981 to 1988. The problematic was then less to do with any political division, or a division between politicised and apolitical, and more to do with different practices employed to convey the density and difficulty of making political video in the context of a hardening hegemony combining free market ideology with domestic repression, and a loss of Old Left bastions of public service like the BBC. Artist-run institutions like LVA and the National Video Festival were in certain respects responses to the loss of the older and stronger institutions founded on what felt increasingly like an outmoded belief in citizenship. The new groupings were of their nature more flexible and responsive. But in the problematic zone of political communication as an art practice, the critical problem was not intention or analysis but the problem of constructing and conveying meaning. The media landscape surrounding them appeared to have successfully completed a transition from public service and citizenship to consumerism and the celebration of triumphant capital. Central to the terrain which video artists operated on was the question of whether meanings could be anchored in their work, or whether the increasingly glossy surfaces of 80s television had successfully realised Baudrillard’s (1983) nightmare vision of a hyperreal so vast and coherent that it had eradicated reality. This problematic slippage of meaning was probably nowhere more apparent than in the influential scratch videos of George Barber.

Reflecting on the possible responses Jean Baudrillard might have had to the emergent video form, Barber noted:

he’d probably see it as the condensed version of an evening’s entertainment, the collapsed version, and he’d be right. Seeing things faster than they go in real life *was* Scratch – the same old impatience as that shared by Fillipo Marinetti, James Dean or, more contemporarily in Britain, the country-based BMW-driving lager lout.[[13]](#endnote-13)

In a similar vein, describing the fast editing made possible by the Sony Series V decks, Barber describes ‘the technical ability to reawaken memories of a shot just gone, a process so fast that you enter oblivion or, paradoxically, a *fast stasis* – life between edits, video that keeps referring back and back to itself.’[[14]](#endnote-14) The reference, appearing in an essay which also refers to the structural-materialist film of Peter Gidal, is strikingly at odds with the post-medium specificity moment which seemed to be the hallmark of the second-generation video artists of the United Kingdom. Yet the context haunted Barber throughout the decade, driving him to a vision of ‘the odd person still beavering away amidst the indiscriminate landscape of Post-modern Corporate Culture, swamped by a vast TV industry.’[[15]](#endnote-15) The welcome given to scratch by the industry at a landmark lunchtime session during the Edinburgh International Television Festival in 1985 was perhaps a warning. After years of neglect by the art world, corporate television was suddenly warming to video art. In a flier for the event preserved in the *Rewind* archive, Michael O’Pray poses an analogy with Pop Art, ‘which also re-appropriated the images of mass-commodities in Western society, both in an ironic and witty way and in a more critical and serious one’. The realisation that the techniques of scratch were so instantly recuperable by the industry was exactly what both Welsh and Elwes had argued, and yet the completeness of its assimilation still came as a surprise. For the most part, the movement was over within a year.

< Fig 8.07 George Barber, *Yes Frank No Smoke*, 1984 >

Yet it left behind some remarkable work, not least Barber’s *Yes Frank No Smoke*, which bears up extremely well with the digital generation of the early 21st century despite its almost exclusively analog production. The tape extracts a brooding tension around loss of innocence and broken communications from two rather undistinguished Hollywood films, *The Deep* (Peter Yates, 1977) and *The Blue Lagoon* (Randall Kleiser, 1980), the latter graced by the cinematography of Néstor Almendros. The success of the tape derives in equal measure from its own pre-digital aesthetic and from the immanent anxieties which inhabit its source material, and which it draws out into a palette of saturated primaries and moiré patterns. If the synthesiser and percussion score has the hallmarks of its period in musical taste, the mix of audio samples is still sprightly, the repetitions never quite meaning the same the second, third or fourth time around, not least as they return in more distorted forms later in the piece. Drawing on the mesmeric pleasures of contemplation which footage of water seems to have conjured up since the earliest Lumière Brothers films, *Yes Frank No Smoke* reduces drama to its binary poles, the thought-free attraction of colour in motion, and the tickle of an unspoken cultural nervousness. In its sheer generality, in the way it abstracts anxiety from either its causes or the people who are supposed to experience it, the tape approaches the abstraction of the digital.

< Fig 8.08 George Barber, collection of positive prints from a negative strip, including *Yes Frank No Smoke* video stills, 1984 >

Though experimental computer animation had begun in the UK in the 60s, and had attracted Malcolm Le Grice at the beginning of the 70s,[[16]](#endnote-16) it was not taken up in the video art scene until the end of the decade when John Butler (for example *World Peace Thru Free Trade*, 1989) and Richard Wright (for example *Superanimism*, 1988–91) began to work in digital formats whose political content drew them towards the same cultural ambit as video artists. As Richard Wright recalls, scratch

built up a visual language that articulated the oppositional energy of a whole social group. For the computer animators of the same time, a curious ‘funnelling’ effect took place instead. … their work became narrowed down on to a certain range of visualising increasingly identified with corporate conformity.[[17]](#endnote-17)

< Fig 8.09 John Butler, *World Peace Through Free Trade*, 1989 >

< Fig 8.10 Richard Wright, *Superanimism*, 1988-91 >

It was just such archetypally corporate associations which would fuel Butler and Wright in their expropriation of the smooth surfaces and geometric perfection of digital animation for a socially engaged parody. For the video artists, however, as in the case of Chris Meigh-Andrews’ *Interlude (Homage to Bugs Bunny)* of 1983, animation still meant the styles of Chuck Jones, in this instance re-edited to create a labyrinth of repetitive action punctuated by the addition of video zooms to the found footage. Meigh-Andrews notes at least four levels of action for the tape:

For me *Interlude (Homage to Bugs Bunny)* was important because it became ‘physical’, both because of the use of duration, which I had learned from the structuralist film-makers, and rhythmical because of what I had learned from listening to Reich. It was also nostalgic, because it referred to my childhood television viewing, and conceptually interesting to me because it referred to the ‘flow’ of programming which by now seemed to define the medium of television so specifically.[[18]](#endnote-18)

< Fig 8.11 Chris Meigh-Andrews, *Interlude (Homage to Bugs Bunny),* 1983 >

Though antedating scratch, Meigh-Andrews’ tape appeared in scratch contexts, adding to the variously critical or post-modern applications an articulation with structure, system and the material presence of the object which refers, among others, to the structural-materialist film work of LeGrice (for example *Berlin Horse* of 1970). For her part Catherine Elwes parodied scratch in her 1985 tape *Gunfighters*, in which her nephew and his playmate enact a violent game of shooting and dying, a game which she edits in the first part of the tape ‘how the boys wanted it to be – as much like telly as possible’. The cutting approximates to the scratch style, punning on ‘toys for the boys’ while at the same time portraying with something close to shock – in the second half of the tape the artist is heard repeatedly asking the boys why they play like this – the apparent inevitability of violence as an intrinsic part of male play. Such personal devices, whether Meigh-Andrews’ nostalgia for childhood or Elwes inquisition of childhood violence, while in certain senses prefiguring a digital aesthetic, were at the time remote from it in their manner of working and their emotional tenor, every bit as much as in their choice of tools.

< Fig 8.12 Catherine Elwes, *Gunfighters*, 1988 >

< Fig 8.13 Catherine Elwes, *Gunfighters*, 1988 >

It was perhaps the apparent affectlessness of Barber’s work that aggravated Elwes. Formalist abstraction, newly informed by systems theory, was centrally important to computer media at the time, including the organic geometries of William Latham, and similarly abstract forms in analog video, such as Peter Donebauer’s Videokalos synthesised imagery, were also displaced from the centre of the LVA culture. Thus Steve Hawley, characterising the new grammar of proto-digital edits (squeezes, flips, tumbles, lozenges, pixellations…) saw these effects as foregrounding the punctuating function of edits, like ‘a written sentence which consists only of elaborate commas and full stops’, noting that their extensive use in advertising parallels the advert’s function as a punctuation in televisual flow, accusing them of banality, and suggesting that, in using such effects, the US artist John Sanborn ‘has found a form of expression that mirrors Western society in the early 80s: its obsession with pace and technology matched by a jewel-like surface, which reflects much but remains opaque.’[[19]](#endnote-19) In context it is clear that this is not an achievement Hawley admired. It speaks indeed to Hawley’s own fascination with language, semantics and the generation of meaning in the interface between images and words, an exploration which raised in profound ways the problem of the slippage of meaning. In an analogue world, meanings proliferated. In a digital world, he implies, they not only proliferate but now no longer stick to reality or to the emotional life of audiences. Their surfaces are in fact vacuums.

On the other hand, such effects could become tools for a new mediation of campaign video, as in the case of Simon Robertshaw’s 1987 *Biometrika*, a single-channel tape which made the most of digital editing effects while analysing the relations between the disturbing history of British eugenics and a case of forced sterilisation upheld by the House of Lords in respect of a young woman with Down’s Syndrome. Here there was not only a parody of television news’ use of computer-generated graphics and edits, but more significantly an implicit argument that the use of digital, and therefore numerical, codes to structure imagery had a directly analogical or isomorphic relation to the disciplinary society of which eugenics was such a pernicious instrument. At a time when Foucault’s later work on biopolitics was only just beginning to be known in the UK, Robertshaw’s tape made a suggestive case that formal properties might not only serve the purposes of making new content newly visible: they might also serve the interests of power.

< Fig 8.14 Simon Robertshaw, *Biometrika*, 1987 >

In these debates over the value and meaning of technologies, the video artists of the 80s generation shifted the emphasis in the definition of video one more time. After the medium specificity derived from Greenberg’s modernist aesthetics, with Hall in particular there is a move towards thinking video as an alternative mode of television, a modality that allows and indeed encourages thinking of the medium in terms of its social and political responsibility. This is as true of Ian Bourne and Kevin Atherton as it is of Hoppy Hopkins or Gorilla Tapes. But in the pre-digital moment, there is a halt in the progressivist discourse. It is no longer a question of how to intervene in or replace television, nor one of rushing to secure access to the best equipment. In fact many artists, like George Barber and John Butler, did have access to such equipment, and later in the decade, as prices began to fall, artists like Judith Goddard secured access through educational institutions, notably Duncan of Jordanstone in Dundee.

But it was precisely at the point at which these tools, or their immediate forebears, began to be available that the doubts begin to be voiced. In one way, Pratibha Parmar’s experience is typical:

I remember watching it with the editor and couple of friends in the edit room on Three Machine U-matic Tapes. Now it sounds so archaic but at that point it was the highest video technology we could get. I had a Three Machine so I could do fades and dissolves and all those kind of things. It was very moving.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The available analogue machinery seemed capable of everything that both anger (against British racist attacks) and poetry could demand, and the edit-room experience was moving in itself, as well as for the content of the work at hand. In *Sari Red* (1988), Parmar creates an articulation of rage against the racist murder of South Asian woman Kalbinder Kaur Hayre with the sacred and the enduring in the form of blood and the sari of the title, in a tape which rhymes the scarlet splash of blood with the endlessness of the menstrual cycle, the vulnerability of a woman’s body with its holiness across times and borders.But if for Parmar three-machine editing was in itself a moving experience, for others the newer tools began to be seen as suspect, as replacing content with technique, of regendering video as a male technological preserve. In this way video was no longer pitched as not-film, or as not-TV, or even as not-traditional art, but as not-digital. This was a brief moment perhaps, coinciding with the emergence of sophisticated visual tools in the last generation of analogue editing, but is indicative of a peculiarity about the video culture of the 80s. This cannot be entirely bracketed as anti-commercialism. Too many of the active participants in the culture either worked with or expressed their enjoyment of popular mainstream culture for that to be the case.

< Fig 8.15 Prathiba Parmer, *Sari Red*, 1988 >

Indeed, such implications of popular and political cultures were rife in a number of works from the period, perhaps most notably in Isaac Julien’s 1983 *Who Killed Colin Roach*, his graduation work from Central St Martins where he had studied with Tina Keane. In this sharp documentary on the protests against the killing in custody of a young black man, street politics is skillfully mixed with the dub music of the Mad Professor, and Roach’s death seen as both a symptom of endemic racism and as the generator of intense creativity in protests against it. In later works like *This is Not an AIDS Advertisement*, Julien would also skillfully blend politics with style, grace and desire. Something similar could be said of John Scarlett-Davis, whose *Chat Rap* in many ways replicated the nightclub Blitz scene, but inflected it with a kind of passionate urgency that pitched gay love and the love of fashion against the moralising climate of Thatcher’s AIDS policies. Among the beneficiaries of the Workshop declaration, the Black Workshops, including Sankofa which Julien co-founded, tended to work in film: Black Audio Film Collective, Ceddo and Retake made work with varying degrees of avant-garde elements. The relation between art and activism came to the fore once more in this fraught ground. Of all people, the novelist Salman Rushdie launched a critical attack on Black Audio and Sankofa in the pages of *The Guardian* newspaper, while Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall among others replied with spirited defences of Sankofa and Black Audio’s demand for a new form for new content.[[21]](#endnote-21)

< Fig 8.16 John Scarlett-Davis, *Chat Rap*, 1983 >

While their work falls beyond the remit of the current research, it exhibits much of the cultural concerns of the video culture of the 80s: a clear political trajectory, and a willingness to experiment with complex layers of imagery, using superimposition within frames as well as montage between them, but eschewing the available digital tools. A sense of political urgency rather than any allegiance to documentary realism seems to have shaped the aesthetic decision-making. Ceddo and Retake both argued that the need to speak with the Black British and British Asian communities was more significant than formal experiment. Yet neither was dogmatic in this idea: they both pursued, respectively, documentary and narrative drama as communicative strategies, rather than as ethical or aesthetic imperatives. The struggle for racial justice in the UK which informed Pratibha Parmar and the workshops, as well as other individual videomakers like Peter Harvey, was open to documentary and art modes, to authorial and to community productions, and the crucial institutions of the culture like *Independent Media*, LVA and the Bracknell Festivals moved readily between modes, as indeed did tape makers themselves.

< Fig 8.17 Clive Gillman and St John Walker (as Nine Attrition Magic), *Saboten Boi*, 1988 >

< Fig 8.18 Clive Gillman and St John Walker (as Nine Attrition Magic), *Saboten Boi*, 1988 >

< Fig 8.19 Clive Gillman and St John Walker (as Nine Attrition Magic), *Saboten Boi*, 1988 >

< Fig 8.20 Clive Gillman and St John Walker (as Nine Attrition Magic), *Saboten Boi*, 1988 >

The central dispute between the pre-digital and the digital seems not to have been conducted at the level of signal, code, pixellation, sampling, the loss of fields or any other technical component of the two systems. Nor, in the cases of Gillman, Barber and Welsh in particular do they seem to have been based in reluctance to work within shots to edit elements. Gillman indeed, in his NLV tapes as well as his collaboration on *Saboten Boi* with Nine Attrition Magic, was a pioneer of non-linear editing and digital effects. No doctrine of documentary truth seems to have been in play. Instead, the core problem seems to have belonged to a cultural allegiance to a political direction. Among the people associated with LVA and the Bracknell video festivals there were many variations on this direction, far too many to allow the video culture of the 80s to be characterised as a coherent ideological platform. What does cohere, however, is a desire to maintain a certain gravity, a centripetal quality, to the meanings generated in often poetic, multi-accented, polyvocal and polysemic works. Pure abstraction of the kind explored earlier by Peter Donebauer, were a cause for anxiety as the innovative spritual or modernist drive became the materials for the simply replicable abstractions of mainstream effects editing. What may have been problematic in the specific form of digital abstraction was the proliferation of meanings beyond either the artist’s intention or the general field of ideological struggle in which individual pieces and the culture more generally sited themselves. Such was Elwes complaint, that some of the more proto-digital works of scratch left themselves so ambiguous that audiences did not know whether ‘to debate the evils of unemployment or get up and dance’. The debate then was not over analog and digital form, but over their characteristic functions.

It was undoubtedly the case, as the epigraph from Jeremy Welsh at the head of this chapter suggests, that this clinging to what may, even at the time, have seemed an outmoded form of political aesthetics, was the direct result of the way modernity, progress, technology and even hope itself had been seized upon by the political Right as their banner. The Good Life was described in every advert, in every political speech, and in the voting patterns of the decade, as the property of neo-liberal Conservatism. In retrospect, at least some elements of the aesthetics of 80s video art can be seen as nostalgic, not only in terms of the kinds of imagery recycled in works as diverse as Meigh-Andrews’ *Interlude* and Anne Wilson and Marty St James’ parodies of soap opera. It was nostalgic too for a poetic documentary tradition, for a vanguardist cause that might make the work of video genuinely public, not merely gallery art. In this sense it belongs to the kind of avant-garde tradition pinpointed in an influential book translated at the heart of the period in question, Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.[[22]](#endnote-22) Bürger argued that the ‘historical avant-gardes’ of the early 20th century had set themselves the task of healing the rift between the most modern art and the contemporary audience. This was also the task which much video art, and scratch especially, set itself, and it involved a hugely difficult tightrope walk between artistic excellence, political acuity, and populist vacuity or, worse, subsumption into the machinery of post-modern asignification. The previous attempt to hitch a political bandwagon to UK party politics, Harold Wilson’s ‘white heat of technological revolution’ promised by the incoming Labour Government of 1965, had caused, if anything, only anxiety about Big Brother. Thatcher’s grab for the glamour of electronic speeds in finance capital seemed on the contrary to seal for the powers of reaction the potentialities of digital graphics especially. In the field of work surveyed in the *Rewind* project during the Thatcher years, these topics return again and again.

The derivation of a politics from aesthetics and of an aesthetics from politics, with all the risks those paths bring, is perhaps in few tapes more apparent than *Prisoners*, a tape produced by Terry Flaxton while working on a documentary on the making of Ridley Scott’s famous *1984* commercial for Apple Computers. The ad was famous for a number of things. It was shown only once in the USA, in the most expensive slot available, half-time at the gridiron finals, the Rose Bowl. It was at the time one of the most expensive adverts ever made. It symbolised Apple’s Mac desktop computer as the alternative to IBM’s Big Brother approach, and the commercial dawn of the era of personal computing, desktop publishing and computer lib. All of these things, and yet, as the tape documents, it was cast with extras drawn from the fascist ultra-right of East End skinheads. ‘It seems as though the sheer weight of the image has overcome my intentions’, an intertitle says in block capitals, ‘One simple voice-over cannot regain the ground lost’. The documentary footage of preparations is split by scenes from the finished ad, the sound of voices by scrambling rollback on tape-decks, and the screen partitioned between a central rectangle in more or less true colour and a bounding frame where the footage is solarised into deep blue. The trappings of video art break up again first by a playback of the whole ad, and then by a cut-up of interviews with the skinheads, where the hatred is palpable.

< Fig 8.21 Terry Flaxton, *Prisoners*, 1984 >

< Fig 8.22 Terry Flaxton, *Prisoners*, 1984 >

What makes the juxtapositions so disturbing is the briefly flashed quote from Orwell’s novel, and its reference to the daily ritual of two minutes’ hate. This of course is what the ad portrays, with a colourful woman athlete storming in to destroy the screen. But for the extras, the oppression is visited on them as skins, not on the migrant communities they despise. They see themselves as the outcasts, even see capitalism as the enemy. But they are as alien to the resistant culture of 80s video as Thatcher’s cabinet. The tape ends with a run-through of the ‘making of’ documentary that was originally commissioned, and then returns to the same ominous words, silent and appalling: the year has come and gone and we still do not understand what it has meant. The emblematic power of the year, derived from Orwell’s novel, and echoed in the riot shields and batons of the fictional police of the advert’s mise-en-scene, chimes with the indefinite identification of the new world order of digital capitalism as revolution. The tape’s still-disturbing power comes from the collision of these forces: the glamour of the new machine, the satire of creeping Stalinism from *1984*, the police state emerging in Thatcher’s war with the enemy within, and the brutal resistance of the skinheads. That the same artist would, with Penny Dedman, encapsulate the decade’s work in the *Video* series for Channel 4, and go on to make some of the most subtle digital effects in *The World Within Us*, perhaps indicates something of the overall movement of the decade. A kind of consolidation, even if one achieved in a fragile ecology of festivals, screenings and publications, emerged around a common and largely unargued position on the left of British politics. At the same time a sense of the old poetic traditions of the British left, the left of Humphrey Jennings and Basil Wright perhaps, would constantly return, with almost nostalgic power.

Yet this was also the decade in which anti-racism and feminism became as much norms as the hatred for Thatcherism, and in which those movements constantly demanded fresh responses to newer and fiercer challenges. The old left had its last stand on the picket lines of the Miners’ Strike, with only a brief return to glory in the Liverpool Dockers’ Strike a decade later. With it went the old Labour Party, and with that the idea of parliamentary roads to socialism. In the Six Counties and in Scotland and Wales, older political movements began to meet the newer intellectual forces of post-colonial politics. It was in these terms that the struggle between digital and analog video were worked out. In many respects, the argument, now far more internationalised, has yet to reach a conclusion. The tensions certainly were not brought into any equilibrium in the 80s themselves. The digital would remain tainted by association with the brutal imposition of monetarist politics, the destruction of the Isle of Dogs, and the emergence of the Washington Consensus in the international political economy that would soon take on the name of globalisation. The Internet would take on much of the organising role of projects like the *Miners’ Campaign Tapes*, while the art world would embrace its high level of abstraction from the functioning of the web in the proto software art of Jodi and the beginnings of interactive hypertext. For a brief period there was a flowering of practice bringing together the craft skills of technological arts, the poetic sensibility of a young generation enamoured of both craft and embodiment, and a political trajectory or atmosphere that acted as a kind of moral guide to the judgement of work and to its making. Its dispersal as a cultural moment is a symptom of the beginning of a new period in British politics, a period of small-scale and local struggles, of brief alliances, of ubiquitous media but also of the ubiquitous resistance Flaxton’s tape begins to adumbrate. Everything resists everything else, and there is no centre. The distributed and ephemeral networks of the present may have nothing to learn from those times. But in terms of how to invent a political creative culture on the fly, they still reverberate, and still surprise.

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