

The revolution will not be televised

My first documentary for television was *The Quiet Mutiny*, made in 1970 for Granada. It was an unusual film, laced with irony and farce, rather like a factual *Catch-22*, and shot in a gentle, almost lyrical style by George Jesse Turner. The story was something of a scoop: America's huge army in Vietnam was disintegrating as angry conscripts brought their rebellion at home to the battlefields of Vietnam. The film's evidence of soldiers shooting their officers and refusing to fight caused a furore among the guardians of official truth. The American ambassador to Britain, Walter Annenberg, a crony of President Richard Nixon, phoned Sir Robert Fraser, director of the Independent Television Authority (ITA). Although he had not seen the film, Sir Robert was apoplectic. Summoning Granada executives, he banged his desk and described me as "a bloody dangerous subversive" who was "anti-American". This puzzled Lord Bernstein, Granada's liberal founder, who protested that *The Quiet Mutiny* had received high praise from the public and, far from being anti-American, had shown only sympathy for the despair of young GIs caught up in a hopeless war. When I flew to New York and showed it to Mike Wallace, the star reporter of CBS's *60 Minutes*, he agreed. "Real shame we can't show it here," he said.

This fear and loathing came as a surprise to me. I was a newspaper journalist naive in the ways of television, especially the lengths to which established power went to control it. The long list of banned, censored and delayed programmes on Ireland is testament to this, as are the declassified files on the real reason why *The War Game*, Peter Watkins's brilliant construction of a nuclear attack on Britain in 1965, was banned. (At the time, the BBC had lied that the "faint-hearted" would not be able to bear watching *The War Game*. In fact, the BBC had secretly surrendered editorial control to the government, with a note from Lord Normanbrook, chairman of the board of governors, explaining that although the

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film was “based on careful research into official material . . . and produced with considerable restraint”, its broadcast “might have a significant effect on public attitudes towards the policy of the nuclear deterrent”.)

Almost all of the more than 50 films I made for ITV (and a series for Channel 4) have had to navigate a system that rarely declares its intention to create and shape public opinion. The BBC exemplifies this, with its specious neutrality, mythically balancing contending extremes while turning out a flow of official assumptions and deceptions as “news”. In its youth, British commercial television was different. Unlike its equivalents anywhere in the world, it retained a nucleus of people who, like Lord Bernstein, would defend those who challenged the received wisdom. Certainly, my collaborators have included some of the best and boldest, not least the three young BBC renegades who first suggested television to me at a Soho restaurant in 1969. The directors Paul Watson, Charles Denton and Richard Marquand were the products of the brief, enlightened Hugh Greene years at the BBC. Brought together by the distinguished actor David Swift, our aim, in Watson’s words, was “to take documentaries beyond the limits laid down for BBC staff and to get on television subjects unpalatable to hierarchies”. We believed that journalism informed by no opinion, no irony, no humour, no compassion and no commitment lacked a very serious dimension. Our inspirations were James Cameron’s *One Pair of Eyes* and Edward R Murrow’s *See It Now*.

The idea was picked up by *World in Action*, the Granada documentary strand that pioneered so much powerful journalism. I was one of the first *World in Action* reporters to appear in front of the camera, encouraged by Charles Denton not to speak in “BBC code” and to say clearly “what you yourself have found out”. From an American fire-base near the Cambodian border, we set out on patrol with a platoon of “grunts” (drafted men), in what they called “Indian country” (Indian = Vietcong). We did not see any Vietcong. What we did see was a chicken, which the sergeant presumed to be a Vietcong chicken and therefore worthy of mention in his log as an “enemy sighted”. When I wrote this into my commentary, a Granada executive wanted to know the source of my statement that the chicken had communist affiliations. After some enjoyable conversation along these lines it dawned on me he was serious. “The ITA need to know these things,” he said. “They won’t be happy unless we reassure them.” I proposed that the chicken remain in the film as a fellow-traveller, if not an all-out card carrier, and this was accepted.

Sir Robert and Lord Normanbrook were right: the political documentary is

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indeed dangerous, because it can circumvent the club that unites and dominates establishment politics and journalism. Moreover, the documentary as a television “event” can send ripples far and wide. Year Zero: the silent death of Cambodia, which I made with David Munro in 1979, did that. Year Zero not only revealed the horror of the Pol Pot years, it showed how Nixon’s and Kissinger’s “secret” bombing of that country had provided a critical catalyst for the rise of the Khmer Rouge. It also exposed how the west, led by the United States and Britain, was imposing an embargo, like a medieval siege, on the most stricken country on earth. This was a reaction to the fact that Cambodia’s liberator was Vietnam - a country that had come from the wrong side of the cold war and that had recently defeated the US. Cambodia’s suffering was a wilful revenge. Britain and the US even backed Pol Pot’s demand that his man continue to occupy Cambodia’s seat at the UN, while Margaret Thatcher stopped children’s milk going to the survivors of his nightmare regime. Little of this was reported.

Had Year Zero simply described the monster that Pol Pot was, it would have been quickly forgotten. By reporting the collusion of “our” governments, it told a wider truth about how the world was run. Until George W Bush and Tony Blair pushed their luck in Iraq and Lebanon, this remained a taboo.

“A solidarity and compassion surged across our nation,” wrote Brian Walker, director of Oxfam. Within two days of Year Zero going to air, 40 sacks of post arrived at ATV (later Central Television) in Birmingham - 26,000 first-class letters in the first post alone. The station quickly amassed £1m, almost all of it in small amounts. “This is for Cambodia,” wrote a Bristol bus driver, enclosing his week’s wage. Entire pensions were sent, along with entire savings. Petitions arrived at Downing Street, one after the other, for weeks. MPs received hundreds of thousands of letters, demanding that British policy change (which it did, eventually). And none of it was asked for.

For me, the public response to Year Zero gave the lie to clichés about “compassion fatigue”, an excuse that some broadcasters and television executives use to justify the current descent into the cynicism and passivity of Big Brotherland. Above all, I learned that a documentary could reclaim shared historical and political memories, and present their hidden truths. The reward then was a compassionate and an informed public; and it still is.

The “John Pilger Film Festival” is at the Barbican Centre, London EC1, from 14-21 September. Call the box office on 0845 120 7500 or book online: [http://www.barbican.org.uk]