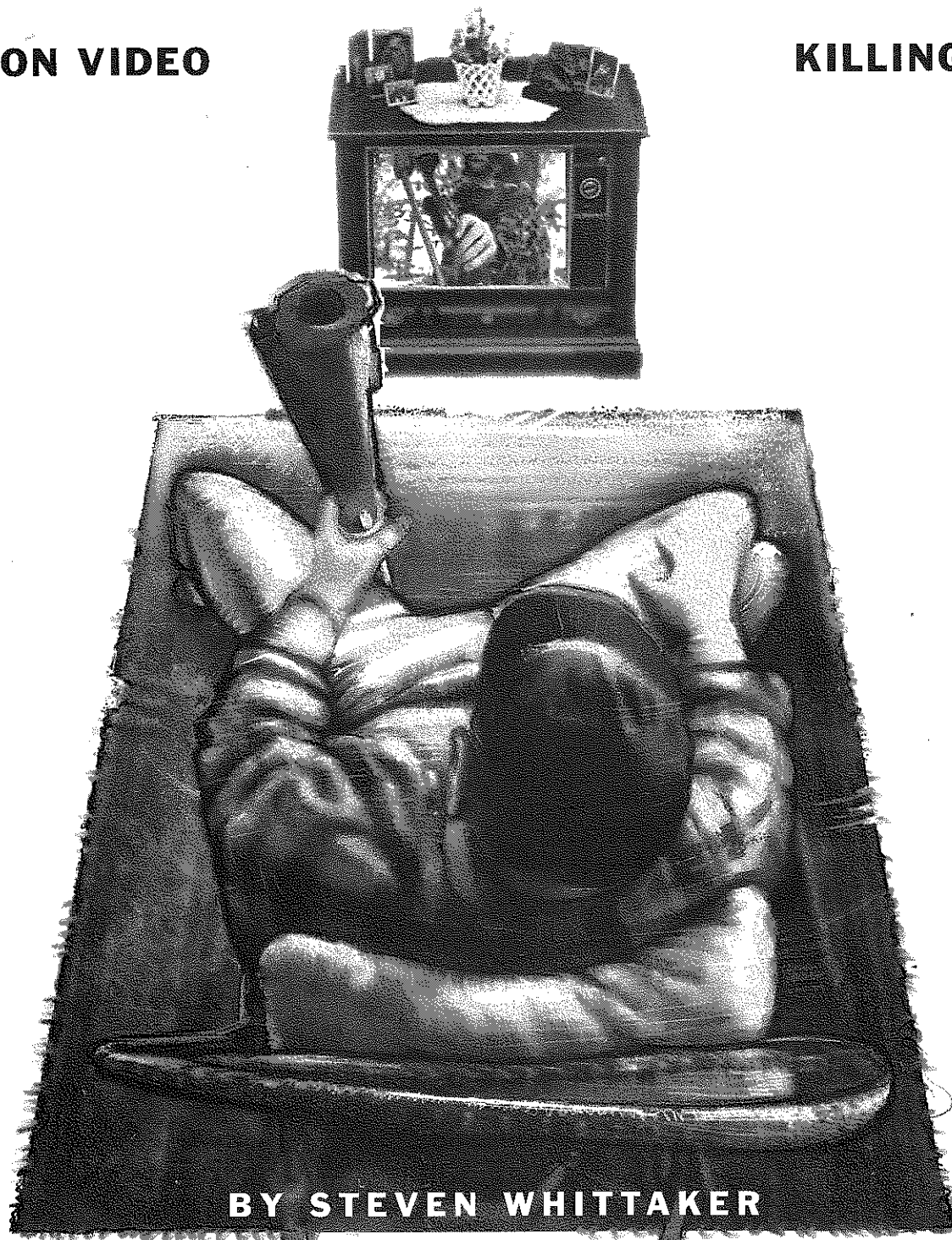


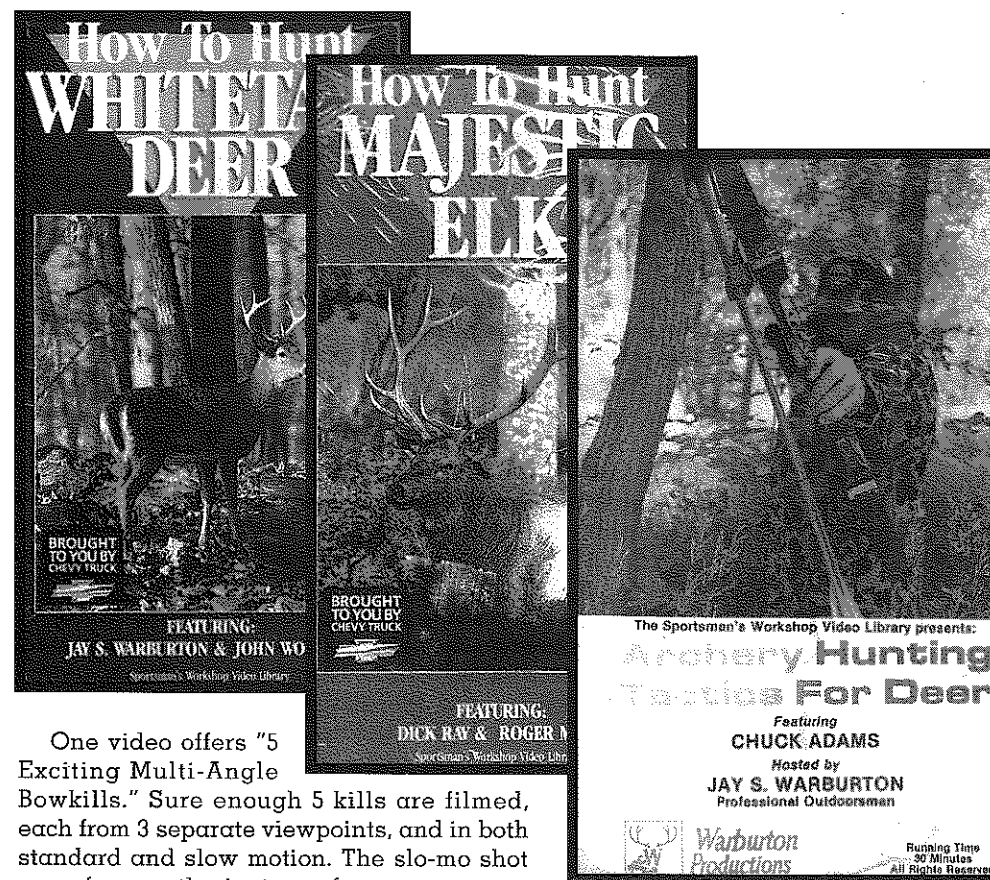
KILLING OUT OF EARSHOT OF DEATH: HUNTING ON VIDEO



BY STEVEN WHITTAKER

My local video store has a new section. With 140 videos, it is twice the size of the arty or "Foreign" film section. It contains lyrical features such as *Autumn Antlers: Bowhunting Big Bucks Under a November Sky*, hunting lodge ad-films such as *Horns of Plenty* and *Hunting Dall Sheep and Caribou in the N.W.T.*, and low-budget redneck offerings like *They're Going Down*. Production values differ from video to video. Some use as many as four carefully directed camera-angles per "kill," while others appear to have been filmed by a buddy looking over the hunter's shoulder. Yet each of these videos records, as one jacket blurb proclaims, "Explicit Live Action" kills.

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One video offers "5 Exciting Multi-Angle Bowkills." Sure enough 5 kills are filmed, each from 3 separate viewpoints, and in both standard and slow motion. The slo-mo shot even freezes the instant of arrow penetration-and-exit. Another video, coyly titled *Bear Facts*, invites us to "Listen to the eerie moan of the bear after Bruce delivers the fatal arrow."

Some of these videos are sustained ads for particular outfitter-and-guide hunting packages. These aim at hunters of relative affluence, hunters who can afford to indulge desires for pristine bounty in a prospective hunting ground. One narrator says: "If you've ever wanted to not raise your rifle for a big buck because you knew you would find a bigger one, then join us in the North-West Territories." On this video the guides are Canadian. The two hunters, who evidently paid substantial fees to outfit this hunt with cook, horses and gear, are American. This video features one heart-warming scene in which the sycophantic guides coo over the hunters' trophies.

Another video, in which the hunt was filmed near Whitehorse, promises that "most game here have never seen a human." The camera scans the wide spaces. Nature in the buff, and you have a chance to pop the wild cherry. To put you in the mood, the soundtrack offers a pastoral Spanish guitar selection, as you savour the unsuspecting dall sheep grazing on their bluff. The narrator says Dall sheep hunting provides the longest sustained excitement of any hunt, because it often takes hours between the time a group is spotted and the successful execution of the kill. No 'whambam thank you lamb,' this.

Each video offers a "variety of kills." Some present a single hunter using different techniques on a single species. Some feature different hunters, or a lone hunt and then a 'rites of passage' hunt. Others offer a smorgasbord of species, killed for the vicarious hunter's consumption. "Hunt with me," says the hunter of *Big Timber Bears* into the camera.

Still other videos are the productions of defensive hunters who are obviously feeling the heat of anti-hunting groups. These films offer various vindications of the hunt. Hunt-deaths and other means of animal death are contrasted, with the former coming out on top. Hunt-deaths are claimed to be cleaner, faster, less painful, even more natural. *Fight for the Right*, for instance, shows the wrung-out cadavers of deer that have died as a result of disease, hunger, getting stuck on barbed wire or struck by a car. "This ain't how nature meant it to be," says the sympathetic narrator. Alternatively, hunting is justified by distinguishing the good hunter from the bad hunter. The latter may be bad because he poaches, or is careless of his own safety, or merely uses inefficient techniques. And, in some of these videos, hunting is hitched to an "unquestionable" value such as God or Country or Family. In the hunt, sons apprentice to dads and bring home the meat. They may even give away the meat to others, and so hunting makes possible the lesson of altruism. One video, concerned with

defending the right to hunt, joins its cause to the Gulf War: "Dan Fitzgerald has dedicated this video to the American soldiers in the middle-east as they fight for our rights." In the same video Fitzgerald speaks at a meeting of hunters. "After the Lord," he says, "bowhunting's my first love."

When we peel away the layers of justification, what do we find underneath? What do these videos reveal that the modern American hunter desires when he is hunting? At the very least it seems he desires to see the immediate outcome of his own action. He desires unobscured work, direct evidence of his own agency. The modern hunter is in search of a pure productivity. "You should always make things happen rather than let things happen to you," says Fitzgerald. The kill is the unambiguous deed.

Also, the hunter must not "come undone" when the time for action arrives. "A good bowhunter is almost Ninja-like." Stalking and hunting gives the hunter the opportunity to produce not only venison or a trophy, but, in "the moment of truth," to produce or verify his own composure.

Over and over, the men on these videos say that what they are doing is "real." But the realness these guys are after is something other than what life might just happen to send down the pike. The contemporary North American hunter verifies himself by setting strict parameters for success, and then getting the right hardware to do that job. The "right equipment" is crucial. Without the appropriate camouflage, ammunition and animal-call device, he lessens the probability of attaining composure. And yet that composure isn't the goal in itself. The hunter's composure is only another element of technique. Like any technique, it is, with practice and the right equipment, reproducible. If he films it, he also has a reassuring record of that composure.

The modern hunter desires Real Experience and seeks it in the immediacy of predation. (Most organized of hunters, he nonetheless likes playing the instinctual predator.) Yet these hunting videos document a distrust of the realness of the hunt. In the majority of these films the soundtrack records the natural sounds of the woods only while the hunter is setting up his stand (his ambush position.) As soon as the stalk begins (and sometimes this consists of a hunter merely waiting in a chair in his tree-stand) and the animal appears, a music soundtrack intrudes. Apparently the filmmakers don't believe in the starkness of the event they record.

In one video, a "stalked" deer approaches his demise to the accompaniment of a slow bourbon guitar riff. This has the effect of a strip-tease, with death the final exposure. The music in each scene puts a bump-and-grind of inevitability into the recorded hunt. In a sense it works to break up the tension, or at least make the tension our friend. The music aligns us with the hunter. The music is with the hunter. The deer sure isn't tapping his foot.

There is an obsession with death, or rather with the mere externals of death, in the multi-angled and slow-motion filming of each kill in these videos. Given sufficient footage from enough angles, the videographer/hunter pieces together and fixes that visible moment of death. But this is death as holograph. Despite all his stalking of Immediacy, the hunter is damned to remain on the outside of death and nature.

In *Autumn Antlers* the vital (!) statistics of the kill appear on the screen as the moment of arrow penetration is stilled, as if these numbers represented the content of the kill. For these hunters, being is the trophy of doing. "People kill to find out if they are real," said Marshall McLuhan. The hunter bags a trophy and has, for the moment, irrefutable evidence he's real. The video trophy is one more medium for the message of the killing ego.

When he isn't simply dozing in his tree-stand, the hunter, with the help of his camo, withdraws into the scenery, so he can "come out of nowhere" on the animal, and suddenly prevail as a killing presence. Watching such an event transpire on video, one in effect also "comes out of nowhere" with the camera. The video record of the hunt is an invitation to kill the animal vicariously. One cannot help but feel a Peeping Tom, hidden from an already impersonalized death by a superfluous camo of anonymity.

Every "narrative sequence" in these videos draws towards the killing "moment of truth." Everything else — the panoramic shots of nature, the inspection of weaponry, the buddy-chat — is table setting. Like the hunter, the camera is interested only in stalking up to the kill, to that moment of

pure doing. For the hunter, during the stalk and the kill, being is doing. The video reproduces this obsession by stopping time at the instant of pure doing, by halting and replaying the kill-moment as if it were the sum or focal point of being.

Does the modern hunter discount the animal's sentience? Does he believe he's just converting mobile matter into an immobile trophy? He claims that a messy, belaboured kill is unethical. He thus at least claims to acknowledge the fact of the sentience of animals. In actual fact, even on these videos, when a poor shot fails to take down an animal, the hunter retires for the night and recoups his kill the next morning. The videos say it is standard safety procedure to wait a few hours before tracking a felled bear. One video records the shooting of a bear, then follows the hunter to camp where he cheerfully drinks coffee out of earshot of the bear's dying. I am reminded of a Raymond Carver story in which a hunter places a gut-shot in a deer and, failing to track the animal, goes into town to get a haircut.

Rather than disbelieving in animal sentience, the hunter removes himself from the throes which are its evidence, when it is most convenient to do so. He is acutely aware of that sentience, even while he chooses not to identify with it. His is cognition without recognition. Further, when the hunt is on, that sentience contributes to the pleasure of the stalk. "Was he leery? Did he know you were there?" asks one guide after his hunter has killed a bear. "I think there's no question he knew something was up," answers the hunter, still breathy with adrenaline. It sharpens the thrill, that he has "taken" an alert, though not alert enough, animal.

This "taking" of an acutely sentient animal is also, simultaneously, the 'making' of a trophy. The moment of kill is a moment of conversion from reality to image. The trophy is a made image of the animal. The hunting video is a second-order trophy, as it were, making "real" images to replace an already stylized event.

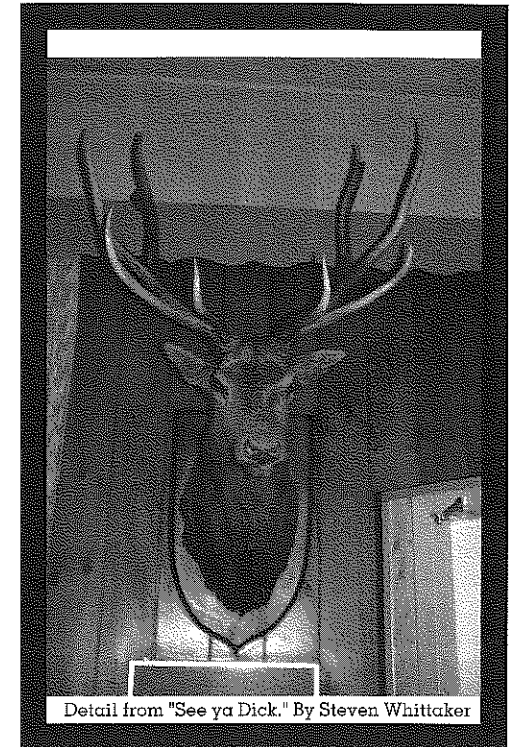
Yet isn't this hunting real within the scope it defines for itself? Not unless we pervert the meaning of "real" so that it applies also to the annihilating of the real. At the instant of kill, the moose carcass becomes immediately a simulacrum of the live moose. The hunter's libido and his self-esteem and his prestige are all juiced into that moment of conversion (from live-aura-real to dead-measurable-simulation.) The modern hunter's fantasy is of production and annihilation in the same act.

The produced simulacrum is preferable because it belongs to the hunter, whereas the live animal does not. The hunter credits himself with the size and form of the animal's body. It is as though he personally had caused his bear to grow to 350lbs and to develop a head nearly a foot wide. It is as though he has made him, not just killed him. Indeed he has made him, qua trophy. Alas, his trophy only confirms him temporarily, before he needs to go out and make himself real again. He secretly suspects he really hasn't created anything. *Ex nihilo nihil fit*. Out of nothing comes nothing.

Similarly, fixing the kill in time, the video enables the hunter to believe he has made the event itself. The use of video finesses the hunter's illusion that he can be sheer agency, unconditioned by either his historical context or the exigencies of nature. Video enables him to create a stasis not only from an animal, but from an event.

In making his trophy, the modern hunter also produces his prestige. If the animal is large enough it will qualify (read quantify) for the *Boone and Crockett* or *Pope and Young* record books. Like the other elements of hunting success, this production of prestige is accomplishable by simply *doing* the right things the right way with the right equipment. There are clearly defined techniques for acquiring recognition.

In their emphasis on the "the right tool for the job," these video hunters act under the illusion that technique unambiguously produces freedom; that technique is freedom. His All Terrain Vehicle and state of the art hardware and software (much of it of military origin, eg. camouflage) permit the hunter to take technology out of its industrial context and to pretend he is not at its disposal. This equipment lets him entertain the illusion that he is master of a kind of pure application. He considers himself free, not only because he doesn't



Detail from "See ya Dick." By Steven Whittaker



"The Occidental," Nanaimo. By Steven Whittaker

answer to nature, but because all these tools serve him.

He doesn't recognize in the gun and tools and cameras at hand technology having its own purposive density, its own internality. He takes for granted in his equipment the intensiveness of applied cognition which its material form objectifies. He lets himself forget he relies on objects which others have made for this purpose. The modern hunter knows his weapon only in the external grace of execution, the skilled individualism it makes possible, not in its made-ness, its indebtedness to the organized efforts of others. He knows his technology only in the disproportionate power it focuses in his trigger finger.

While utterly dependent on intensive technology and organized activity in his hunt, the modern hunter imagines himself a lone, instinctual predator. He doesn't see that his tools and weapons and cameras do not only extrapolate, but also mediate his sentience and his will.

The videoing is just the next (techno)logical step in this obscuring of the real context of the modern hunt. This high fidelity trophy only re-presents what was already present in the hunt itself, the denial of the actual industrial context on which it depends. In this regard these videos are typical of most contemporary media, which tend to render their subject matter as though with immediacy, obscuring their own mediating role from view. Such media exacerbate, and maybe produce, the chronic North American appetite for immediacy. These same popular media, by severing events from real contexts, end up placing the real world of viable action and responsibility at one further remove.

In exposing the hunt to the video camera, the hunter also further removes himself from the actual event. His desire for multiple camera angles and slow motion shots leaves the modern hunter "on the outs" with a nature that is sheer externality. Nature is reduced to what is transparent to the camera eye. These videos recall Jean Baudrillard's description of "the era of hyperreality" in *The Ecstasy of Communication*. In these videos image supersaturates event. The event of the hunt is replaced by the myriad recorded angles and speeds. External verisimilitude thus replaces the internal content of the event, the killing and the death. The effect is comparable to that of the high-resolution pilot's-eye-view images of detonating missiles, which came to us out of the Gulf War's version of production value. With such excess of visual image over lived event, these videos cross the line Baudrillard would mark between spectacle and obscenity:

Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, ... when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication.

The modern hunt is obscene before a camera even enters the picture. The video is pornographic because it records the prior fact of this obscene event. And it is pornographic because in producing another explicit trophy, it converts death from grave indignity to "raw" information.

Which is to say death is missing here. The video production of the hunt both immerses us in the hyperreal immediacy of the hunter's kill, and puts us at one further remove from the animal's death. With his video camera the hunter produces a reviewable trophy of his Real Experience. His video record further confirms his hunt as an action that produces freedom from a world of impermeable externality. He ignores the fact that he himself determines nature as explicit, material surface, in order to then free himself from it.

We should be worried, living in an info-milieu which makes byte-sized, two-dimensional units of all events, even death. On the news we watch an inhabited building, videoed by the missile that destroys it. The image may fade to grey, but death withdraws from such a scene, in which it is no longer even implicit. The unrecognized disappearance of death is the trophy of the video hunter. The failure to realize death is also, though, the implicit truth of the "explicit immediate" media in which we are, with killing anonymity, immersed.

So much killing, so little death.

Steven Whittaker is a freelance writer living in Nanaimo, B.C.

Further Reading and Viewing

- Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988).
- Autumn Antlers* (Wildlife Quest, 1990).
- The Bear Facts with Bow and Arrow* (Eagle's View Productions, 1990).
- Big Timber Bears* (Chamberlain SD: Tom Miranda's Outdoor Films, 1989).
- Bowhunting Monarchs of the North* (Dave Coleman Productions).
- Fight for the Right* (Tecumseh MI: Dan Fitzgerald Hunting Videos, 1990).
- Horns of Plenty* (Spokane WA: Sun West Films).
- Hunting Dall Sheep and Caribou in the N.W.T.* (Calgary, Alta: Lifestyle Home Videos, 1986).
- Techniques for Instinctive Bow Shooting* (Ashboro NC: White Tail Visions, 1988).
- They're Goin' Down* (Tecumseh MI: Dan Fitzgerald Hunting Videos, 1991).

Edward Palmer Thompson 1924-1993

Cultural Studies, which has become something of a buzz-word for those who see themselves as dissident academics in North America and the Antipodes, did not, of course, spring ready-made out of Larry Grossberg's imagination of what the British were up to in the 1960s and 1970s, but was a product of a very real struggle involving all the political definitions that were present then and have become more pronounced now. Those of us who marched to Aldermaston and back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, who helped to establish the New Left Club (at the Partisan Coffee House at 7 Carlisle Street in Soho, London), who discovered Jazz with Eric Hobsbawm, who taught evening classes for the Workers' Educational Association, who fought with the Fife Socialist League, who defended (equally) Tom M'boya, Lenny Bruce, Wole Soyinka, C.L.R. James, Vic Allen are surprised to discover that what we were doing was inventing Cultural Studies.

The death of Edward Thompson pulls us up short. Cultural Studies has become the gossip of this and that. In Thompson's case this involved the petulant diatribe against Perry Anderson in the 1960s, the cantankerous outrage against Stuart Hall and Richard Johnson in a History Workshop conference in an old church in Oxford in the late 1970s, the absurd pomposity recorded by those who only knew him from the outside. And, of course, the labeling: in the Oxford meeting he said, "I reject without reservation the identification of the Marxist tradition of historiography of which I have been taken as one representative of 'culturalism.' This term is Richard Johnson's invention." But, of course, Thompson was all and none of that. It is impossible to think of any of these disputes without recognizing that they were not academic in the arcane sense that much cultural theory is couched, but directly political. On the other hand there was nothing that was technically 'academic' which was not equally political. Ultimately, even the very personal was political. From the death of his brother by a firing squad in Bulgaria in World War II (which he recounted in his first book) to his last book on Blake (Thompson becomes Blake), the literary, the historical, the political, the personal are one.

His legacy was to compel us to engage with human others, to think ourselves into their situation, whether they were the late eighteenth-century working class making themselves, or those, in the twentieth century, living under the terror of nuclear power, who chose to resist the ultimate death machine. If Thompson was the ultimate Luddite, it was because he was convinced that the mechanization of everyday life was not conducive to our social health.

The central feature of Edward's life and work was that it was not academic in the narrow sense of the term. He was not part of condescending academia which saw itself as setting rules, in order to create an academic 'culture' that was sealed off from the everyday world. Quite the contrary. That academic world was just as culpable in compounding the problems that face us as were the multinational corporations, or the politicians who constantly speak of our venalities. The real test of our scholarship was how it measured up against the harsh realities of every-day life. His venom was directed against those (politicians, academics, even Marxists) who behaved as if their rules, their tribal customs, were the only ones that mattered.

But Thompson will be remembered primarily for the marvellous books on social and cultural history (*William Morris, The Making of the English Working Class, Whigs and Hunters, Blake*), his many pieces of journalism (in particular, perhaps, those collected under the title *Writing By Candlelight*), his ferocious intervention in the theoretical concerns of the New Left (*The Poverty of Theory*), and his systematic campaigns against nuclear weapons from the late 1950s to his death. Ultimately, however, his major contribution was to a complete rethinking of how history is written, involving the reclamation of people's history, and the involvement of non-academics in the research and writing of that history. More than any other thinker in the British New Left, Thompson, to use Gramsci's phrase, helped to create Organic Intellectuals. Anyone concerned with Cultural Studies today who forgets his legacy does so at his or her peril.

Ioan Davies
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