

**The New World Image Order(s)**  
by Patricia R. Zimmermann (1998)

We all -- artists, programmers, non-profit administrators, media activists, teachers, funders, scholars -- live on a precipice as we edge into the 21st century. We have all been defunded and demoralized. We need a new world image order.

In the last decade, draconian federal and state budget reductions have devastated the non-commercial media sector. Emerging makers have been robbed of hope. The infrastructures supporting new cultural practices are hobbled. It gets harder and harder to reimagine the universe, much less argue with it. Democracy if defined as access to the means of production and to the production of engaged public spaces seems stifled by MTV, CNN, Fox Cable, Disney, Viacom and Time-Warner.

How are we to understand these new world orders that have massively altered the public sphere, placing us within the vise-grip of commercialism? Transnationalization undergirds the 21st century. The transnational economy depends on flexibility and mobility, constantly mutating to changing social and political conditions beyond the nation state. It depends on new technologies like computers and satellites to transmute the relationships between space and time, shearing capital from any location. It relies on media imagery/imaginaries. It is global.

1989 witnessed the initial rumblings of the transnationalization of the entire media sector. Media merged across industries, forming huge behemoths combining radio, cable, satellite, new media, film, video, theatres. The word synergy served to camouflage conglomeratization without regulatory controls. Sony, the Japanese hardware producer known for creating the Walkman, bought Columbia Studios. Time bought Warner Bros. And on and on.

The transnational economy manifests a techno/media/political/scape. Images are politics, politics are media, and the new politics are image/media. Work is reengineered, downsized, deskilled, part-timed, degraded and sped up. It declaws identities into market segments, devouring multiculturalism as an insidious advertising strategy.

1989 marked a pivotal year in this accelerated restructuring of the media universe and the global downsizing of media democracy. The student protests in Tiananmen Square advocating democracy and free speech also demonstrated the political power of low-end accessible technologies like the internet, fax, and camcorders to create global alliances. The fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and Perestroika in the former Soviet Union presumably opened up the East to democracy. But ultimately, these momentous

events unlocked the former Eastern bloc for Hollywood action adventure films, multiplexing, and the demise of national cinemas.

By 1997, this unregulated media concentration across national borders heralds the most intensive cross-media merger activity in history. Competition is now obsolete. Disney/ABC/Capital Cities and Time Warner/Turner now reign as the largest media combines in the world. They span every continent and deploy nearly every available media technology. They embody the new 21st century versions of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, always subsuming new territory.

1989 also featured one of the most vitriolic, hateful attacks against the National Endowment for the Arts for funding the posthumous Robert Mapplethorpe photographic exhibition. The Mapplethorpe episode underscored the depth of the right's offensive against sexuality and difference. Yet this infamous, heartbreaking case which put a curator on trial and mobilized demonstrations in front of art museums was unfortunately a harbinger of the future.

In the last eight years, the situation has only worsened. Newt Gingrich and his congressional transnational corporate allies campaign against art in all its public forms. They defund and demobilize the arts. They demonize and demoralize artists. Their offensive constitutes nothing short of a civil war against art made by white feminists, women of color, radical white men, men of color, gays and lesbians, the working class, the middle class, new immigrants, rural people and the avant garde. It is a war against difference. Artists and spectators alike are engaged in a constant struggle to regain control of our collective imaginations.

These various reorderings are not isolated. Together they paint a palimpsest of the new world order. Economics, politics and aesthetics layer onto each other, suffocating differences, debates, controversies, passions. Here, anything public - - museums, art, media, grammar schools, universities, national parks, public television, film festivals, cyberspace -- is auctioned off like suburban real estate plots to private enterprise. The collective and the public diminish into the individual and the private.

Media activists make a grave mistake if we only battle arts cutbacks without connecting them to snowballing transnationalization which creates corporations larger than most nation states. Media analysts commit a serious political error if we simply decry the viral spread of unchecked, conglomerated, market democracy to the former Eastern bloc and Asia without linking it to the decline of support for public culture and deregulation worldwide. The entire globe is up for sale, privatized. In 1998, privatization breeds multiple meanings: the decline of the welfare state, the triumph of the market economy, a retreat into the self, and sitting alone at a computer rather than protesting in the streets. We are all, in effect, grounded, staying home alone where we can't make any trouble.

So, to invoke Toni Morrison, is there any space for an unofficial, samizdat culture of hope, within this official culture of expanding transnational empires, anti-immigration, nationalist civil wars, attacks against difference, and increasingly inaccessible high technology? What is to be done, to summon Lenin, that old revolutionary from the old world order, in the media arts field when films like the Titanic cost over \$200 million? And its computer-generated special effects cost more than the entire film/video budget for the New York State Council of the Arts?

We all need to resist the new world order that demolishes the arts and transnationalizes the econo/politico/scape We need to form all kinds of new alliances with each other across differences and across borders. We need to rethink how we think about media.

In the decrepit remains of this degraded public sphere that demobilizes nearly all collective action, a new world image order has bloomed, one where difference makes a difference. New technologies are raided. Corporate images are pirated. New combinations of ideas and people remake our vision. Media makers invent ways to work without grants. And teachers, students, programmers, writers, and funders resist this stagnation in big and little ways.

But perhaps most urgently we also need to aggressively, unceasingly take back public spaces for these new world image orders to grow and flower. In its small, persistent way, the Black Maria Film and Video Festival serves as a model reclamation project for difference, hybridity, and publicness. It is a place where production budgets don't matter as much as heart, guts and bold, unrestrained imagination. It intervenes in these global flows.

For the last 17 years, the Black Maria has almost shamanistically exorcised the stupor of this invasive, numbing commercial culture and the depression which descends upon me when I see the limitations it imposes on my students' imaginations. A visit by the Black Maria offers hope, energy, and a look into the future of film and video.

It is, of course, no historical accident that the Black Maria commenced in 1981, the first year of Reagan's assault against the arts, the welfare state, and federal regulatory controls of media which propelled the intensive economic and political restructuring engulfing us now. 1981 also represents a significant turning point for American feature-length narrative independent cinema, for it was during this time that these films first reached larger audiences. And 1981, more personally, was the year I started college-level teaching and discovered my thirst for a long, intoxicating drink of new work I couldn't see otherwise.

Promoting politically rambunctious and hauntingly poetic work of exploration, engagement and experimentation, the Black Maria represented a stubborn reclamation of public space for challenging work. This recovery project has

evolved into a major archaeological mission to create a place for all those marginalized film and video practices exiled by passionless, standardized, heartless commercial culture. A look at the lists of works screened in Black Maria over the last 17 years testifies to how little we historians really know about independent film history.

I live in a small college town in a rural area. It is not easy for me to see large quantities of new work, especially shorter films that provide more inspiring, empowering role models for my students than Clerks or Pulp Fiction . Black Maria's offerings differ in significantly powerful ways from the independent narrative features screened at the Sundance Film Festival, which seem to me to have simply replaced the old B picture system in Hollywood. I can't discern the difference between an indy film at Sundance and a Hollywood studio film once the elaborate sound mixes and special effects are stripped away. Hollywood films and these independents are merely two sides of the same old/new global Hollywood, lost in a perpetual quest for deals and dollars. Personally, I find Black Maria's less-than-feature length provision deeply democratic.

I admire films that rock the world, and how I see that world. I love films that force me to think and to see in new ways I could never imagine without them. I am tired of media as a bedtime narcotic. I crave for truly independent work, where independent means never having to say you are sorry to a Hollywood studio or to a commercial audience. I want to see films and videos that are revolutionary acts of defiance.

But in my small upstate New York town, the public spaces for this kind of work simply don't exist that much anymore. And I live in a state with one of the highest levels of arts funding in the nation, a state with an aggressive, admirable plan for public support for alternative media exhibition and huge independent media networks. My town has been multiplexed to death. Our small art cinemas are choking. They survive by screening second run Hollywood fare at lower prices. The theater at the other university in town bravely shows international films and resolutely programs live artists yet it, too, financially survives by screening Raiders of the Lost Ark on the weekends. My own campus is not immune. Our student film society operates as a third run revival house, screening Hollywood mass market films like Robocop .

Consequently, the Black Maria remains one of the few places in my academic and artistic life where I can reconnect with the real independent media world and reclaim something public. At Black Maria, films and videos transport me somewhere else. Genres are mixed and identities disturbed. Surprises still happen. Emerging artists are discovered. And difference -- racial, sexual, gender, national, technological, genre -- is celebrated. When the Black Maria arrives on campus, I change all my plans. I hire a baby-sitter. I finish grading papers. I re-wet my contact lenses and open my notebook to jot down films and tapes to rent.

Black Maria reminds me that obsession and compulsion still exist: it boomerangs me back into those illicit desires and introduces me to new ones.

Each year, I see work that is so beautiful I have to rent it for my students, like Peter Hutton's *Study of a River*. Each year, some new technological process in film, video or digital spurs me to rethink everything I know about representation, like Peter Rose's *Metatalogue*. Each year, work rouses me to write about it in order to understand its politics more deeply, like the media piracy of Dee Dee Halleck's *Gringo in Mañanaland*, Norman Cowie's *The Third Wave* or Meena Nanji's *It's a Crime*. Each year, I discover something or someone I am absolutely driven to program, like Pamela Yates's *Take-Over*, Diane Nerwen's *Under the Skin Game* or Greta Snider's *Portland*. And each year I glow with pride that some colleague at my own institution or someone I want to know in the independent realm scores a visual/analytical home run like Vincent Grenier's *Surface Tension*, Marcelle Pecot's *Every Telling has a Taleing* or Juan Mandelbaum's *New World of Music*.

All of this reminds me that our community is large and prospering. It sustains me. I know there will be years down the road when the Black Maria forces me to ponder digital technologies like CD-ROM and Web Pages as independent media, and I am ready.

Every year, John Columbus, like an old 19th century magic lantern showman who travels from town to town delighting the bored, starved populace, appears on my campus with a trunkful of films and videos. In contrast to the transnational multiplexers, the Black Maria programs for localism and heterogeneity. John asks us local hosts all over the country what we need to see, what we want to see, what our students and patrons could be galvanized by. He then gently suggests a few pieces he thinks we should see for our teaching, our research, our programming, our psychic health. The screenings morph for each site and each audience.

John Columbus functions as a tireless traveling ambassador for short, experimental media work under 90 minutes, the kind of media that gets made because it has to be made, the kind of media that depends more on heart, guts and passion than on big budgets, big crews, big deals. He is one of the few programmers in the country who mixes up genres, technologies, ideologies, established with emerging artists, personal, political and poetic work, styles, attitudes. He reminds us all why we love independent film and video.

However, the Black Maria exceeds the conjurings of its itinerant, enthusiastic director. To attend one of these shows is to understand the true meaning of the term independent film community: a volatile public space where different works from different voices can jostle with each other and dislodge spectators, ideas, pessimism.

The Black Maria performs a necessary ritual of renewal in the media arts world: it revives passion. Black Maria is perhaps one of the only festivals in the world that travels to its audience, adapting the fluidity and mobility of the transnationals towards more emancipatory ends: it brings these new works to us like gifts to be unwrapped and delighted in.

But most importantly for these viciously privatized and embattled times, the Black Maria provides a stellar example of what an engaged media democracy might look like in the reimagined 21st century, It sustains a new world image order for hybrid, diverse, gutsy work that asks us to rewire the world in every way, every day.