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Video Restoration Lab I - Fall 2011

Researching Production History

Documentary Video Production, 1990s – Appalshop

Decade of Transition up in the Mountains

The 1990s was a decade of transition for video. After several years of analog video and linear editing workflows, the onset of digital production and non-linear editing systems came about during this time. The introduction of such technologies had an impact on video makers across disciplines and institutions ranging from media activists to the newsroom. But the transition did not occur overnight for many. For most the 90s was a decade of trials and errors as they try to figure out the direction they will be heading. And for some, it was about striking a balance between the old and the new. That was the case for the documentary filmmakers of Appalshop.

Starting as a community film workshop for the youth of Appalachia in 1969, Appalshop has grown today into a multi-disciplinary arts and cultural center based up in the mountains in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Though it now engages in various media ranging from radio to theater, Appalshop has always been known for its documentaries given the subject matters they cover and the distinct style they employ.

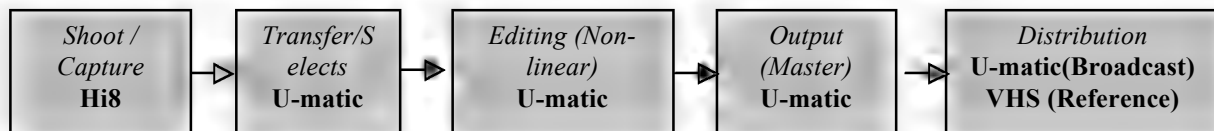
Initially making their documentaries on film, Appalshop eventually moved to video production during the mid 80s. They developed and upgraded to a new workflow during the 90s balancing out their familiarity with the old and utilizing some of the new technologies available then. Their reasons were primarily out of practicality. With limited resources, the institution thought it best at that moment to work with the equipments and infrastructures they already had and make some efficient adjustments where possible.

And though there are few who continued to work on film and a even fewer who dabbled with digital and linear editing, majority of the productions then still remained analog. In particular one of Appalshop's key projects, the Appalachian Media Institute (AMI), followed this analog video workflow in training young people in the region in documentary production.

The Old and The New

Regardless of format and workflow, the Appalshop documentary style and approach has remained the same since its first generation of filmmakers. The Appalshop documentary tradition is one grounded in honesty and brevity that is part folklore storytelling, part cinema verite and part visual poetics. An Appalshop documentary, simply put, is mainly composed of interviews with some cutaways about the subject matter and b-rolls of the landscapes of Appalachia. Focus is given to the man, the land and his story and this is reflected in their production choices when they shoot and edit.

Given their then robust U-matic editing suites equipped with editing controllers and graphic devices, Appalshop continued with linear editing through most of the 90s most specially with their AMI productions. They however embraced Hi8 as their format of choice in shooting given its portability and cost. They then finished things in U-matic and made broadcast copies on the same format and reference copies on VHS.



Shooting

Moving away from their 8mm/Video8 to the improved version that is Hi8, Appalshop shot and captured their materials with Handycams on this small portable format. Given, at that time, the comparatively high video and audio quality they get from the format, Appalshop documentarians captured their raw footage on Hi8. These footage include mostly interviews, sound recordings, music tracks and b-rolls.

For a short form 20 minute documentary, which is an Appalshop-AMI standard, there will usually be around 15 Hi8 camera original tapes. Most of these raw footage are valuable hour long interviews.

Transfer

Given the editing infrastructure they already have and heavily invested in Appalshop continued to edit using their U-matic suites. This entailed the need to transfer their Hi8 footage to U-matic tapes for editing. They did this by re-recording the Hi8 footage as the source video on to a U-matic tape. The camcorder served as the source VCR. There are transfer losses as this is done as some of the signals irretrievably degraded or were lost.

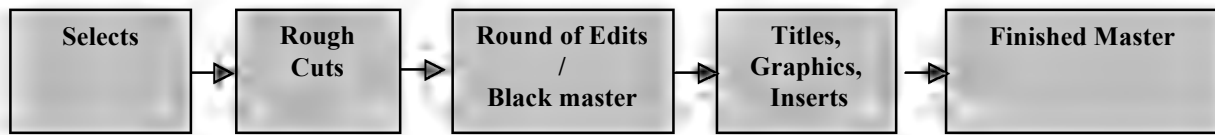
Usually all of the footage on a Hi8 tape is transferred to U-matic. At times though, the documentarians would opt to selectively record only parts of the raw materials that he/she will use cutting down the amount of transferred work tapes. These selects will then be used during the tape-to-tape non-linear editing process.

Non-linear Editing

Appalshop's U-matic editing suites were furnished well equipped with editing controllers, time based correctors, graphic generators, and various adapters and controllers. The suites were also capable of video and audio insert editing.

The tape-to-tape editing process involved working with the selects and transferred footage on U-matic. With two VCRs, one source and one record, and at times a graphic generator in between, the editors have to go through a series of sequential edits also known as

assemble editing.



Because signal loss and picture disturbance can be seen at the end of re-recorded sections, assemble editing requires that each new video clip was recorded before the end of the last as to cover up this disturbance. There were always sections of instability and the goal was to push them all the way to the end of the piece after a long black.

Adding titles and graphics was fairly straight forward since it was already part of the suite's infrastructure placed in between the source and record machines. While video, image and sound inserts were done over the top of pre-recorded footage to keep its stability and clean beginning and end points, as they were dependent upon the synch pulse of the video underneath.

This editing process resulted to even more work tapes and various cuts on U-matic. Additional select and outtakes were drawn as well.

Output and Distribution

The production finished and created masters on U-matic of which dubs were created from. For general access and distribution through sales, VHS copies were made from this master. Later during the decade, Appalshop made compilations of its masters on Betacams.

Appalshop also had a half-hour weekly slot on the local commercial television station, WKYH-TV in Hazard, Kentucky. The show was called *Headwaters* and it featured the works from the organization. Appalshop then made broadcast copies on U-matic for the television station.

Given the economic realities back then in the region, production and broadcast were not at par with current practices elsewhere.

Preserving a Bag of Tapes

A single production then would generally have raw footage / camera originals on Hi8, selects and work tapes on U-matic, finished masters and dubs on U-matic, access/distribution copies on VHS and broadcast tapes on U-matic.

Though the number of materials may vary from production to production due to differing scope and style, the production workflow, elements, and deliverables laid out above are the general guide points for Appalshop documentarians and the students of AMI.

Elements	Format
camera originals	Hi8
selects / work tapes / cuts	U-matic
finished master / dubs	
broadcast copy	VHS
access / distribution copies	

Preserving the elements of these 90s Appalshop productions is a challenge given the nature of the formats used and the limited accessibility of the necessary equipments available. Looking at the instabilities and obsolescence of the formats together with assessing the value of the elements and the content, priorities can be drawn accordingly.

Hi8

Hi8 tapes are known for its instability as it is highly susceptible to magnetic particle erosions and eventual dropouts. Given that most of these tapes are well beyond ten years now, they are highly at risk. Furthermore, these Hi8 tapes are the camera originals. They have almost all of the content including raw footage in their highest quality as it is the original / first generation.

These put the Hi8 camera originals on top of the priority list. Preserving them will secure the longevity and access to rich materials such as valuable interviews which serves as oral histories and b-rolls that capture the beauty of the mountains and the faces of its people.

U-matic

The whole transferring and tape-to-tape editing lead to some signal loss along the way which made the U-matic videos subpar in quality compared to the Hi8 originals. And though the format itself is obsolete and has bigger preservation challenges than that of the Hi8, most of the U-matic elements are comparatively less important and redundant to the Hi8 raw footage.

That is of course except for the finished masters, preservation dubs and broadcast tapes which originated on U-matic tapes and consequently are high priorities.

VHS

With poor video quality and the sheer amount of copies available, there is no real need to do preservation work on these access/distribution copies on VHS.

Moving Forward

Today, Appalshop has digitized most of its 90s productions. They have made access and distribution copies on DVDs and some are even available for streaming online. Given such actions, less priority can now be given to the U-matic tapes which hold these finished masters. More than ever though, corresponding preservation plans must be enacted towards the Hi8 camera originals as the wider availability of these finished works can yield to further inquiries and requests regarding their rich raw materials.

With the developments in digitization and non-linear editing, much can be done with these materials. For one, these documentaries can be reconstructed from scratch using the original raw footage and referencing the finished works which will yield to an output that is of higher quality than that of the original U-matic masters.

In this case we see how one institution adapted during a decade of transition striking a balance between the old and the new and utilizing what they already have while also trying something new. And though their workflow was not the most efficient, given transfer loss and the disadvantages of tape-to-tape editing, they made do with what they had and what they can get.

Resources

Correspondence with Elizabeth Barrett (Documentary Filmmaker, Archives Director) and Caroline Rubens (Archivist), Appalshop.

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