

Documenting the Movement

CALIFORNIA NEWSREEL
REMAINS AT THE CENTER
OF SOCIAL CHANGE

BY CATHLEEN ROUNTREE



From Mark Kitchell's *Berkeley in the Sixties*, which is distributed by California Newsreel. Courtesy of California Newsreel

In 1968, as international socio-political movements thrived, the San Francisco Bay Area characterized the epitome of counter-cultural revolutions. Berkeley was rife with Civil Rights sit-ins, the Free Speech movement and anti-war protests. The Black Panther Party, founded in Oakland by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, struggled to promote civil rights and self-defense as it fed, clothed and educated underprivileged children. Across the Bay, a lengthy student strike erupted at San Francisco State, led by the Third World Liberation Front, which demanded an ethnic studies program and an end to the Vietnam War. Other escalating social issues included women's rights, gay and lesbian rights and nascent environmental concerns.

During these agitated times, California Newsreel emerged.

"A lot of people who were filmmakers at that time wanted to be part of the movement," says Larry Daessa, one of Newsreel's three co-directors (along with Cornelius Moore and Larry Adelman). "And so they formed collectives in various cities across the country in order to produce films, newsreels of the events of those times." These films and newsreels were then self-distributed, mostly to college campuses, organizations and activists.

From the beginning, the Newsreel group was highly political and went through the ideological struggles characteristic of the period. But after the end of the Vietnam War and the Black

Liberation movement, without events to photograph or events at which to screen the films, the organization swiftly dwindled to just four people. In 1974, "the two Larrys (as they are referred to in the Bay Area)," Daessa and Adelman, arrived. "I think the gross revenues were around \$16,000," recalls Daessa. "It wasn't self-sufficient or serving any substantial social goal. So it was obvious that the organization needed to reinvent itself because it couldn't continue on the same model."

For four decades, while surviving fluctuating sociopolitical climates and exponential technological advancements, and despite what Daessa calls "the great disillusionment of late 20th century progressive politics," Newsreel has continued to reinvent itself and, indeed, flourish as the quintessential paradigm of the social change media distributor.

The Newsreel Nonprofit

Today, Newsreel (www.newsreel.org) remains the largest nonprofit, social-issue documentary film center in the country, and it was the first to marry media production with contemporary social movements. Newsreel produces and distributes cutting-edge, social justice films that inspire, educate and engage audiences. The distribution branches include academic, theatrical and home DVD. However, Daessa admits, "We're not terribly interested in theatrical releases. *Black Gold* screened at 35 theaters, but only grossed \$80,000. It's doing much better on DVD. But

still, not many home video consumers saw it theatrically, so they don't know to buy it."

Newsreel's African-American Perspectives collection is a leading resource center for the advancement of racial justice and diversity and the study of African-American life, history and politics. The current catalogue of African-American titles includes *Black Panther* (San Francisco Newsreel, prod.; 1969); biographies of black writers and intellectuals W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin; *February One* (Rebecca Cerese, prod.; 2004), about the first lunch counter sit-ins of the Civil Rights movement; and a tenth anniversary commemorative DVD release of documentary filmmaker Marlon Riggs' trilogy: *Ethnic Notions*, *Color Adjustment* and *Black is... Black Ain't*.

The Library of African Cinema stimulates cross-cultural dialogue and political engagement, and includes 130 films from over 30 sub-Saharan countries, representing themes on women's issues, civil war, politics, anthropology, etc. Catalogue titles include *Afrique, je te plumerai*, by Cameroonian filmmaker Jean-Marie Teno, about the ongoing impact of neocolonialism on traditional African societies; *Faat Kine*, by master Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene, the story of a successful businesswoman who overcomes a lifetime of betrayal by men in her life; and *Everyone's Child*, from Zimbabwe's Tsitsi Dangarembga, which addresses the issue of the 10 million AIDS orphans on the African continent today.

Newsreel's educational initiatives include a series of study and facilitator guides for many of the titles, which can help contextualize a topic, provide approaches for teaching and inform the viewing of a film.

With an emphasis on the international division of labor, Newsreel recently launched its global economy initiative with *Black Gold* (Marc Francis and Nick Francis, dirs./prods.), about the unjust conditions under which coffee is produced, and *Maquilapolis* (Vicki Funari, Sergio De La Torre, dirs./prods.), about women in Mexico who work in factories owned by transnational corporations and become grassroots activists. According to Daressa, *Maquilapolis* is doing very well in DVD sales to schools with courses in women's and Latino studies, business labor and international studies.

Universities and institutions are the primary markets for these films. It is worth noting that Newsreel, without subsidies from foundations, offers all of its titles to high schools, public libraries, community organizations and historically black colleges and universities at a 75 percent discount off the regular college price. Naturally, this allows Newsreel to reach a larger audience, but, as Daressa emphasizes, true to the company's political core, this productive structured atmosphere "is a more conducive context to actually doing something about these problems, rather than just empathizing, which is what happens with TV and home video; you're not looking at them in a context that's associated with any ongoing political activity. We always make the point that TV is not conducive to serious, or what we call 'active,' viewing."

California Newsreel at 40

Mark Kitchell, producer and director of the Academy Award-nominated *Berkeley in the Sixties*, notes about Newsreel, "I tend to think of them as a collective." After running into Kitchell at Sundance in 1989, Daressa and Adleman offered him \$30,000 to cover post-production costs. "Trust was a major factor in my choice," remembers Kitchell. Two years later, after his advance had been repaid, he was especially impressed that Newsreel had "estimated exactly what the market in the educational world would be for *Berkeley*. These guys really know how to market a film, and they don't waste money."

"The reason we've survived is because we make 90 percent of our income from earned income," asserts Daressa. Unlike most film organizations or nonprofits, which are mostly dependent on government organizations or foundations, "our market has remained fairly stable



From *Maquilapolis* (Vicki Funari, Sergio De La Torre, dirs./prods.), which is part of California Newsreel's Global Economy initiative. Courtesy of California Newsreel.

over the years, because there is an established business in the sale of educational films. Ours happen to have political content, but they're also educational. They're not propaganda films."

Gail Silva, former director of Film Arts Foundation, who now advises arts organizations and filmmakers, agrees: "California Newsreel has anticipated the needs of their primary college and university markets, creating niche initiatives for the particular time. And they have never lost their activist roots."

Daressa also credits Newsreel's longevity to its being situated in the Bay Area. "Being at the center of social ferment has allowed us to anticipate social movements, to begin to understand them and to have access to people who understood them. Also, the wonderful community of independent documentarians in the Bay Area has supplied more than a fair share of our catalogue titles."

Keeping Up with Technology

Technology is something that any social change group or media group has to keep up with. As Daressa points out, "The problem is, tech change is something which will always be led by the commercial media, of which we will have to fit in on the margins as we've always fit in on the margins. I have no question that we will be marginal on the Internet, as we are presently in the world of DVD. So technological changes are something that you continually adjust to. It's not that difficult."

The real issue, as Daressa sees it, is ultimately the market size. "And the market size is not so much determined by technology, but by

the socio-economic environment, by which I mean the politicization of the public at a particular period around a particular issue. So if the country were to suddenly become much more politicized than it is at present, our market would be much larger."

In terms of how the digital age has affected Newsreel, Daressa supposes that VOD will enable the company to develop a less limited consumer market, in addition to integrating its product more effectively into activist networks like blogs and print magazines online, e-zines and the websites of various organizations—all of which will increase sales. "But the question is, What is a sale? Is it a download? I mean, we can't sell it for free, unless someone subsidizes us. There has to be some way of charging people." Daressa foresees different charges for streaming and downloading, for example, "A class of 300 should pay more than if it's downloaded by a student as a reading assignment, where the price could be as low as \$1.98."

The Changing Form of Docs

Finally, as a distributor, Newsreel encourages and supports the work of emerging producers and filmmakers, and can provide helpful advice about the inside world of educational distribution. Ever anticipating the evolution of both the creative and business sides of documentary filmmaking and distribution, Daressa offers insights into shifting the "static" form of current documentaries that are "stylistically indistinguishable from the films that we first acquired in the early '70s."

Daressa believes that the Internet necessitates



From *Black Gold* (Marc Francis and Nick Francis, dirs./prods.), which is part of California Newsreel's Global Economy Initiative. Courtesy of California Newsreel.

nonfiction filmmakers to "start exploring new possibilities and developing some radically new forms," which he already sees happening there. The long-form doc will continue on television and

in theaters, he predicts, but films will be shorter, primarily due to "the attention-span issue; more films will be serialized and carried on from week to week, like a blog entry. Films will also need to

be cheaper, because they'll be appealing to smaller markets.

"You have to ask yourself," Daressa continues, "when you see a link on a Website, how long will you stay at the link until you return to the home page, or move on to the next link? Perhaps 20 minutes. So the films will need to be much more embedded in the new environments in which they're shown. And I think there will be a lot more PSA films as discussion starters and opportunities for people to become aware of issues and then move beyond the film to actual political involvement."

Vivian Kleiman, a veteran independent filmmaker whose work includes *Maquilapolis*, *First Person Plural* and *Color Adjustment*, reminds socially conscious filmmakers, "While it's easy to create a website and sell a video to those who happen upon it, it's an entirely different matter to use media to play a strategic role in social change, and to earn money for the filmmaker. The folks at California Newsreel are among the best in the field." □

Cathleen Rountree is the author of nine books, including The Movie Lovers' Club: How to Start Your Own Film Group (2006). She interviews directors and covers film festivals for Documentary and other publications, and teaches writing and multicultural studies at University of California, Santa Cruz.

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