PBS and its views from the left

By Charlotte Allen
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How many lesbians does it take to change a light bulb? Three. One to do it and the other two to make a PBS documentary about it.

This joke circulating among television critics says a great deal about how people perceive the typical documentary offering of the Public Broadcasting Service network: so boring that only the government would finance it and so outre in subject matter that no commercial network would touch it. During the week that began July 14, PBS affiliates around the country were scheduled to air the PBS documentary to end all PBS documentaries, TONGUES UNTIED. It was all part of P.O.V. (billed as "Television with a Point of View"), the chronically controversial summer series on PBS that gets just under half its $1.14 million annual budget from the federal government.

Billed as a film that "unflinchingly tears off the gags that have kept gay black men silent," the 60-minute documentary by Marlon Riggs of Berkeley, California, couldn't be more extreme in subject matter, featuring frontal nudity (if only in brief glimpses), men in bed together and enough graphic descriptions to slake the curiosity of any heterosexual still ignorant about what homosexuals do in bed. The Rev. Donald E. Wildmon of the pornography-battling American Family Association was actually urging people to view the movie "and see if you agree or disagree" with his contention that the federal government should stop funding fare like TONGUES.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a 1967 creation of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, gave P.O.V., which is produced by a consortium of four public television stations, $215,000 to underwrite this summer's 12-week series. The PBS system (which gets 16.5 percent of its funding from the federal government) contributed another $300,000. The National Endowment for the Arts, already in the hot seat for its underwriting of the allegedly obscene and blasphemous, gave $250,000 (the remaining $370,000 comes from the MacArthur Foundation, a private charity). Riggs got a $5,000 grant from the NEA's Western States Regional Fellowship Program to make the film.

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The film is a montage of the life of Riggs himself—or, rather, of the emotional slings and arrows he has had to endure, for there is little hard autobiographical data. Interspersed with this are scenes of gay life at the usual watering holes—mostly San Francisco's Castro district—cross-cut with references to white-on-black injustices in places like Howard Beach, where a gang of white toughs ran a black man down. Thumping rhythmically in the background is some, well, poetry. Sample:

Now that I have shed shades of nigger, boy
For shades of faggot, queer. . .

Then comes the political part. "End the silence, baby," wheedles a voice as the camera plays over black feet shod in expensive sneakers: "We'll start a revolution."

According to Marc N. Weiss, an independent filmmaker who is P.O.V.'s executive producer, TONGUES UNTIED and its co-offerings for this summer won out over 400 competing documentaries. "We look for voices that are not ordinarily heard in the media," says Weiss, who maintains that "quality" and "diversity" are the two main criteria for picking a P.O.V. film. Most of the art establishment agrees with Weiss. TONGUES UNITED has won prizes in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Berlin.

The P.O.V. series is in its fourth summer season. Both PBS and P.O.V. have raised the ire of conservative critics over the years because a high percentage of the documentaries always seem to come from the left end, even the far left end of the political spectrum.

Probably the lowest point for PBS came back in September 1989, when the network aired DAYS OF RAGE, a documentary about the Palestinian uprising in Israel in which every Israeli was a hard-line fanatic and every Palestinian was a moderate voice of reason. The film outraged the Jewish community, especially when it emerged that Saudi Arabia secretly helped fund it.

Since then, PBS has pretty much gotten out of the politically charged documentary business, leaving that to P.O.V. And P.O.V. has developed a slightly defensive attitude toward its own material. In a post-production interview following MARIA'S STORY, a saga of a female Salvadoran guerrilla set to air on P.O.V. in August, co-producer Monona Wali declares that she knows the film is one-sided, because that is what its makers intended. "It's like asking why Hitler's point of view isn't presented," she retorts.

Weiss maintains that the dearth of right-of-center programming on P.O.V. merely reflects the proclivities of independent filmmakers, among whom political and social conservatives are few. Nonetheless, P.O.V. twice rejected a documentary about mistreatment of political prisoners in Cuba made by Academy Award-winning cinematographer Nestor Almendros and journalist Jorge Ulla.

The film, NOBODY LISTENED, won numerous awards worldwide upon its 1988 release, but P.O.V. turned it down. Weiss says that's because the editorial board found the film "confusing" in its narrative structure, and a second time in early 1990 because Weiss objected to a $15,000 processing grant its directors got from the National Endowment for Democracy, a congressionally created agency that is unpopular with the left. Weiss later apologized to Almendros and Ulla. A shortened version of the film eventually aired last August, not in the P.O.V. series but elsewhere on PBS, accompanied, presumably for balance, by a pro-Castro documentary titled THE UNCOMPROMISING REVOLUTION, made by Saul Landau, a radical filmmaker affiliated with the left-leaning Institute for Policy Studies.

Certainly a survey of this summer's P.O.V. lineup reveals little to comfort conservatives. MARIA'S STORY is a sentimental evocation of communist pieties: "Maria Serrano is a wife and mother and a guerrilla fighting the U.S.-backed government in El Salvador," says the female narrator. Maria never stops talking about how she wants only what every other woman wants: "schools, education, health care and housing." The only real character in the film is Maria's husband, Jose, who seems to have no interest in the communist takeover of his country but is crazy about the buxom Maria. As she bids a guerrilla's good night to her daughter ("We're in the offensive now"), Jose snuggles up happily next to his rifle-toting wife.

Three just-aired P.O.V. offerings—SEA OF OIL, CHEMICAL VALLEY and TURN HERE SWEET CORN—blasted the Exxon Corp. (over the Valdez spill), a West Virginia chemical plant and greedy Minnesota real estate developers respectively. The Oscar-nominated BERKELEY IN THE SIXTIES, coming up this month, contains memorable vintage footage but indulges the now-prevalent fantasy that a gaggle of milk-fed California college students managed to change the world. PLENA in June turned an exploration of upbeat, percussion-laced Puerto Rican music into a diatribe against the "oppression" of the island by guess which English-speaking country.

Other works are less controversial. ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE, in which 11 people diagnosed as carrying the AIDS virus told their stories (the documentary aired in June), was overly long but often stirring. Another June offering, Les Blank's MARC AND ANN, about Louisiana musicians Marc and Ann Allen Savoy and their four children, was a celebration of Cajun music and family life.

But the existence of programming like that does not vitiate the complaints against the network. "PBS is relentlessly and monochromatically to the far, far left without any balance even from the mainstream left," says David Horowitz, the radical-turned-conservative former editor of *Ramparts* magazine who heads the Committee on Media Integrity. This is obviously an overstatement. But the endless persistence of the complaints against PBS—and its continuing devotion to programming that so infuriates a large number of Americans—are not going to get any more temperate.

Too-slick rappers sell rage, despair for profit

By Leonard Pitts Jr.
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A young man I know got shot last week. He was driving in south central Los Angeles when another car pulled abreast of his and someone peppered the vehicle with gunshot, striking the young man in the neck and the groin.

Later, at the hospital, his worried family gathered. There were tears, there was fear, there were questions . . . and there was rage. Two of the older brothers vowed that somebody was going to pay for this. They were going riding tonight. Somebody was going to die.

But cooler heads prevailed and as it happened nobody died. Not even the shooting victim.

Of course, if somebody had died, there could've been an up side to it—some clown might have gotten a rap record out of the deal.

If I sound angry, it's only because I am. Only because south central L.A. street gangs have become such big business. Mind you, I'm not talking drugs. I'm talking music.

It's called gangsta rap, and it is a sound informed by the L.A. gang experience, a sound of unredeemed violence and unrelieved ugliness. If you want to understand it, don't think of upbeat pop rappers like M.C. Hammer or the Great Pretender, Vanilla Ice. Think instead of Eazy E and N.W.A, Ice Cube and BWP. Think instead of a world where the old rules are punk rules, where what's right for you is all that matters and where women are betraying bit—es and lying ho's useful only for sex.

Punks been dissin' you? AK-47 spraydown. Broke? Deal you some rock, boy. Old lady pregnant? Kick her in the belly, then watch her crawl.

Gangsta rap. The record industry can't get enough. And why not? The *kids* can't get enough. Yeah, suburban white kids, too. It's a national phenomenon, its influence showing and growing in mainstream music, movies, fashion and slang. Many critics love it as well, praising it with morbid fascination. It's a tough, cutting edge sound, they say—music that tells it like it really is down there on the street.

What about the argument that gangsta rap glamorizes and legitimizes an ongoing, abhorrent tragedy? "Hey," say the rappers, "we don't make no judgment. We just reporters, tellin' what we see."

Maybe I'm crazy, but am I the only one who thinks it obscene that this popular new game was born out of the exploitation of a sick violence that has wrecked thousands of lives?

But then, I'm probably closer to this than most other critics. I grew up in south central and if I close my eyes, I can be there again. I remember the winos—wasted, aging men —who sat all day in front of the liquor store swigging Tokay. I remember the gang shootings that disrupted school and the gang fights that did much the same.

I remember ... Welfare check day—Mother's Day—when the women formed long lines at check-cashing places while the supermarkets bustled suddenly to life. Police helicopters circling so constantly that you don't even hear them anymore. Walls scarred by misspelled graffiti. A kid at a concert stomped to death for his leather coat while onlookers watch in horror.

And things have just gotten worse. In fact, it is only slight exaggeration to call it cultural suicide. Last year in Los Angeles, 329 people died in gang-related incidents. Not just gang-bangers, but also grandmothers and babies. Nationally, one in every four young black men is under court control—either parole, probation or prison. For young black men, the leading cause of death is murder—generally at the hands of another young black man.

The sense of self-hatred among those children is deep and corrosive. An anti-gang counselor once put it like this: "I can't stand myself, so I must kill that which looks like me."

Understand: I'm not saying gangsta rap causes this tragedy but that it legitimizes it. I recognize and respect the all-star anti-gang efforts mounted by some of the same rappers I've named-it's what they do *outside* of those efforts that offends me. And while I defend with enthusiasm the First Amendment Right of an Ice Cube or N.W.A to do their worst . . .I still hate what they do. Hey, if you want to make music about this tragedy, sing *Stop! in the name of Love*. Sing *What's Goin' On* or *Save the Children*. And *stop* exploiting the children.

Two years ago, I went to a cemetery in Compton to visit my parents' grave and came upon the headstone of a young man who had just died. It lay in the shadow of a statue of Jesus, this small wooden grave marker that looked like something someone had made in shop class. The dead man's name and dates of birth and death were engraved into it and there was a place for his picture. Most of the image had already been burned away by the sun, but I could still see his big smile.

Next to the grave someone— reminiscing homeboys, no doubt— had left two empty bottles of alcohol. And on a tiny wire fence that circled the headstone, they had pinned blue gang bandannas. The bandannas fluttered in the breeze of that quiet, sunny morning like the flags of some lost and backward nation.

I learned later that that young man had died in a drive-by shooting that also took the life of a toddler. Looking back on that morning I wonder, bitterly and perhaps unfairly, where were the rappers celebrating how tough this guy was? And where were the critics?

They listen to gangsta rap that glorifies a death like this and they hear music on the cutting edge. I don't. I hear a mother moan and a baby scream. I hear a bright red wailing cry that shatters my sleep and haunts my days. *I* hear it. Why can't they?