



Activist film-makers share a tradition with 21st-century bloggers and camcorder-carrying marchers. **Maureen Paton** on a tribute to their moving images

Reel politik

Rewind to the beginning of the second world war, when teenager Stanley Forman was filming peace marches through London while trying to avoid getting mown down by the mounted police. Having absorbed the Lenin dictum that "the most important of all the arts is cinema", the East End tailor's son and his Young Communist League comrades were recording their street protests for posterity.

Horses' hooves were the least of his problems. As he recalls: "My little Yiddisher momma was terrified that I was going to be put in prison, because she had a visit from MI5, who said: 'You realise your son is going around with Communists?'"

Now fast forward to the demonstrations against the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001, when sports

photographer-turned-activist Paul O'Connor put his camera bag on his head for safety before running through a phalanx of baton-wielding Italian police. "My equipment got bashed, but at least I saved my head," says O'Connor, a member of the alternative news service Undercurrents, which provides practical support to activists — rather like a video-making equivalent of flying pickets.

One of O'Connor's colleagues had managed to climb up on a roof to film the police brutality that killed demonstrator Carlo Giuliani and injured thousands of others; last month, the video was finally used as evidence in court against the Italian police.

These two events occurred in different centuries, with a 60-year gap between them, but the film-makers faced the same ideals and dangers. Alternative documentary-making has been going on for a lot longer than the



Rebels with a cause: Stanley Forman (above) began filming peace marches at the start of the second world war in a tradition that continued in films such as *Injustice* (left), released in 2001 and documenting the campaign by the families of people who have died in police custody

Photographs: Martin Argles (left), BFI

average 21st-century blogger (weblogger diarist) or camcorder-carrying marcher against the Iraq war might imagine. And, to prove it, a British Film Industry (BFI) season at the National Film Theatre (NFT) in September is showcasing for the first time 73 years of screen activism, ranging from the home movies made by Rhondda miners during the Depression in the 30s and the anti-poll tax rebellions in the 80s to the anarchic exhilaration of the Guerrillavision video *Crowd Bites Wolf* that was filmed during the mass anti-capitalist demonstrations in Prague in 2000.

Self-help is the key to all of the films being screened at the NFT, most made by amateurs with the help of professionals. As Forman remarks, there was an obvious collectivity about the collaborative nature of film-making that tended to bring people together.

"Whereas blogging is an individual thing, the whole history of film and video activism is about community — local, industrial, racial and political," says Jez Stewart, acquisitions assistant in the BFI national film and television archive's non-fiction section, who has programmed the season at the NFT.

Taking their inspiration from Soviet pioneers, the first alternative newsreels in Britain in the 1920s and 30s became channels for dissenting voices fighting against issues such as unemployment, poverty and fascism. When light, 16mm cameras became available in the 60s, a network of politically motivated film workshops and cooperatives sprang up to capture the radical spirit of the time. The introduction of video in the 70s and 80s further encouraged a new breed of guerrilla film-makers who recorded Vietnam protests, civil

rights marches, environmental disputes, women's rights and gay rights rallies. And with the arrival of the camcorder and the development of the internet in the 90s and the dawning of the digital age, the possibilities now seem endless.

Yet veteran activist Chris Reeves recalls that it was much easier to raise money in the 80s for video activism. "Trade unions are worried about being political now — it's a meaner environment, more dog-eat-dog," says Reeves, who worked with mobile news service Cinema Action — now defunct — on *The Miners' Campaign Tapes*. These six newsreels were shot largely by miners themselves during the 1984-85 strike. Reeves remains "reasonably optimistic", however, about the future, having just finished editing some dramatic footage shot by some of the human shields who went to Iraq.

Two years ago, Reeves was involved in making the *Not in Our Name* video. Screened all around the world, it is now recognised as having played a key part in mobilising the mass demonstrations against the Iraq war.

"It's all about empowerment," says O'Connor. "People are desperate to find out what's going on beyond the mainstream media, and a perfect example of that was September 11. We got loads of emails and phone calls saying: 'How do we find out more? Does this affect me?'"

Forman's own radical influence had been Ivor Montagu, the British aristocrat's son whose Communist party election film, *Peace And Plenty*, named and shamed corrupt British politicians as the enemies of slum-dwellers and featured a satirical puppet of Neville Chamberlain.

As well as directing 12 films himself, Forman distributed thousands of Soviet documentaries throughout Britain during the 50s and 60s — no easy task during the Cold War — and only stopped work on film production last year at the age of 81 when he handed over his massive film archive to the BFI.

Senior citizens with long memories are still at the forefront of direct action alongside all the young warriors, it seems. Genoa may have been O'Connor's hairiest moment to date, but his proudest came in 1998 when Undercurrents helped two pensioners to film their campaign against a polluting Wrexham aluminium factory. They took their protest all the way to its owner in New York and were thrown out on to Fifth Avenue by security, all of which was captured on camera.

O'Connor recalls: "The BBC got involved, all the New York cable channels showed the film, the protesters got every single demand they wanted, and the factory was fined £20,000. Perfect result."

Although he insists that he was no hero, Forman likes to think that the powerful images he and others helped to bring to the screen had some kind of effect on public consciousness. He is delighted that communities are still coming together to train a leftwing lens on the world.

Six programmes charting the history of British film and video activism from 1930-2003 will be shown at NFT2, from September 1-30. For further details visit www.bfi.org.uk or contact 020-7928 3232.