

## Some Messages from the Backs of Postcards

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I've learned some things from making and showing my tape, *Postcards from Nicaragua* (1985), that I want to share as part of that old theory/practice dialectic.

I went to Nicaragua in the summer of 84 with Julia Lesage. We spent 5 weeks in Estelí, a town of about 45,000 about 100 miles north of Managua studying Spanish in a program called NICA which involved lessons in the morning, volunteer work, and informational meetings with local officials. We each lived with different families. Julia had visited Nicaragua earlier, in 1981, training members of a film, and later video, workshop sponsored by Sandinista trade unions. From interviews she did at that time, and in collaboration with Carole Issacs, who also visited Nicaragua around the same time, Julia made a slide show on women in Nicaragua, which later became her videotape, *Las Nicas*. We spent an additional two weeks in Managua working with the People's Video Workshop after living in Estelí.

Julia and I share several intermeshed concerns that shaped our time in Nicaragua and subsequent creative work. Politically, we believe that the test of any revolutionary movement is in its effect on ordinary people's lives and how they think about it. As media makers we are committed to both letting Nicaraguans speak on their own terms and providing the necessary act and art of translation. We are also trying to find new forms of expression and diffusion for anti-imperialist solidarity media. We're especially interested in consumer format video cassette and exhibition in a wide variety of situations--shows, classrooms, political meetings, cable tv, gallery installations, homes, etc.

We went to Nicaragua with 1/2" VHS equipment because it was what we could afford and it offered extreme portability. I saw my primary media work as doing camera for Julia. In addition, I shot a lot of 35mm portraits and some of my own video which resulted in *Postcards From Nicaragua*. The tape works in a strongly visual and lyrical mode, which is partly a function of aesthetics and politics, and partly a function of my limited fluency in Spanish.

Central America solidarity media is remarkably well developed in the U.S. compared to the situation of radical media during the Vietnam war. Most local organizing, outreach, and education prominently uses films, tapes, and slideshows. It's common for a group to take a tape or film to as many audiences as possible and then to get a second one to continue and expand the process. Because there is so much useful material already circulating, I'm interested in making work which complements rather than duplicates what exists.

The dominant form of solidarity films and tapes is the expository documentary. Like expository prose, the film or tape is essentially a written essay which is given visual and

dramatic elaboration. The verbal always leads the visual. You could listen to the soundtrack and easily get the main point, but just seeing the visuals wouldn't explain much. Such documentaries have a strong narrator and often a central character for reference. There are interviews with experts and witnesses, and often maps and charts and newsfilm clips. From a quick discursive beginning to a final exhortation or suggested solution, such works are typically fast paced and use visuals and elaborated sound only to amplify the verbal script.

Many interesting and useful films and tapes have been made in the expository mode. However that discourse doesn't exhaust the range of documentary, and it has certain characteristics which are limiting. It calls on experts, authorities, heroes, and sometimes celebrities. As it's usually practiced, it depends on a narrator we don't know or even sense. Thus it calls for a kind of trust that some people, especially skeptics or people not familiar with movement rhetoric, can withhold. It often speaks from the point of view of a North American, or even inserts such a person into the work to provide a reference or relay for the message being conveyed to the U.S. audience. Thus solidarity media often repeats the pattern of network news "stand ups" with the U.S. reporter-narrator on the scene telling us that they have the truth. The net result of these decisions is to maintain a system of hierarchical authority and a point of view from the position of the dominant culture.

Now I know that such films and tapes often work, and work with audiences that will resist a documentary made by Latin Americans about their own concerns articulated in their own voices. So I don't want to criticize such films and tapes to dismiss them. But I am concerned with how we can make documentaries that let ordinary people speak and express their concerns from their point of view. This is particularly important to me in the context of Nicaragua because the Sandinista revolution has been especially powerful in its mobilization of ordinary people, of peasants and workers. Many of these people have a profound political analysis, and have, especially through their mass organizations, shaped programs and policies.

My tape reverses some of the usual expectations in solidarity media. I show the expert, the authority, the politician--Sergio Ramirez campaigning to continue as Vice President. But he doesn't speak. Instead the overt political statement is carried by market women who explain that all they want from the U.S. is medicine and peace. Instead of a constantly explaining narrator, the tape is essentially non-narrative, with virtually no verbal soundtrack. Music and ambient sound replace the talking heads and voice over commentary. During the burial even the location sound ends, emphasizing the importance of the visual track. The camera becomes a personal presence.

Some solidarity organizers, whose commitment and politics I respect, find this very disconcerting. They want the tape to be more direct, to get to the point, to move along faster, to say something. But, I answer, there are ways to communicate without words, and sometimes it's important to understand the duration and the space of an event in order to show something.

Latin Americans who have seen the tape, and many Third World people, don't have the same problem as some North Americans. They savor the seeing. A friend from India exclaimed, "that's my village!" on seeing the ox cart and washing clothes in the river. The act of translation from one culture to another is sometimes easier across the Third World than "back" to the First World. This is important to come to terms with, because as long as solidarity media remains from the point of view of the dominant and dominating culture, it effectively reinforces imperialist ideology and thought patterns on some level.

At the same time, I don't think there's some magic truth than can be easily revealed by direct portrayal of another culture. There are marked cultural differences, barriers to unmediated understanding, which are also the fruit of distinct national heritages and histories as well as the power differentials and politics of imperialism. Because of this translation is always necessary in cross-cultural communication. The video camera is a tool in that visual and audio translation, but only a tool. It can be used to illustrate a verbal message. But it can do much more than that. It can investigate and explore. And it can assist in changing cognition itself, in getting beyond the dominant ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking. A tall order. Perhaps. But so is overthrowing imperialism. History has given us this challenge. It's up to us to figure out how to meet it.

POSTCARDS FROM NICARAGUA/POSTALES DE NICARAGUA LIBRE, 1/2" VHS to 3/4" TBC, color, NTSC/PAL, 50 min. 1985.