Guerrilla News Network's Digital Documentaries
Interview with Stephen Marshall

GEERT LOVINK

The political videos of Guerrilla News Network are a challenging affair, in terms of their content, aesthetics and distribution. Deeply hybrid, GNN is crossing boundaries in such a professional – and easy – manner, it almost seems that we have landed in the perfect, tactical media future. On GNN, it is trance meets Chomsky. Without leaving behind the tradition of political documentary video and investigative journalism, GNN uniquely frames classic footage in an innovative television format. Edited as high pulse video clips, the works are designed as interactive art works and distributed simultaneously on VHS, DVD, as television signal and, last but not least, as streaming video content on the web. In fact, the website is the centrepiece of the GNN operation and not only works as a video portal but also serves as a platform for daily written Newswires. GNN topics range from Environment, the War on Terror and Intelligence. My favourite is *S-11 Redux*, a scratch video masterpiece that jams American news footage – a delightful deconstruction of the late 2001 hysteria, leading up to the invasion of Afghanistan.

Canadian writer and video director Stephen Marshall has been involved in desktop video and the handy-cam revolution since 1995 when he ran Channel Zero, an 'underground' video magazine, which had wide distribution through stores such as HMV, Tower and Virgin. After Channel Zero fell apart, Stephen worked as a DJ in New York and Toronto. In early 2000 he got together with MTV's Josh Shore and together they created GNN. At the height of the dotcom boom, Guerrilla News Network was launched as a hot, content-rich multi-media site. After having produced two videos, one on the diamond trade in Sierra Leone and one on CIA's involvement in drug traffic, GNN merged with another alt-news web venture and attracted a few other professionals. I met Stephen Marshall at Chicago's exciting Version New Media Festival in March 2003, where we decided to keep track of each other's movements. Precisely because of GNN's political overtone, I kicked off the interview with camcorder technologies and digital video aesthetics. All the rest you can see and judge for yourself: www.gnn.tv.

>> **Geert Lovink:** Could you tell us something about your editing technique? You seem to edit on the rhythm of the music, that's the feel one gets, but perhaps the content is not always ready to follow that logic. How do you solve that tension?

>> **Stephen Marshall:** It is important to know that, besides being a video director, I am also a progressive trance DJ. And I have always been deeply interested in the alchemy of sound and live 'editing' of beats that happens in the clubland culture of dj-ing. So when I cut videos, it is really just an extension of that process. The visuals are just another layer of

meaning but not necessarily a more important one. I think that anyone who is seriously dedicated to the creation of transformative media – and by that I mean media that has as its core goal the (sub) conscious evolution of its audience – the study of human perception is critical. You simply cannot attempt the production relevant socio-political media while ignoring the avenues of receptivity that are innate to your audience. And we know that, in that respect, sound precedes image. Human beings hear before they see. Before there was light, there was 'the sound'. You know? It's just fundamental. And what I learnt from DJing is that there is a whole array of reactions and responses that can be triggered in people through the purposeful architecture of sonic frequencies – at least in the way that they move their bodies. So much of the art of dj-ing is about building a narrative with the music, one that is inclusive and has impact enough that people never leave the dance floor.

Applying this to GNN, my intention has always been to merge the subliminal elements of electronic music culture with the overt and traditionally barren transmission of socio-political data. And not just because of my own artistic fetishes. There has been such a huge dropping off in the relevance and popularity of the documentary genre, and all news programming for that matter, which is really quite alarming. If young people are not engaged in the gathering and trading of data that directly informs their perception of society, the potential for a widespread tactical overthrow of the system is threatened. And if activist content producers are not willing to use all the means at their disposal to compete with the mainstream broadcast spectacle, then they are not serious about building a movement to silence it. So, in my approach to the editing and design of the GNN news videos, the primary focus is always on building synergetic media that is driven by a musical narrative. Because that is what the younger generation responds to. Nike knows this. Coca-Cola knows this. And we should not ignore the time and research they have put into attracting and conforming the attention of the youth through their advertising campaigns. In many cases I have let the music guide the editing process and conformed it to that, because the original concept for the GNN news videos was that they exist as a new form of 'enhanced' music video – political films that were scored by pre-produced ambient or beat-driven tracks. So right from the start, we knew that there was going to be a tension because we wouldn't just be cutting the video and then sticking in loops after the fact. The editing would be done to the track itself. So I would spend a lot of time looking for tracks that evoked the frequency of the message inherent in the video we were producing, and then let the music guide my cuts, my design techniques and the placement of the content.

Let me give you an example: The first video I edited for GNN was called *The Most Dangerous Game*. I had shot the principle interviews a month before and decided that I wanted to go with a very basic, split-screen design that incorporated flashes of white text centred between the two screens on the bottom of the frame, so as to create a hypnotic effect. And we had made an arrangement with Mitchel Akiyama, a Montreal-based producer, to use one of his tracks. But when I began to listen to his music, it was so haunting and beautiful that it began to shape the way I was approaching the narrative. The song became primary and I found myself literally cutting the documentary to the music. You can imagine how weird and backward that is but I felt totally compelled to maintain the integrity of his composition and warped the spoken word and text around the track. So when people

watched *The Most Dangerous Game*, the first thing they always said was, "the music is so perfect for that" or "I can't believe how well that goes with the music". Obviously this was not going to be a sustainable approach to editing the news videos. Since then I have developed relationships with djs who take mp3 clips of various speakers, and then create loops that I can drop in behind them, which are specifically produced to mirror that person's vocal pitch and the tempo of their speech. In the case of *AfterMath*, we actually worked directly with Paris who gave us individual tracks for each segment and then came to the studio in post to make sure that the speeds and tempos were all synchronized. So it is an evolving process.

>> GL: Can you tell us something about the background of the infographics that you are using? Who is your main source of inspiration there? Is it in video art or documentary film- making or rather something from the world of computers?

>> SM: My first and most decisive exposure to the use of typography and text-driven design, as a pure art form, was in Peter Greenaway's *The Pillow Book*. That film, and its approach to cinematic composition of text, specifically Mandarin characters, was so beautiful that it really inspired and informed most of the work I have done since 1997. It just added an extra layer of information and, in many ways, was the next level evolution of the design that Tomato had done for all the Underworld videos of *Dubnobassinmyheadman*, which were also hugely inspiring – though not so much in a practical way, more just for their obvious love for 'type' and re-contextualization of it in the beat-driven electronica of Underworld's seminal tracks.

In all of GNN's work, the primary emphasis is on the functional dissemination of information. It may move quickly, and require multiple viewings, but the bottom line impetus is transmitting useful socio-political data. So, in that regard, I have also been very influenced by the template approach of the various twenty-four hour cable channels – the way they use their little news tickers and the Flame-enriched motion graphics to dig deep into the collective unconscious of the spectatorial masses. It's all very experimental in its own way. When I was running Channel Zero, I was actually brought into CNN by its chairman and CEO right before they got taken over by Time Warner in 1997. He wanted me to help them re-design the network and to potentially create a youth-driven news channel. I used the opportunity to work our designers to develop a series of design templates for the network. These were all based on using a new palette of colours and background designs as well as placing the newscasters in smaller boxes allowing for more space for text. We also spent a lot of time conceiving ways to make the information presented more visceral. So we came up with designs that featured key words that would pulse through the screen when they were spoken by the commentators.

These days I get most of my ideas from magazines and online design journals. There is such a powerful renaissance occurring in the realm of design but it is so seldom used to further any political or social goals. So it's actually quite easy to look at what the kids are doing with Flash and Photoshop and just riff on it within the political context of the videos we are producing.

>> GL: Could you, in theory, produce all your clips with a DV camera and a PC or Mac with

video editing tools or do you still have to go into a studio? Where will we be in a few years from now, in terms of tactical media tools?

>> **SM:** Everything that I make can be produced entirely on a laptop and a firewire cable. Of course, the larger projects really depend on drive space, but with 3 x 60 gig drives, you can basically cut a feature film. The next crucial element is software, of course, and even then we only really need a good desktop editor like Final Cut Pro as well as some basic design tools like Photoshop or After Effects. Tactical media tools have become 100% portable. I remember that when I was cutting *AfterMath*, I had to do a series of talks around the US and so I took the video on the road with me. It was a huge design project with some parts expanding over sixteen layers of video. On one flight to Chicago, I was actually designing this sequence that dealt with the failure of the military to intercept the hijacked aircraft on 9/11. I had cut out images of the actual planes and was creating an animation of the Pentagon attack, probably one of the more complicated design sequences I have ever executed. I didn't know it but there were a group of passengers all sitting behind me watching me cut. And one of them came up to me and asked me if I was playing a video game. I laughed because, even though to many people this would be considered a relatively complex process, for me it has become the equivalent of walking around with a Gameboy.

I was actually just in Iraq. And before we left, we were warned by some journalists not to bring too much equipment because it could get jacked driving across from the Jordanian border. So we just took our cameras and flak jackets and left our laptops behind. But once we got there, I realized that it would have been fine. There was no real danger of getting robbed and I could have been producing video of the situation in Baghdad right from my little hotel room, and uploading to the site through the net café downstairs. So, it's all here right now, from a tactical media perspective. What we need to focus on is the development of the infrastructure that will disseminate these clips. We need to think in terms of our own broadcast enterprise so that it is not such an atomistic, singular culture.

>> **GL:** Some of the people that I spoke with are critical of your populist approach. They also see your affiliation with conspiracy theory as a symptom of leftist media populism. How do you respond to such remarks? Where does investigative journalism stop and turn into conspiracy? Do you see such criticism as envy because GNN so successfully brings together pop aesthetics with critical content?

>> **SM:** It's interesting that you say "populist". I was just with Naomi Klein and we were talking about differences between American and European broadcasters. I was saying that, after being in Iraq and watching a lot of the BBC, I was quite impressed by some of the coverage of the war. And, specifically, about a series they had run challenging the virtues of capitalism. But she was not at all impressed, and made the point that although the BBC has more intellectual vigour and is able to find an audience for programming that publicly challenges the foundation of their economic system, there is a more ingrained elitism which pervades their coverage. One example she used was that the BBC always uses the word 'populist' to describe revolutionary or insurgent movements in countries like Bolivia or

Venezuela – as if to give the impression that they are the products of some irrational mass hysteria, instead of a deeply intrinsic and instinctual reaction to an entrenched socio-political power base that has, at its core, militarized defence mechanisms. And looking back at the coverage of the recent Bolivian protests, I found her to be very accurate in her characterization.

Like the BBC, or any organized social cluster, the so-called Left has its own entrenched elitist core. And one of their defining conventions is the whole scale rejection of any decon-struction deemed 'conspiratorial'. From Noam Chomsky to Chip Berlet, they simply deny, and in many cases, ridicule those who attempt to piece together disparate facets of a lar-ger picture in order to understand how power operates through covert channels to achieve its prime directives. I feel that this is one of the primary faults with the Left elite – and one of the major reasons for their increasingly diminished relevance with younger generations. They refuse to expand the horizon of their intellectual inquiry. For them, there is no tangible value for theory that falls outside of the institutional critique. But what kind of world would we live in if Aristotle hadn't mused on the nature of the heavenly spheres or if Newton hadn't extrapolated on the laws of gravity, or Einstein on the quotient of relativity? Or, more to the point, if Woodward and Bernstein hadn't gone down the muddy path toward expos-ing the Watergate scandal? All of these people built their cases, at one crucial juncture or another, without factual data to back them up. All of them had to postulate at certain times, and instead of drawing society away from the critical work of catalysing an overthrow of the structural paradigm, these 'theories' created entirely new constructs for the society to per-ceive itself through. Surely there is a place, in all modes of inquiry and critique, for this type of scientific adventurism … it is how we get from one place to the next. For now, I think these intellectuals do us a mild disservice by looking down their noses at even the most humble attempt to piece together and understand what is a very simplified and untenable explanation of the events.

With respect to your question about GNN, I don't think that we have a conspiratorial ethos. Nor, even, an 'affiliation with conspiracy theory'. All of our (text and video) stories are vetted with traditional journalistic standards and scrutiny. We have certainly never been accused of disseminating misinformation. Perhaps one could accuse us of slumming with conspiracy theorists, but only in one of our video productions, *Aftermath: Unanswered Questions From 9/11*. In *Aftermath*, we sought to gather perspectives from nine individuals who collectively represent a spectrum of beliefs about what occurred that day. And, yes, in that film we did feature people who wholeheartedly believe that 9/11 was orchestrated by a covert US intelligence cell, working through Al Qaeda. But we also featured a major US attorney whose deepest conspiracy theory is that the airlines did not do enough to protect their passengers, and a long-serving civil rights attorney who is concerned with the impact that the US Patriot Act will have on civil society. So there was a spectrum of opinions pre-sented, and none of them were factually inaccurate – not even the revelations concerning the Northwoods Document, which was authored by a former general in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and which called for attacks on US civilians to justify a war on Cuba.

But anyone who finds that or other facts untenable immediately accuses us of con-spiracy theory. Just as I imagine they did when Gary Webb broke the Dark Alliance story in

1996, proving that the CIA had engaged in drug traffic to support the right-wing Nicaraguan Contras. He was called a conspiracy theorist when the story first came out. But now it is accepted as historical fact. And, interestingly enough, we actually won our prize at Sundance for *Crack The CIA*, which is just a graphically enhanced, beat-driven rehash of the Contra scandal. So, clearly, young people are looking for answers to questions that go beyond the intellectual theory that is the elite Left's principal strategy for overhauling the system. If that is really what they are trying to achieve. Because the mass public will not help anyone overhaul anything unless they see tangible evidence, at a very base level, of complicit wrongdoing and overt criminality. They do not respond to hyper-verbosity. They want it tabloid style. And we can either snobbishly reject that 'populist' approach, or take our cues from the mainstream realm of advertising and music television and deliver socio-political commentary in the most charismatic style possible. Weaponize the media. And this is what we are trying to do with GNN – to help corroborate a functional algorithm for under-standing the machinations of power. If critics of the work see GNN as somehow reaching down to the lowest common denominator by questioning the motives and potential crimi-nality of the covert bodies operating on behalf of the American elites, then I have to ques-tion what their motives are. And if they have really thought it all out now, in the year 2003, with a Bush in the White House and the advent of a nuclear battlefront. Obviously they are not having much success.

The Left is invisible in American political life. Can't they see or admit to themselves that it's not working? We need to overthrow the power structure (in both the Left and the Right!), and this will only happen by creating a widespread and widely held level of public distrust of those who manipulate it for their own ends. As to the issue of jealousy, I have always taken shit for my designer approach to tactical media, which has usually been a hit with the kids. That, and my talkative personality, tend to make people think I am perhaps a little too cocky. I don't think it is a matter of envy, though. At least I hope not. It is more an issue of an establishment ethos making itself transparent in the Left elite – that they are just as old-fashioned and fuddy-duddy as the monarchies. Just look at what Roger Ailes is doing with Fox News Channel. Have you seen it? They are using some of the highest-end graphics generators to filter the Pentagon's press releases into the public consciousness. You think we have time to sit around debating whether or not to use drum'n'bass as a background score? The spectacle is in full effect and we need to build ourselves into a powerful rival if we are going to have any tangible shot at the hearts and minds of the next generation.

>> GL: What interests me in your work is that you have not dropped the 'talking heads'. In fact, you have reframed talking experts within a contemporary environment of music video clips and computer graphics. Can you imagine moving on and dropping the 'talking heads' altogether? In short: how can critical content be delivered within screen culture if we do not want to use the written or spoken word?

>> SM: I do think we can evolve the broadcast template to a level where the viewer does not need to see an image of the spokesperson in order to digest their words, though that will have an effect on the way that they process the information. From a pure news per-

spective, there is an element of credibility that is assured by showing the 'talking heads'. You know they are the authors of the ideas. You can see their faces and look into their eyes. There is, at least, the illusion of contact. And I have tried to stay with that on a fundamental level. So what I have been doing, the re-contextualizing of the standard 'talking heads', is really just merging traditional documentary form with the more modern approach used to sell ideas or products. In a sense, we are 'selling' or 'commodifying' the ideas of our intellectuals and experts. Selling them to the viewers as aggressively as Coke sells sugar-water. And I am not sure that we would be as successful if we just dropped the talking heads altogether because I think people need to see that person, hear that voice to know what they are dealing with – and whether they want to 'buy' that perspective. However, as you know, there is a relatively new genre of film that does not depend on talking heads or spoken word to make profoundly impacting and controversial political statements. The *Qatsi Trilogy* by Godfrey Reggio and Philip Glass has become cult with global reach. And they translate so well because they are driven purely by the universal languages of image and music. How many raves have you been to with *Koyaanisqatsi* playing on multiple screens behind the dj? I've been to hundreds. It is a ubiquitous presence in underground culture. And this is one goal I have for the GNN videos: that, eventually, we might begin to create works that are so subliminally subversive and non-specific in their 'language' that they can be played anywhere, in any environment, and still conjure some instinct for critical enthusiasm on the part of the audience.

>> GL: What is the main source of distribution for GNN? Do you see broadcast TV as the ultimate opportunity or would you rather bet on an increased distribution via DVD and the net, combined with screenings in halls and theatres?

>> SM: Without sounding too idealistic, all of the above. GNN's main source of distribution is through our website. But that is only the first tier of our horizontal distribution network. It serves as a free, viral platform for the videos, which have been the catalysing force for our 4000+ registered online community who interact through the forums. We also sell our DVDs from the site and get a lot of sales from people who have shows on community television stations. Our deal with them is that as long as they buy one DVD, they can play the videos as much as they want. So there is a broad level of distribution occurring through broadcast TV, just not the corporate networks. Through our work with Interscope and other, smaller, record companies, our videos have been given a platform that reaches a broader audience, but the closest we came to having an MTV debut was with the video we produced for Eminem's *White America*. Unfortunately, on the day it was set to launch, CNN did a feature on it and brought on one of the parents of a Columbine victim. Within a matter of minutes they had reduced the video to a glorification of the infamous school shootings, pronounced it vile and opportunistic. And Interscope was forced to pull it from MTV. As a result, it got approximately 6 million views online. But the most successful and rewarding of all have been the public screenings of *AfterMath*. These started with a sold-out premiere in San Francisco's historic Herbst Theatre. The event had been organized by a group of local 9/11 activists and they had raised money to buy thousands of beautiful, full colour movie posters.

The hype was massive and we had about 1,500 people show up for the screening, with 500 turned away. When other groups heard about this, we began to get a flood of requests to provide DVDs and posters for local events. These culminated in a North America-wide screening on September 11, 2003, to commemorate the second anniversary of the tragedy. Screenings were held in large theatres, public libraries and even people's homes. Many had long, formal debates after the film to discuss the issues it raises. Since we completed the DVD, *AfterMath* has been translated into four languages. So, on a microcosmic scale, we are pushing the envelope in each realm of exhibition. Apart from the site, we have also distributed the DVDs through retail video chains – though only the large independents. Mainstream companies won't stock the films and we cannot get a distributor to represent us. So it's still a grassroots thing and we're happy that way.

>> GL: In October 2003, half a year after the Bush invasion/liberation of Iraq, you visited Baghdad. Reading the dispatches on your website, we get a sense of both the beauty and violence of the place. This visit must have moved you. To what extend did it challenge your perceptions of the war? Are the anti-war protesters still right? I suppose so. But how about the intense reality over there? Did that overturn the global media spectacle?

>> SM: Visiting Iraq was a transformative experience. Not because of the hyperrealism and immediacy of witnessing a culture reacting to a major military occupation, but more because I was able to step directly into the meta-narrative that exists beyond the veil of America's shallow, Pentagon-sanctioned media coverage. While we were there, we began to think of the experience in terms of a virtual reality game. It was so palpably dangerous, chaotic and graphically stunning. And so much more complex than what we had been told. We jokingly referred to it as "Grand Theft Auto: Baghdad". The tableau was so rich. And the characters we met were incredibly diverse and eloquent people – from Rana, our chain-smoking pro-Saddam translator, to Lt. Colonel Nate Sassaman, the legendary West Point quarterback now running tactical operations against the insurgency in the Sunni Triangle. At one point, when asked how he would describe the experience of being in Iraq, Sassaman smiled and said, "I am living in, like, a totally surreal movie". So I know we were not the only ones who felt it was something ultra-ordinary.

 And yes, it totally overturned the media spectacle and illustrated how truly dangerous the media has become, in that they have simply accepted the new rules of war and wilfully allowed themselves to be 'embedded' without ever gauging the experience of the average Iraqi. When was the last time we saw Iraqi citizens speaking for themselves on television or in the mainstream press? It's so brutally ethnocentric that you have to wonder just how producers and editors can sustain their apologist rhetoric without ever being struck by the vacuous negative space given to the Iraqis to occupy.

 As far as how the experience affected my interpretation of the war – from the minute I stepped on the plane to Jordan, my perceptions were challenged. Like many of us in progressive social movements, I was against the war – not so much because of its stated objective of removing Saddam Hussein, whatever the justification, but more because it was being prosecuted by individuals that had established business relationships with him during

some of his most brutal and repressive periods. Bush and Cheney are just so nakedly disin-
genuous that it would be difficult to support even the most humane of policies because you
know that their hearts just aren't in anything. But when we met Frank al-Bayati, an exiled
Iraqi freedom fighter who had been rescued by US soldiers after being left for dead by
Saddam's soldiers and then given a new life in America, on the flight to Jordan, it changed
everything. And I would challenge any steadfast anti-war protestor to stand at the border of
Iraq and watch Frank, weeping uncontrollably, kiss the ground of a country he was forced
to flee due to his political beliefs, and then tell him that the Americans didn't do the right
thing. I certainly was hard-pressed to summon even the remotest degree of cynicism. And
as we travelled around the country, filming his emotional return to a family that had assumed
the worst, our sense of confusion and conflict only deepened. It was a profound experience.

Of course, we know Frank's return to a 'free' Iraq is only a sideshow to the American
boot print which has been placed firmly on Arab soil, and that was only made clearer by our
time with US troops stationed in the Sunni Triangle. As you probably know, this is where all
the fighting is happening and we were able to spend a few nights with the troops stationed
out there. It was an equally transformative experience. We met top-level colonels and low-
est rank privates, all of whom were imbued with an almost uncanny level of humanity and
integrity and an open compassion for the Iraqi people. Many spoke very candidly about their
fears and lack of enthusiasm for fighting, especially when they only signed up for the
reserves to get a college education! But what they all had in common was a sense of pride
in the notion that they were working directly with the rebuilding of schools and hospitals.
And why wouldn't they? These are the very people who can relate to the kind of world social
inequity the Iraqis are facing because they are the poor and lower middle-classes of the
country. But by no means less intelligent. In one of the more paradigm-busting moments of
the trip, we interviewed an African-American tank commander named Hollis who proceeded
to deconstruct the war, referencing the Third Punic War, and citing analogies to *Star Trek*
and the battle between humans and the Borg. It was truly mind-blowing. But what got me
the most was when he explained the Administration's need to lie in order to justify the war.
It went something like this: "You can't tell mothers who have lost their sons that they died
fighting to save our way of life, that they were taken to Iraq to fight for what is the globali-
sation of capitalism. You have to present them with a war fought over ideology. That is the
way it has always been. But we understand very well that we are fighting for economic rea-
sons. And we should. It is either us or them. Falafel or Big Mac. And that is worth dying for".

For me, Iraq was about finding the human strand of DNA that runs through all of the
conflict and betrayal of our innermost desire to be one. I found it in everyone I met.
Everyone who was on the ground in that country was united by that elemental desire. No
one, not even Saddam's staunchest supporters, would say that he was a good or kind or
wise leader. But the one idea most everyone would accept is that the reasons for America's
drive to Baghdad were never clearly and honestly spoken by its architects. And that, in the
end, even the biggest lies will yield poisoned harvests for their advocates.