

Interview

REVOLUTION '67

A documentary of the events in Newark, NJ, during the summer of 1967 by filmmakers Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno

Richard Cammarieri

"When tyranny is law, revolution is order."

Pedro Albizu Campos

(Puerto Rican Nationalist and advocate for independence from the United States whose work spanned the 1930's through the 1950's.)

I think often of Albizu Campos' quote when I'm engaged in discussion, analysis, and debate regarding struggles for social justice and attendant urban uprisings, especially those throughout the '60's and in particular the civil unrest that occurred in Newark where I was born, raised, and still live.

In language and substance, Campos' quote resonates profoundly with the content and subject matter of the Bongiorno's' documentary film "Revolution '67". Tackling historical events that are so fraught with sensitive and highly charged issues of race, class, politics, and economics is, to say the least, challenging. And I admit to a level of skepticism when the Bongiorno's first approached me to participate as a commentator; a skepticism that has been fed by far too many people over the years simply trying to pimp off the profound struggle of Newark residents for some transient academic, journalistic, or self-proclaimed artistic self-aggrandizement.

But since they were and remain genuine Newark residents, one of whom was in fact born and raised in the city, I gave them the benefit of the doubt. And it should be noted that being a Newark resident is a rarity when it comes to people who want to tell Newark's 'story.' And as I continued my involvement in the project over the past few years I became more intrigued by the process of trying to bring 'order' to the diverse sense of history, memory and feeling the Newark 'riot' elicits. Thus the interview speaks less to the historical event as such but more to the decision-making process for making the film.

What was the motivation for trying to address this subject in the first place? What was the collaborative dynamic between the filmmakers? How were decisions made regarding research and contextualizing, for finding 'witnesses' and other relevant commentators. How does one organize the narrative structure, the choice of visual images, photos, and graphics? What determines the 'message', the story, the point of view? Do you start with one? Does it become modified in the course of making the film?

Where do you begin? Where do you end?

-Richard Cammarieri, Activist

Newark Community Activist, Richard Cammarieri (C), interview with Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno (ML) and Jerome Bongiorno (JB), the filmmakers of REVOLUTION '67, a documentary film broadcast nationally on the premier non-fiction series P.O.V. on PBS on July 10, 2007 at 10 PM (Check local listings)

C: The first and most obvious question is "why?" What prompted you to decide to produce a documentary about the events of mid- July 1967 in Newark?

ML: As a lifelong resident of Newark - just like you, Rich - I was always troubled by the question of "What happened in Newark during that summer of 1967? Why hasn't the city recovered? What can we learn from the past?" And the burning question of "Why? Why did it happen?" I never understood that. And when I thought I understood it, when we made a short film, people like yourself raised the question of the myth of the black sniper - which we did not know was even a question mark--

JB: I live here and wanted to know why Newark is suffering and how it got that way.

C: Do you see resonance in your exploration of what happened in Newark in terms of other events like it, like Detroit and Los Angeles and a variety of other cities? In fact, there were uprisings in cities in New Jersey...Montclair, Plainfield...

JB: Yes, it seems like the same story everywhere. There's corruption and the political structure doesn't seem to be interested in helping the people that need help the most and eventually it gets out of control and there's a riot. But, in the 60s, riots were happening all over the place, and maybe people saw that as something that they could do. Because you don't see that today. Why don't we see that today? A riot or rebellion against the government, isn't it something that people would still do?

ML: Certainly after Katrina--

JB: --Because things don't seem to be better.

ML: Riots do erupt today. There's Paris.

C: Some people suggest that some of the social policies since the 60s were enough to tamp down the contradictions and the hardship to a point where people don't quite get to a level of rising up. I mean obviously that didn't stop people in Los Angeles in the early 90s. Do you have any point of view on that?

JB: When the LA riots happened, riots didn't erupt in 150 other cities, like we experienced in 1967. Maybe there are no activist groups fomenting rage like in the sixties. Agitators. Those groups may have helped to create a higher level of expectation. Plus, you know, there was the draft in the sixties and that brought people into the streets.

ML: The draft was a major issue.

JB: Yes, it's the sixties and you're all pissed off because you're a kid and you might get drafted and sent off to die in a war in Vietnam, and you're taking it to the streets, burning your draft card. And let's say you're poor and living in Newark and thinking "I'm pissed off about my living conditions and I can do that, too. I can take it to the streets." That could be a reason why there were lots of riots in '67. People saw it as viable protest. But I think the lack of rioting today is due to apathy. Plus, today, with the stranglehold gangs have on a place like Newark, turning to the drug trade for diversion and money has also dampened the necessity to riot.

C: Aside from your wondering about what happened and why it happened, was there something deeper, more emotional in terms of your interest in making this film?

ML: When I tell people I live in Newark, I get a blank glazed look followed by silence.

C: Like, "You live *where?*"

ML: Exactly. So, that reaction to my home leads to frustration and anger and you try to funnel that in a constructive way, like making a film, to try to make things better.

C: And you made this film together, working as a husband and wife team. How difficult is that?

JB: It isn't, just the opposite.

ML: We rely so much on each other, in order to complete the process. Producing is what I do, which means getting the funding, and I also direct. Jerome shoots and edits and does animation and sound design. So there is a complete balance. And we work many hours a day, seven days a week.

C: Were there issues percolating in your mind before or were they generated as you were making the documentary?

ML: We started very naively, with just the sniper question. Then we started to get involved deeper and deeper with our interviewees who led us to other people. As an example, we didn't know Tom Hayden was in the city then. We saw his book "Rebellion in Newark" and realized he lived here and was working as an activist from 1964-68. We didn't know anything about that, so we said, "Let's talk to him."

Even though Amiri Baraka is a famous son of Newark, we didn't know what he was doing at that time. We wanted details about daily life. This led us to people like George Richardson, who gave us a perspective of what was happening in the years that led up to 1967 and what progress was being made by black activist groups in the city. So you could say the process of making this film began academically, with research that led us to eyewitnesses and historians, who led us to more people, more questions, some answers, and finally to an analysis of Newark today.

JB: Right. People were giving responses to questions we hadn't asked. When we transcribed them, we were unaware of this information, and we had to do more research and that broadened our perspective, going all the way back to slavery. Which we hadn't intended to do. I also had to create animation to illustrate some story points that had no archival footage.

ML: The animation became an integral part of this film.

JB: And got better as the film progresses because I learned how to animate better.

All: (Laughter.)

C: How did you decide who to speak with?

ML: The first people we went to were the historians to give us some kind of frame work for the "hindsight look at history."

C: Who were some of the historians?

ML: Ken Jackson, Clem Price, and Charles Cummings had studied Newark extensively over many years, and Nell Painter provided the historical context of slavery and the great migration.

We were trying to understand how Jim Crow laws and bank redlining, which you discuss in the film, had an effect on people's lives. You actually talk about the fact that if this red line was drawn around a block indicating one black family or one Jewish family that there would be no mortgages or insurance given on those properties. I didn't know that the federal government had made such a concerted effort to prevent--

JB: --To get people out to the suburbs. Buy more cars, use more gasoline.

C: The GI Bill sometimes was described as a "white affirmative action" type program.

JB: (laughs)

ML: Exactly.

C: Let's talk about the editing.

ML: We started with the chronology of events.

JB: July 12th through the 17th, the days of the riot.

ML: But interspersed with the chronology are "diversions."

JB: We experimented with one day of the riot, then went backwards in time. Second day, back in time. By the time you reach the last day, we've covered decades leading up to the riot.

C: So you made a concerted effort, in terms of the narrative structure, to put as much historical context as possible. But the one thing I have to admit, I'm impressed that it is just not a historical context of Newark, but it is also a much broader historical context of the issues that resulted in--

JB: --We didn't do that on purpose. It just so happens that all major cities that had riots or rebellions share a remarkably similar history.

ML: We're seeing an incredible parallel amongst these cities. Some people from Detroit saw the film and told us, "This is our story - then and now. Just change the photos." It's usually the same story: corruption, poverty, some spark that provoked it. But one of the biggest revelations, that I think Rich is touching upon, is that it wasn't just the single day of July 12th. It wasn't just a couple of months or years. As we said, it was decades.

C: Well, that brings me to my question about the title, which is nothing if not provocative: "Revolution '67." Especially in the context of various names people have applied to what happened: the riot, the rebellion, the civil disturbances, uprising. Your decision to call it "Revolution '67", was that something you came to the project with? Or you developed that sense after your research?

ML: We started with a title of "Newark, 1967: Then and Now," but we wanted something more provocative, but not just to provoke. I saw revolution as the turn of a wheel. I see it as another cycle. I had a philosopher friend break it down in Marxian terms. She says revolution is the most complete and political term because it implies the conscious and organized participation of the masses to overthrow a system in order to create a new political system: a communist state or society in Marx's idea. It applies to our documentary because it refers to changes that should have taken place. The final part shows the rates of unemployment and poverty higher now than in 1967, which implies that if we don't change the status quo, a revolution could recur.

C: Did some of the participants, people who were adults and active back then, did they show signs that they evolved in their thinking about what happened?

ML: Sheriff Fontoura was a police officer at the time. 40 years later, he maintains that it was chaos and you can't hold the police accountable for those circumstances. The most startling thing he says in the film is "Well, you hear a gunshot and you don't look or register anything, you just shoot back. So, whether it's somebody running towards you or away from you, you don't think, you just shoot." Hearing a police officer say that was not very comforting. It raises all kinds of questions about police brutality. Paul Zigo, the National Guardsman, told us he was sure there were no snipers in Newark in 1967 because when he was fired upon, it was an automatic weapon, and, to his knowledge, no law enforcement were carrying automatics. Our archival footage shows otherwise.

JB: Our evidence doesn't mean that he's wrong. Somebody could have fired upon him--

ML: --But we raise the question.

JB: We just put the doubt in people's minds. And also in his.

ML: There's the question of truth. We're illustrating what we see as people's memories, their perceptions, with "official accounts" and archival footage of the event and animation. The question becomes: what is truth?

When we interviewed Tom Hayden, he said something very interesting. He said something like "I have a memory of a birthday party when I was very young, because of a photograph that was taken at that time, that I've seen over and over in my life, and so my memory of that event is superimposed by what the photograph captured."

C: Any enlightenment about the condition of the people in 1967? I'm reminded of "Root Shock" where Tony Imperiali's son says, "Yeah, the black people were treated like trash. They had a good reason to rebel." Any moments like that?

JB: Yes, Former Governor Byrne, who was Essex County Prosecutor in 1967, told us that (reading from Gov. Byrne transcript) "The administration in Newark then wasn't really concerned as it should be with people who were unfortunate or deprived, who didn't have the opportunities in Newark that the democratic system should have offered them." I mean for the Governor to say that...

C: Did you face any issues in terms of, basically, you're two white filmmakers? Once again, we have these white people telling a story that is primarily about black people. Did that come up?

ML: From the beginning, in screenings across the country, the first question we were asked was "Where do you live?"

JB: Which is a reasonable question.

ML: A very good question. But I see it more than a black and white issue. Do people who live in this city have a right to ask what happened in 1967, is it a black story only? I don't see it in terms of race, do you?

C: It's an American story.

ML: Yes, that's our message.

JB: It's not just Newark's story or urban America's story, it's America's story.

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