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**Thema
Revolution und Medien**

**Alternative Medien und digitalisierte
Gegenöffentlichkeiten
Ricarda Drüeke & Elke Zobl**

**What was Guerrilla Media?
Michael Goddard**

**AUF und an.schläge,
Frauensolidarität, fiber und Co
Brigitte Geiger**

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mit vulnerablen Gruppen
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What was Guerrilla Media?

From Armed Struggle to Guerrilla Television and Punk DIY Practices

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Abstract

This article examines the highly contested term guerrilla media and charts its development from an element of guerrilla warfare, via examples of ludic and DIY experimentation such as Guerrilla Television and Punk fanzines, to question its relevance to the present. Drawing on research for my book *Guerrilla Networks* (AUP, 2018), I argue that it is important to trace its origins in the ascendancy of guerrilla warfare in mid 20th century, and how this then mutates into more ludic but still politically charged practices such as those influenced by the Situationist International which would inform movements from Italian Autonomia to media activism more generally. It also examines the more politically ambivalent experience of guerrilla television in the 1970s, which involved a slippage of meaning towards mere DIY entrepreneurialism, as well as the use of media during the punk explosion including records, radio and especially fanzines. It concludes that while guerrilla media could be considered a debased and almost meaningless term in the present, its more ludic instantiations still offer resources for political movements in the present.

Keywords: Guerrilla media, urban guerrillas, DIY, Situationist International, radical media, fanzines, punk, guerrilla television

Guerrilla Filmmaking, Guerrilla Marketing, Guerrilla Advertising. These terms today at best conjure up ideas of low or no budget productions, if not the corporate exploitation of DIY practices on social media. Yet at its origins, Guerrilla media were directly connected to political contestation, sometimes of an armed nature, before passing onto more ludic yet still radical communication practices such as pirate radio, radical posters and flyers or subvertising. Ultimately these terms would pass through more ambivalent contexts like guerrilla television before attaining its contemporary meanings of merely low budget appropriations of DIY practices, often on behalf of corporate interests. This article will explore this trajectory, also paying attention to the use of guerrilla media in punk and industrial contexts and will argue that despite its contemporary debasement and co-option the guerrilla media concept played a vital role in late twentieth century radical media that is still of relevance today.

Guerrilla Media and Guerrilla Warfare's "Revolution in the Revolution"

To fully grasp guerrilla media it is necessary to examine the origins of the guerrilla concept in guerrilla warfare. Beginning in the early nineteenth century but as Robert Taber argues having antecedents going back as far as Lao Tzu's ca. 500 B.C. *The Art of War* (see Taber, 2002, 149–172), guerrilla warfare refers to asymmetrical warfare undertaken by small scale armed groups, usually against a colonialist regime or invading force. But guerrilla warfare refers to more than just a set of techniques for engaging a more powerful army but a mode of action aimed at engaging the hearts and minds of a population as much as attaining military victories.

Robert Taber, writing in the wake of the popular successes of armed guerrilla conflicts especially in Cuba, defines guerrilla warfare as "*revolutionary war*, engaging a civilian population, or a significant part of such a population, against the military forces of established or usurpative

governmental authority” (Taber, 2002, 4, emphasis in original). Importantly guerrilla struggles are not just based on fixed ideologies, stated goals, or material conditions of inequality but require what he calls a “revolutionary *impulse*” (5, emphasis in original), a wave of popular will that the guerrilla forces are inseparable from. Guerrilla campaigns are therefore not merely reactive protest or dissent about current conditions but envision potentialities and express a newly awakened consciousness. This consciousness and awareness of a joyful potentiality empowers people to believe there is something they can “*do, have or be*” (Taber, 2002, 6, emphasis in original), through action. In this sense guerrilla warfare exceeds the set of techniques of irregular warfare, which Taber refers to as mere “guerrilla-ism” (Taber, 2002, 13), and its main weapons are not guns or bombs but the close relations the guerrilla enjoys with a people, a community or a nation.

Of course, all the military techniques of guerrilla forces can and are used by dominant counter insurgency forces, as documented, for example in *Killing Hope*, William Blum’s extensive account of CIA involvement in overturning democratic and socialist states throughout the world (Blum, 1997). And it is difficult to share Taber’s optimism that such techniques cannot be effectively used against guerrilla forces, since this has happened on multiple occasions. Nevertheless, it remains true that the contestation of guerrilla and anti-guerrilla forces is as much about raising the hopes of a population or destroying them, even if recent conflicts in countries like Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan complicate such a simplistic account. Nevertheless, while counter insurgency is a strictly military operation, masterminded by distant powers, guerrilla warfare is inseparable from politics in every action and the ability of the guerrilla to move among the people as the fish swims in the sea (to paraphrase Mao Tse Tung) is paramount.

This contestation over hope, or hearts and minds, means that guerrilla campaigns are necessarily also media campaigns, and theorisations of guerrilla warfare are also media theories. While the mass media of any state are almost always in the hands of the dominant, ruling forces, guerrillas have developed a range of tactics to intervene in the dissemination of information, which was the initial sense of guerrilla media. This can be through the production of “radical

media” in the form of leaflets and posters, the setting up or taking control of radio or TV stations, or through the generation of events that will have to be covered by the mass media, and that a sympathetic populace will be able to “read” however much the events are presented from the perspective of the reigning powers. In this sense, and as I argued in my book *Guerrilla Networks*, guerrilla warfare becomes not only an ecology with relation to a particular population and territory but a media ecology, in which all its actions are a form of semiotic warfare, whether this is the distribution of a radical pamphlet, a pirate radio broadcast, or the detonation of a bomb.

This sense of guerrilla warfare as a media ecology is already implicit in the writings of Mao on protracted warfare when he advocates

“seeming to come from the east and attacking from the west; avoid[ing] the solid and attack[ing] the hollow [...] guerrillas [should] withdraw when [the stronger enemy] advances; harass him when he stops; strike him when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws.”

(Mao, 1961, 46)

These tactics are as much about manipulating information as they are about military manoeuvres or rather the two are completely intertwined. This becomes explicit in the writings of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara who maintained that popular forces can win a campaign against the army, without needing to wait for revolutionary conditions, by basing guerrilla campaigns on nomadic guerrilla units operating in the countryside, acting autonomously without dependence on a central command.

As a key part of his discussion of the different components of guerrilla warfare such as the need of the guerrilla to “exemplify” qualities for the masses to aspire to, Guevara explicitly theorises the guerrilla use of media under the name of propaganda. For Guevara, the key distinction here is not between different media, but between different uses of media in zones that are occupied or liberated. For Guevara, it is the media of the liberated zones that are most important as they not only have access to the latest information, free of censorship and reprisals, but they are also able to fulfil the dual roles of describing what is happening and

explaining and justifying it. In both contexts Guevara places and emphasis on “truth” in the use of media, even if this should be tailored to different audiences and literacies such as workers or peasants. He especially emphasises the importance of radio which not only frees communications from the exclusions of unequal literacy, but also is able to give the revolution an affective tonality. As he puts it “the inspiring, burning word increases this [war] fever and communicates it to every one of the future combatants” (Guevara, 1997, 121). Radio should therefore not merely present information but educate and enthuse the population by broadcasting impassioned speech. This was an explicit aim of *Radio Rebelde* in the context of the Cuban insurgency, which not only broadcast information that the government would rather people did not know about, but also had a direct impact on rapidly unfolding political events:

*“It is by means of radio that the guerrillas force open the doors of truth and open them wide to the entire populace, especially if they follow the ethical proscriptions of **Radio Rebelde** – never broadcast inaccurate news, never conceal a defeat, never exaggerate a victory.”*

(Debray, 1968, 108)

The total uses of popular propaganda in both liberated and occupied zones, constitutes a media ecology working in tandem with the guerrilla struggle itself, serving to expand the free territory via affective and cognitive means. However, this is by no means limited to conventional media like radio, literature or posters. In a guerrilla context, every action is a form of “propaganda of the deed” and every communication is a contribution to the armed struggle. As Régis Debray put it, radio enacts a “qualitative change in the guerrilla movement” (Debray, 1968, 108) since the two are inseparable. The media ecology of guerrilla warfare incorporates military actions, intelligence, technical media, and informal modes of communication within a single assemblage, that is at once experiential and political, popular and military, armed propaganda and guerrilla communication.

Support the Armed Struggle: The Guerrilla Concept in European and North American Contexts

Che Guevara was writing in the specific context of Latin American guerrilla warfare which he viewed as a continental project as exemplified by his failed and fatal attempt to export these ideas and tactics to Bolivia where US trained forces were able to hunt down his guerrilla group and execute him without difficulty. Clearly these tactics and associated ideas of media could not be exported without modification. Elsewhere in Latin American countries like Brazil and Uruguay, for example, guerrilla groups were often based not in the remote countryside but in the metropole, and this necessitated the development of very different tactics, placing greater emphasis on urban actions like bank robberies, bombs, kidnapping and sabotage, that come much closer to ideas of terrorism, even if strictly speaking this only accounted for a subset of these tactics.

This shift also gave rise to a different kind of literature and one that would have a major impact on armed guerrilla groups in the northern hemisphere that also tended to operate in urban rather than rural environments. Such tactics were laid out most clearly in Brazilian militant Carlos Marighella’s *For the Liberation of Brazil* excerpts of which became known and internationally circulated as *Mini Manual for the Urban Guerrilla* (1971). Essentially a recipe book of urban guerrilla tactics, this manual was more pragmatic than political, and laid the blueprint for the kind of tactics that would be adopted by guerrilla groups like the Red Army Faction in Germany: occupations, ambushes, kidnappings, sabotage, liberation of prisoners and the “war of nerves” (Marighella, 1971, 21). While largely limiting the term terrorism to the use of bombs and incendiary devices, it presents it in much more affirmative terms than Guevara did claiming that “terrorism is a weapon the revolutionary can never relinquish” (30). It needs to be remembered that these tactics were developed in the context of resisting a military dictatorship and it should also be pointed out that they were not especially successful, although the Tupamaros who used similar urban guerrilla tactics in Uruguay had considerably more success at destabilising the government there (see Gilio, 1972).

The transposition of this manual to a European context would be fully apparent in the first

major publication by the West German Red Army Faction, *The Urban Guerrilla Concept*. However, rather than just being a pragmatic manual, this pamphlet also sought to persuade individuals and groups on the left to support the armed struggle in Germany, meaning the RAF's own campaigns of bombings, kidnappings and other actions. Furthermore, it functioned as a kind of media critique, at times not sounding so far removed from the kind of criticisms of hegemonic capitalist media made by the Frankfurt School a generation earlier, albeit expressed in a markedly different language:

"No areas of public life are left which don't have, in some way or another, the main goal of serving the interests of capital. [...] these activities play themselves out in the context of mostly private, coincidental, and bourgeois forms of communication. [...] The media's message in a nutshell is [...] Sell. Anything that can't sell is considered pukeworthy: news and communication become commodities for consumption."
(RAF, 2005, 28–29)

This pamphlet, largely believed to be the work of Ulrike Meinhof who was previously a journalist for the left-wing publication *Konkret*, bears the imprint of this experience and intimacy with left media in the German context. As I argue in my book *Guerrilla Networks* there is a clear continuity between Meinhof's work as a radical columnist and this urban guerrilla pamphlet, even if the context and mode of expression have changed. Not only had her writings on the student movement in Germany in the 1960s already charted the passage "from protest to resistance", but her last column for *Konkret* simply entitled "Columnism" was grappling with the same limitations of progressive liberal media, that the cited passage from the *Urban Guerrilla Concept* was denouncing. In particular, Meinhof had questioned whether radical content in a conservative authoritarian context in the form of a column could really communicate radical ideas or be anything other than opportunism:

"It is opportunistic to claim to be struggling against the conditions that one is really reproducing [...] it is opportunistic to limit the anti-authoritarian position to the authoritarian form of the column."
(Meinhof, 2008, 253)

The RAF not only drew on Meinhof's media experience but one of its members Holger Meins had a film background, attending the Berlin Film School with Harun Farocki, Helke Sander and others, and sharing a similar politics based on the student movement, opposition to the Vietnam war and a general anti-capitalist orientation. In both cases it was a question of going beyond the limits of the radical media tolerated by the capitalist state into direct action against it, but this was not without an awareness of the power and centrality of the media in contemporary capitalist society. This was expressed not only by the RAF's own texts but their choice of guerrilla actions which would have to be covered by the mass media, and even the provocation of German cinema to produce a plethora of both fiction and non-fictional films in response to both the RAF and the state's counter-terrorist response to it. This is not so far-fetched given that prominent filmmakers like Rainer Werner Fassbinder had enough connection to members of the RAF to make them the object of counter terrorist surveillance, which would subsequently be dramatized in his contribution to the *Germany in Autumn* (1978) collective cinematic response to these events. In both cases we can say that both Meins and Meinhof were looking for a guerrilla mode of expression beyond the constraints of capitalist media, even if this more frequently took the form of militant and violent actions than the production of media in a conventional sense.

However, even for underground, clandestine groups this did not necessarily have to be the case. A contrasting example to the RAF is the Weather Underground in the United States that similarly developed out of the more radical wing of the 1960s student movement. While in the beginning, the Weather Underground were planning an RAF style violent bombing of a dance of US military officers, the failure of this action led to a rethinking of tactics, so that while bombs were still deployed, care was taken through warnings and the selection of targets for this to have no fatalities and only destroy property. More importantly for the purposes of this article is that the bombings increasingly became just a way of getting media attention and were accompanied but increasingly detailed communiques which became the main point of the bombings. As Dan Berger put it, Weather members of the

1970s were as much media professionals as professional revolutionaries:

“Most of the group’s communiques were press packets, often seven or eight pages long and as thick as the press releases of the government agencies being attacked.”
(Berger, 2006, 175)

But the Guerrilla media of the Weather Underground was hardly limited to communiques- from their initial declaration of war sent to and played on countercultural underground radio stations onwards, they expressed their ideas and positions via a wide variety of media. Perhaps the most dramatic instance of this was the Emile de Antonio film made with the group called *Underground* (1975), which was produced at a time when they were on the FBI’s most wanted list. As de Antonio put it when the US government was trying to ban the film, releasing the film

“would embarrass a government whose vast resources had failed to locate a network of fugitives that a middle-aged filmmaker had found without any difficulty.”
(De Antonio cited in Berger, 2006, 222)

This film really should be considered as a co-production between the Weather Underground and de Antonio since the group had a major say not only in the content of the film but its form, since it needed to be filmed in such a way (using veils, mirrors etc) that would preserve its members clandestine anonymity. Additionally to this unlikely activity for a clandestine group, the Weather Underground also produced a journal *Osawatomie*, and a collective book *Prairie Fire: The Politics of Revolutionary Anti-Imperialism* (see Dohrn et al, 2006, 231–388), the successful clandestine delivery of which to a whole network of radical bookstores was perhaps one of their most successful and important actions, with the book gaining approval from left wing figures who had previously been hostile to the perceived dogmatism of the group. However their subsequent attempt to co-organise a radical conference with the above ground Prairie Fire Organising Committee was a disaster and more or less spelt the end of the group’s relevance as they were rejected by feminist, African-American and other activist groups for positioning themselves as

the vanguard of the anti-imperialist movement. Nevertheless, their activities as producers of guerrilla media, completely outside of the usual networks of production and dissemination are highly significant for an understanding of both the potentials and limits of guerrilla media in the classical sense of the term.

Ludic “Communication Guerrillas” and Radical Media

If guerrilla media was limited to media in support of the armed struggles of guerrilla groups, it would already be a substantial contribution to twentieth century radical media. However, almost from the beginning guerrilla media started to take on other senses in relation to counter-culture, non-militarised social movements and ultimately all modes of non-hegemonic media production and circulation. Certainly this has led to a dilution of the concept especially in some of the worst abuses of the term like guerrilla marketing; nevertheless along the way some of the boldest instances of guerrilla media have been autonomous from any armed struggle, with differing relations to a range of social movements. In order to limit what could be a very wide scope of this kind of guerrilla media, this article will limit itself to guerrilla media related in some way to the same counter culture and social movements related to the student movements of the 1960s in Europe and North America, before presenting two case studies of guerrilla television in the United States in the 1970s and punk guerrilla media, mostly focusing on the context of the UK.

A key concept in this communicational context is that of the “ludic”, or the game-like nature of communications systems, which “communication guerrillas” have adopted a range of tactics and strategies to engage with. These strategies are extensively catalogued in the collectively authored book *Comunicazione-guerriglia: Tattiche di agitazione gioiosa e resistenza luica all’oppressione* (Communication Guerrilla: Tactics of joyful agitation and ludic resistance to oppression, 2001), which deals with a range of examples including strategies like anonymity, multiple names, pranks, fakes, subvertising and other practices that have been used by a range of communication guerrillas to disrupt what they call “cultural grammar” (23–28ff). These practices, while having a range

of historical antecedents, became especially popularised in the 1970s and 1980s a period of defeat of revolutionary movements, and this was hardly accidental. If conventional guerrilla media depended on a liberated zone of free expression of truth without censorship or reprisals, more subtle and complex strategies were needed in a world where there is no such zone and dominant communicational media had to be confronted on their own terrain even if by forms of underground, alternative or “pirate” media. This is where the ludic come in as a way of intervening not only in the content of communicational media but in its structural logics, by subverting the mechanisms by means of which information circulates and replicates itself in what would become known as a viral manner.

A key grouping in this regard was the Situationist International which, originally appearing as an artistic avant-garde group and later, after multiple purges, as a political one, in fact was neither in any conventional sense of the term. What really distinguished them was an early understanding of communicational logics as fundamental to the operations of contemporary capitalism, rather than a superstructural, merely ideological epiphenomenon. This insight would famously be expressed in Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), but prior to this they developed a range of aesthetico-political strategies that were not only highly influential on a whole range of subsequent communication guerrilla practices but shifted the terrain of contestation from the conventionally political sphere, or the sphere of high culture to the popular cultural arena and its rich potential for subversion. A key strategy in this regard was *détournement*, the modification of an already existing artefact whether by radically changing the context or by modifying the object itself or both. Early experiments in this regard involved buying kitsch paintings from junk stores and overpainting them in an art brut manner, bringing out or creating a dialectical clash with the original object and its buried meanings. Later versions of this would include things like René Viénet’s films like *Can Dialectics Break Bricks* (1973) which retitled a commercial martial arts film with a discourse about different revolutionary tendencies exposed by the recent events of 1968 and its aftermath, aiming thereby to subvert the logic of the spectacle. Typically, such practices open multiple levels of

meaning and the radical message is inseparable from a ludic and entertaining play with reigning conventions.

Other key situationist practices like the *dérive* and the associated concept of psychogeography were no less influential in multiple contexts with or without any connection to its initial radical intentions. The *dérive* involves an aleatory practice of urban drifting as a way of tracing the effects of the built urban environment on emotional and mental states. The idea being that this “research” would be fundamental for a revolutionary urbanism, to redesign urban environments to maximise their joyful potentials rather than the poverty of subservience to the dictates of labour and consumer capitalism. The reverberations of these practices are multi-faceted and extend from currents within urban studies to literary and cinematic “London Psychogeography” associated with writers like Iain Sinclair and filmmakers like Chris Petit. A stranger and more clearly guerrilla media tendency was that of so-called “landscape theory (*fukeiron*)” that informed the work of several radical Japanese filmmakers at the end of the 1960s (see Furuhashi, 2013). Responding critically to the mass media representation of spectacular violence, filmmakers including Masao Adachi, Nagisa Oshima and Kôji Wakamatsu became interested in the idea that the urban landscape already latently expressed the dynamics of class struggle and therefore shifted attention away from spectacular violence itself to the urban environment. This was done most consistently in the film *AKA Serial Killer* (1969) which responded to a key example of mass mediated spectacular violence in the case of the young loner turned serial killer Norio Nagayama. The film avoids all representation of the violent events of this case and focuses instead wholly on these environments, shown in static long takes, as if by studying the environment it would be possible to understand the collective forces that gave rise to the spectacular events since it retains traces of political contestations and in turn conditions events and behaviour. Without there being any direct influence, similar strategies can be seen in the work of Straub and Huillet in Europe who in films like *Too Early, Too Late* (1982) show only long takes of landscapes accompanied by the readings of texts about class struggle related to these same environments, and therefore also propose the

idea that political struggle leaves invisible traces in environments that can be read using an audiovisual strategy that ultimately derives from the *dérive*.

As a final example we can consider the post situationist intervention into Italian politics in the 1970s in the form of the report entitled *The Real Report on the Last Chance of saving Capitalism in Italy* (1975) originally attributed only to the pseudonym, Censor. This report, widely believed to derive from the upper echelons of the government, industry or the Italian intelligence services, fully acknowledged the complicity of the state in acts of terrorism that had been previously attributed to the far left or the unaided far right, revealing the working of the so-called “strategy of tension” that was up to this point considered nothing more than a left wing conspiracy theory. It also proposed incorporating the far left into the government to defuse left wing resistance, in a strategy that would soon actually be adopted in the “historic compromise” between the Christian Democrat and Italian Communist parties, leading the latter to become an instrument of repression of the autonomist social movement. The revelation of the real authors of this report namely Gianfranco Sanguinetti with input from Guy Debord, was a double blow against the regime since it not only revealed the conspiratorial violence of the governing regime, but was also taken to be true and widely reported in the mass media. This was effective only because it was believed to originate from an insider and this false attribution facilitated a real shift in what was admitted to be true and allowed to be included in media discourse about the political constitution of contemporary Italy, namely the idea that “counter-terrorism” was in fact terrorism as carried out by the “strategy of tension” (see Sanguinetti, 1979). Such use of false attribution would be used widely in future forms of ludic guerrilla media, notably by the group The Yes Men, whose entire modus operandi was to gain access to the corporate world via impersonation of companies like Dow Chemical, such as their celebrated “Golden Skeleton/acceptable risk” lecture at a London banking conference in 2005 (Yes Men, n.d.). Having made a fake Dow website the group managed to get invited to the conference, and presented the idea in the wake of the Dow Bhopal disaster of the profitability of acceptable risk in turning unavoidable industrial deaths

into golden, ie profitable skeletons, complete with elaborate skeleton props. This proved highly embarrassing for Dow who, due to the presentation, were obliged to offer a much higher degree of compensation to the Bhopal victims. This use of fake identities to provoke real events has been a key guerrilla media strategy from the 1960s to the present.

Guerrilla Television as Ambivalent and Pivotal Moment of Guerrilla Media

Perhaps the most well-known, as well as the most ambivalent, conjugation of the word “guerrilla” with media expression was in the US guerrilla television movement which emerged directly out of the late 1960s hippie counterculture taking advantage of the newfound availability of video technology, making possible a radically different conception and practice of television. While this arguably had already informed video art, its location in the gallery and use of largely closed circuit video and disdain for any form of broadcasting meant that it was more an outgrowth of contemporary art rather than a reinvention of television in an institutional sense. Nevertheless, early exhibitions like *Television as a Creative Medium* held at the Howard Wise gallery on 57th street in Manhattan in 1969 drew the interest of future guerrilla television producers as much as video artists, who shared ambitions to use the newly available technology to create alternative ways of producing, distributing and consuming video. However, whereas video artists sought to do this for largely aesthetic reasons, and in the context of the gallery, guerrilla media was conceived as an activist intervention within television, even if the cultural politics of this intervention was not always clearly defined.

At any rate it was through the meeting of attendees at this exhibition of Michael Shamberg, Paul Ryan (Marshall McLuhan’s research assistant) and Frank Gillette that the Raindance Corporation would be formed, giving rise to the publication of the magazine *Radical Software* and the book *Guerrilla Television* (1971) which would condense the heterogeneous contents of the former into a kind of guerrilla television manual, albeit one with little in common with the urban guerrilla manuals previously discussed. *Radical Software* combined practical concerns about using video technology in a range of DIY contexts, with an

awareness of video technology as a new media ecology, often ascribed with global and even cosmic attributes. The influence of McLuhan's ideas were very apparent as well as an eccentric range of other media ecological thinkers like Buckminster Fuller, Gregory Bateson and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin which showed the origins of guerrilla media in the more hippie rather than militant regions of the 60s counterculture. In the place of Marxist derived theories of class struggle, however updated, a more cybercultural techno-anarchist mode of thinking was adopted and reflected in the name of the journal. If words like "radical" and "guerrilla" were still used, this was not without radical shifts in their meanings. As Shamberg put it in *Guerrilla Television*:

*"The use of the word 'guerrilla' is a sort of a bridge between an old and a new consciousness. The name of our publication, **Radical Software**, performs a similar function. Most people think of something 'radical' as being political but we do not. We do, however, believe in post-political solutions to cultural problems which are **radical** in their discontinuity with the past."*

(Shamberg, 1971, n.p. emphasis in original)

This did not mean that guerrilla television would not engage with politics at all, but rather that it would do so in line with a cultural politics that was seeking to use new technologies to create alternative information structures to dominant media on all levels. For Shamberg and his associates, conventional left politics was too trapped in binary structures to effect real change and what was needed was a more complex ecological approach to media and technology that would seek to radically decentre and democratise their use from large corporate structures to everyday DIY practices. But this would not be through the previous understandings of guerrilla television as the hacking into existing television stations and transmissions to deliver radical content but rather by the creation of alternatives, maximising feedback and process over products, and aiming to transform mainstream media from the inside rather than attacking it from a supposed outside "pure" radical position. This did not mean appearing on existing television networks and attempting to disrupt them, which Shamberg claimed would always result

in failure due to the lack of control over the transmission, but creating alternative networks whether through tape exchange or the public access television that was still in the process of being developed that would be relatively free of interference.

Public access television was fundamental for the development of guerrilla television since merely circulating videotapes, however radical, was only going to be a highly limited and inefficient mode of distribution. Due partly to the pressure of video activists as well as educational organisations, in 1972 laws were passed requiring cable companies to make some channels available for public, educational and governmental use to serve the communities they were reaching. As guerrilla television producers were already creating material that was needed to fulfil this obligation, for a brief period there was a perfect opportunity for guerrilla television to have dissemination channels below the level of national broadcasters but reaching far more people than informal networks of exchange. However, as Deirdre Boyle has pointed out, this was a short-lived alliance as once cable companies had obtained their licences, they tended to drop these public access channels as fast as they could get away with.

In this context it is legitimate to ask how guerrilla was guerrilla television, and what kind of break did it constitute from conventional conceptions of television? For all the rhetoric of television made by the people and for the people, there is a slippage in *Guerrilla Television* between a more radical use of the term and advocating a small business entrepreneurialism that is much more amenable to capitalist control, especially as it would be reformulated in neoliberalism. While Shamberg is happy to paraphrase Mao in some passages describing guerrilla television as swimming like fish among the people, the actual practice of the guerrilla television made by TVTV (Top Value Television) that emerged out of Raindance was much more a practice of low budget DIY entrepreneurialism than anything revolutionary.

TVTV initially became known for its alternative coverage of mainstream political events such as Democrat and Republican conventions which was hardly a radical choice of subject matter, even if they did turn their cameras on the mainstream media coverage and accompanying outside protests in ways that were quite foreign to how mainstream

media operated at such events. Nevertheless, for TVTV, politics whether of a mainstream or alternative variety was essentially nothing more than good material for making videotapes. Even if other guerrilla television organisations like People's Video Theater or Communitube were more engaged with supporting social activism, and therefore close to radical film collectives, the post political theorising that informed the practice of TVTV separated it from media activism. As Deirdre Boyle put it:

"Shamberg equated guerrilla television with community or grassroots video, but they were actually different species of video activity. Guerrilla television producers professed an interest in community video, but they were generally far more interested in developing the video medium and getting tapes aired, than serving a local constituency."
(Boyle, 1997, 34)

In other words despite the rhetoric in *Guerrilla Television* about being all about process and video made by the people and for the people, in reality it was a small business alternative model for producing and distributing television products, and one that would become easily incorporated into the television industry which was already on the verge of being broken up through the advent of cable networks and more individualised, decentralised models of production. Nevertheless, however co-opted TVTV might have become, its desire to challenge the control and monopoly of corporate television did inspire future generations of video and media activists, some of whom remained closer to the initial meanings of guerrilla media as presenting radically different perspectives and practices to the mainstream, even if the idea of guerrilla media as merely involving low budget DIY entrepreneurialism that was at best reformist rather than revolutionary also began to gain currency following the theory and practice of guerrilla television in the 1970s.

Guerrilla and Punk Convergence: Records, Radio and Fanzines

This ambivalent sense of guerrilla media in the slippage between merely DIY small scale entrepreneurialism and actual political content and form can also be seen across what I have

called the punk media ecology encompassing, records and tapes, flyers and posters, fanzines, gigs and other events, fashion and graphic design (see Goddard, 2018, 166 ff). If early UK punk groups like The Sex Pistols and The Clash injected some explicitly political content into an only reformed rock idiom, this politics was belied by deals with major labels of the recording industry thereby echoing the contradictions of radical publishing pointed out by Meinhof a decade earlier. Notwithstanding this, The Clash, in particular, aligned themselves through fashion, album cover art and lyrics with urban guerrillas, Joe Strummer going as far as sporting a T Shirt which combined Red Army Faction and Brigade Rosse (Italian Red Brigades) logos. However, while namechecking these groups as icons of rebellion they were also treated critically as in the lyrics for the song Tommy Gun: "You'll be dead when your war is won/Tommy gun/But did you have to gun down everyone?" (The Clash, 1978). More significantly The Clash pointed to the rise of pirate radio both through songs that critiqued the emptiness of commercial radio and presented histories of pirate broadcasting and operated themselves as a kind of pirate radio station informing their listeners of political struggles on a global scale as evident especially on *Sandinista* (1980) and *This is Radio Clash* (1981). But for all the guerrilla allusions and style, The Clash ultimately operated as a hard-working conventional rock band or certainly became one (see Goddard, 2020).

Other groups, however, operated very differently, with a much more DIY approach to producing material. Bands as different as the pop punk Buzzcocks and the experimental art punk band Swell Maps produced recordings entirely independently, only allying with even independent labels like Rough Trade Records for distribution purposes. Nevertheless, such releases could only be seen as guerrilla in the DIY sense not in terms of any political content. The first punk group to really create a full guerrilla media ecology was Crass who were deliberately set up as a reaction against all the inconsistencies and they would say hypocrisies of first-generation punk. Taking anarchy seriously, they were not only responsible for founding anarcho-punk but created a whole operating model that would be highly influential on the future development of punk scenes worldwide and especially on US hardcore.

Crass not only created recordings independently but used them to question not only all dominant political ideologies but also every aspect of punk expression up to this point. This went from rejecting the fairly conventional rock and roll form of punk recordings whether by playing faster with shouted vocals, or using free form improvisations with more in common with free jazz than conventional punk aesthetics. More than this, album art mostly produced by Gee Vaucher, was also highly political and releases were accompanied by extensive texts that further explained the group's political views as expressed in the lyrics. Crass's albums were therefore a platform on which a whole range of issues including anarchy, peace movements, nuclear disarmament, gender issues, ecology and others could be discussed openly. This went to the extent of giving the address of the Dial House commune, where its key members like Penny Rimbaud and Steve Ignorant lived, on album covers, performing where possible in unconventional venues like community centres, insisting on low prices for both gigs and albums, and setting up independent distribution channels with other anarcho-punk bands which sprouted up all over the country following the example of Crass (see Worley, 2017, 160–164ff). While there are few examples of groups or scenes following every aspect of the Crass playbook, certainly a lot of it can be seen in the ethos of Ian McKay's US hardcore label Dischord, as well as the *modus operandi* of his bands Minor Threat and even more so Fugazi which had a similar approach to Crass towards venues, accessibility and insisting on full independence, as well as explicit politics, albeit of a less strident or proselytising variety (see Grubbs 2008, 6–43). As with Crass, it was at least in part due to adopting this guerrilla model of fully independent production that enabled Dischord and its bands to have such a substantial influence, despite avoiding all of the usual marketing mechanisms like appearing in the national music press or making music videos. For example, the "straight edge" ethos first expressed in a Minor Threat song, as a personal decision to avoid alcohol and promiscuous sex, soon spread throughout hardcore scenes to the point of becoming fanatical and militant in the 1990s.

These tensions or contradictions can equally be seen in the proliferation of fanzines during the punk era. While these informal

publications had antecedents in the hippie counterculture and its underground press, during the punk period there was an explosion of these publications, often primarily the work of a single fan wanting to communicate their enthusiasm for specific groups and scenes and find a resonant mode of expression to the music itself. All of these fanzines combined the recent availability of Xerox photocopying, with cut and paste graphic design, some of which had been developed first as album art, and a DIY attitude. As Matthew Worley et al. put it, following the seminal example of Mark Perry's *Sniffin' Glue*, fanzines combined:

"fervid text with cut 'n' paste imagery that was Roneo-stencilled or Xeroxed to be sold for minimal cost at gigs, school, college, or in local record shops."

(Worley et al 2018, 2)

Worley et al also point out that while beginning as mere juvenile fandom, punk fanzines like the bands they were writing about developed rapidly, often taking on more explicitly political perspectives:

"Not only do they provide portals to a particular time and place, with parochialism transformed into resonant snapshots of cultures beyond the hubbub of London's media, but they also offer glimpses of the interests, concerns and opinions of youthful milieux."

(Worley et al 2018, 1f)

It was often only in their evolution that the properly radical potential of punk fanzines became apparent. For example, Tony Drayton began *Ripped and Torn* primarily as a vehicle for his fandom of Adam and the Ants who, in the wake of the disintegration of The Sex Pistols seemed for a short while as the leading lights for future punk evolution. However, this all changed radically when Drayton encountered the music and politics of Crass, which made his previous fanzine seem like child's play. Instead of simply having new content he started a new zine with the provocative title of *Kill Your Pet Puppy*, which was a forum for discussing "anarchist politics and esoterica" (Worley et al, 2018, 2). An even more dramatic evolution can be seen in the case of the Bay Area fanzine *Search and Destroy* started by Vale. While always

more than just a punk zine, distinguished by high production standards, and interests in esoterica and beat writers like William S. Burroughs, alongside articles on and interviews with punk and industrial bands, it became something else entirely when reinvented as *RE:Search*. These book like publications were now mainly engaged with both the groups and wider concerns of industrial music, and went so far into the cultural sphere as to publish hard to access literary work by Burroughs, J. G. Ballard and Octave Mirbeau, as well as devoting special issues to these figures. Most famously their *Industrial Culture Handbook* (issues 6/7) which combined wide ranging discussion with an eclectic range of both musical groups and performance artists, with extended discussion of anomalous figures like Jim Jones, Charles Manson and Aleister Crowley and extensive film viewing and reading lists, became definitive of the range of interests that would constitute the industrial music genre and subculture. Emerging out of the West Coast scene which was much more experimental than politically focused at that time, there was no obvious politics expressed by *RE/Search*, especially since it tended to give much more room to interviews with the bands and other authors than any editorial position. Nevertheless, it was clearly enacting a subcultural politics, and embracing ideas from industrial bands like Throbbing Gristle and Cabaret Voltaire of contributing to an information war against “control” by making extreme, underground, occult and experimental materials available to a wider audience.

A final example is the London zine *Vague* which, despite beginning as just another fanzine, morphed into a wide ranging psychogeographical exploration of all the currents informing punk, including the legacies of radical post-1960s counterculture. In a sense this comes full circle as one of these currents that *Vague* was especially interested in was urban guerrilla movements and several issues contained discussions of British radical groups like King Mob and The Angry Brigade, as well as an entire book on the chronology of the Red Army Faction called *Televisionaries* (see Vague ed., 1994; Vague, 2018). Nevertheless, despite all these explicit references to these and other radical political groups, the politics of *Vague* was no more explicit than the meaning of Joe Strummer’s T-Shirt; certainly these groups were being held up as icons of rebellion, but

not uncritically and certainly not as a path to be followed. In many ways they were not treated that differently to the ways fanzine writers would discuss their bands of choice—information and chronologies were given, with some interpretation and value judgements, but more as a kind of minor history of a neglected phenomenon than to advocate any explicit guerrilla politics. In a way, this was an accurate reflection of punk itself, that firstly could not be defined by any specific political stance, not even anarchism, nor by a consistent relationship to politics, despite initiatives like Rock Against Racism. Ultimately radical politics became, just as it did for the practitioners of Guerrilla Television, just a kind of material to engage with and disseminate, other than some key ideas picked up on from some of these groups such as Situationist psychogeography.

The Guerrilla Media Concept Today

Given the multiple ambivalences surrounding the term guerrilla media even in the 1970s, what relevance can it have today in the cybercultural or even post-internet context of social media? Certainly some of the functions that alternative forms of media were seeking such as many to many communication and community building migrated to the Internet in the 1990s only to be subject to corporate take over and monopolisation via mega platforms like Facebook, YouTube and others. Projects like Indymedia, with its aims of creating fully independent file and video sharing via the Internet seem today to be archaic and quaint and to have more in common with radical media of the 1970s than with the present conjunction, despite only happening twenty years ago. But this outdatedness was already being picked up on in the 1990s by the Critical Art Ensemble, for example, and was subsequently echoed in Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker’s book *The Exploit*. Essentially this critique is based on the idea that when power has become deterritorialised and networked, territorial strategies of resistance no longer produce any effects. So, blowing up a building or other site, however important, or hacking into a television station, is not going to make the least bit of difference, if power is essentially distributed and decentralised. It is possible to argue that this was already the case in the 1970s, and that the RAF, for example, could be easily hunted down

and its members shot or arrested because the West German police, aided by new computer networks, was better at being nomadic and distributed than the urban guerrilla network. Nevertheless, the concepts of guerrilla media extended beyond merely local actions and at their best were aimed at mobilising resistance at as wide a level as possible whether this was in the context of the Cuban *Radio Rebelde*, a political pirate radio or guerrilla television broadcast or a punk or industrial fanzine. Ultimately, I would argue that it is neither the pole of guerrilla media as an extension of armed struggle, nor the other pole of mere small-scale entrepreneurialism that is its most enduring legacy. Instead it is the

inbetween path of ludic subversion and play with dominant communicational codes that still retains relevance today. While necessarily operating in specific cultural political contexts, ludic subversion of dominant media codes whether of billboards, Websites or social media platforms can and have been the sites of tactical media interventions that clearly draw upon this legacy and do so up to the present moment and communicational context. To be effective, however, such guerrilla media methods need to be constantly re-invented in relation to shifting modalities of power as well as dominant media channels.

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