

the few Mardi Gras video veterans of more than five years explained, "Every year, I see new people thinking they're going to strike it rich in this business, but then I never see them again."

Soft-Core Professionalism

Standing more than six feet tall, with another foot-tall top hat of many colors, Giesel said he had witnessed the soft-core profession develop before his eyes, both literally and figuratively, during the five years he sold footage as a freelance videographer. Like the newcomers, he typically went out on Bourbon Street at noon, knowing he would be outside or in local clubs for the coming twelve to eighteen hours. In a knapsack and fanny pack, he carried with him equipment, tapes, rain gear, and some ten pounds of beaded necklaces and stuffed animals. He was forty-four years old in 2004 when I met him, but he had the stamina of a younger athlete. As dusk came and the streets filled with revelers, he moved lithely between crowds, jumping trash-filled curbs and bounding over beer and vomit puddles to find saleable footage. Flashing in public is a quick motion, taking five to seven seconds per shot. Catching this act spontaneously required identifying a likely target and beating several other people with cameras, both professionals and tourists, to a front-row position. Giesel had mastered the challenging shots through shifting patches of darkness, long-distance balcony shots, and sudden rainstorms. Otherwise, he had to rely on his communication skills, getting a woman to flash for him rather than some other guy. All the while, he shielded his video equipment from jostling during a shot, avoiding cracked lights from flying beads or shorted circuits when a beer fell over the balcony onto his camera. He kept away from confrontations. Given the levels of intoxication on the streets, fights and shouting matches were frequent. Video cameras could attract ire from both men and women, who might throw a punch or publicly try to humiliate the videographers, as in the case of a woman who liked outing men like Giesel by screaming, "Perveeeeerrrrrrttt!" Police officers then could arrest everyone for disorderly conduct. This routine continued for five days in a row until Mardi Gras Day, when Giesel went home.

When I asked him why he endured these trials, he answered, "You have

to love it is the first rule. A guy who comes out here and thinks he's going to make a tape and a lot of money has another thing coming. You have to love it for all the physical abuse you take from it." Indeed, money was not Giesel's main motivation. In recent years, he had ended up spending more money than he earned from his professional grade shots. Rather, the benefits of the profession outweighed material measures.

The expansion and professionalization of a soft-core workforce seemed at odds with the poor conditions for the work and the increasing precariousness of the labor market. After all, these jobs did not guarantee any entry into a stable career or even a reliable trajectory of earnings or benefits. The tourists who berated the videographers and the employers who undercut the value of their work constantly called the status associated with being a soft-core professional into question. The varied usages of the word *professional* spoken by the men I met on the streets during Mardi Gras suggested that professionalism was an elastic discourse. Its mutability covered all workers, despite the generational and educational gaps between freelancers and contract cameramen. Its siren song seemed to lure a racially and socially diverse group of men to the work, even if few stayed beyond a season. Offering soft-core cameramen symbolic goods in lieu of other material benefits, the discourse of professionalism organized and incorporated a wide range of work and leisure activities. The television economy now incorporated these activities, integrating their practitioners as its laborers, even if simultaneously placing them on its margins.

Professionals as Not-Amateurs Over the course of my fieldwork, I heard the term *professional* used in several contexts, but always in contrast to tourists, who were simply "amateurs." In this discourse, professionalism was a marker of pride, emphasizing skills and knowledge in the industry. According to this logic, amateurs may own video cameras, but they did not understand either the production routines or the product norms that defined the professional community. It made for a fine distinction, because these routines and norms formed part of a leisure economy that itself has integrated the traits of an aspired professionalism and disciplined labor in the form of hobbyist societies, fan communities, and lifestyle consumerism. Paid soft-core workers labored to maintain these delicate boundaries, turning to each other for community and support while turning others into saleable footage.

The geography of Mardi Gras shooting incorporated public, semipublic, and private spaces. After the first weekend of Mardi Gras in 2004, I knew where to find people who sold their flashing footage. They frequented the same local bars and hotels near Bourbon Street. Like conventioners, they reunited every year to reconnect over shared interests: the pace of the flashing, the quality of the women, the attitudes of the police, and other issues relevant to those in the video business. In John T. Caldwell's television production geography, these were "insider spaces" within "contact zones" that permitted media professionals and members of the public to interact.²¹ There, they could network and close business deals to increase their efficiency and productivity.²² More important, they could compare their practices among recognized equals. "You can do this all you want, but you need someone to share it with," explained one cameraman who had invited a hometown buddy to share in his work as his "assistant" by carrying gear and holding his beer. Several cameramen mentored their friends in the business, drawing on their company and the respect they received from their apprenticeship. The cameramen could not necessarily depend on women, tourists, or even their employers to validate their collective identity as workers with professional techniques and standards. By sharing stories, tips, and breaks, however, they could validate each other.

Rick valued company on the street as well as in the clubs. Hailing from Texas, he drove the circuit of spring breaks and New Orleans's events in search of content. In New Orleans, he surveyed the street with Nate, a younger man who shot video for personal use but who had also considered selling his footage. Not in competition with each other, the men selected different women to tape. Rick differentiated his choices from those of Nate in that, as a professional, he had to satisfy his audience first and foremost.

RICK: I used to shoot everything, but because it's a business, I'm more selective than the other guys out here. [He motions toward one woman.] See, like [the novices], they'll get everything: fat, skinny, old, young. . . . They don't discriminate. We go for just the college coed type.

VICKI: Why is that?

R: Young guys like it. It has a broader appeal. There's a market out there for older women and fatter women, but it's small compared to college stu-

dents. Older guys will look at girls younger than them. But young guys want young women. That's just the way it is. I don't even have to like the girls.

v: What's the cutoff?

R: It just depends. I've seen attractive women into their thirties. It also depends on their bodies. My personal preference is natural tits. But I shoot fake tits too. It's a business. See, that's a good example, I don't even shoot only what I like. But fake tits on an older woman are out of the question. If they've got fake tits, I'm less likely to shoot. See, I can be selective.

Rick was exemplary of a cameraman who presented himself as someone who maintained the boundaries between professionals and amateurs. He prepared for the job by traveling to New York to do market research of the field. "I looked at everything that was out there. Not for myself but to see the market. I knew I could do better," he said. His careful planning relayed a personal investment in internalizing the market standards and the limits of the genre, much as done by other television industry producers.²³ Although Rick tried to distinguish his selections from others, all cameramen competed to select a relatively narrow range of women on the street, producing a divided subjectivity between their personal tastes and idealized profitable standards.

Rick's professional sensibility guided him in his production routines. On the street, he knew who to approach, who to wait for and watch, and who to avoid. Like in other media industries, professionalism implied a shared set of conventions for controlling the complexities of production.²⁴ He pursued exclusively young and thin women, preferably those without noticeable breast enhancements. He avoided women who looked to him too young, particularly if they seemed to be with a parent; he feared that the girls were legally underage. He also knew who on the street was likely a dancer or strip artist, two other types of workers not likely to flash for free. Subtle clues tipped off who might flash on the street. A woman with a purse hung diagonally across her chest would be less likely to expose her breasts, just as a woman wearing hose would be unlikely to raise her skirt. Tipsy women wearing strands of the biggest or most ornate beads, however, were a dead giveaway for people ready and willing to flash on camera. Rick might wait and watch for those women to affix their gaze, also known as "beads in the eyes," cueing a potential shot. Rick and others took particular pride in

their ability to convert their knowledge into free shots, that is, ones in which they did not have to negotiate an exchange rate in return for the footage.

The distinction between who got paid and who did not was vital to videographers' self-definition as professionals. That is, many workers found that even if they earned very little only years later, their personal investments of time, money, and energy were symbolically valuable in distinguishing them from the gullible or naive laborers who were posing for cameras or posting images to their own personal websites. Rick maintained he would eventually make money from royalties, a hope that tied his interests even further to those of his employer. Meanwhile, he had already spent over \$5,000 on equipment, travel, lodging, and beads for a Mardi Gras weekend. In the discourse of professionalism, achievement as an unpaid hobbyist had lost value in a society in which almost all cultural practices, such as those surrounding Mardi Gras and other tourist events, have already been sold as a commodity.²⁵ At the same time, the videographers did not rely on payment alone, preferring to see themselves as craftsmen rather than corporate men.

Professionals as Not-Dependents Whether as freelancers or company employees, soft-core cameramen railed against notions that they served corporations, employers, or really anyone with their craft. The sense of independence from bosses made for an interesting hierarchy when Rick, together with Nate, spoke of his position in relation to other media production professionals. I had asked him if this profession might lead to other careers, a potential marker of occupational mobility:

RICK: I get approached sometimes to do like a wedding or something, but, frankly, I don't like it. I don't even know what to shoot. This is much more straightforward.

NATE: And you don't have to please anyone. When you shoot a wedding, you have someone always mad at you that you didn't get the right angle or something. You get a lot of complaints.

R: Here, we call the shots.

VICKI: You're more autonomous.

R: Right, no one is telling us what to do.

N: Here, we help other people. Like when *COPS* is here, they follow us around because they know they're going to see something.

V: *COPS* the show?

N: Yeah, they're here every year. Rick and I were in the last year's show. I was helping them set up a shot when the police busted it up. They're cool guys. We talk a lot about equipment.

Together, the men established a hierarchy of video production based on their power to "call the shots" and lead the production. Though it was clear that Rick and Nate placed themselves above wedding photographers, another liminal profession, they saw themselves as relatively equal to the reality television crew they helped by letting them "follow us."

Independence was important to defining a soft-core professional as a craftsman, someone dedicated to the perfection of the art. In this sense, professionalism was a way of identifying one's technique, discipline, and dedication in the face of work that was standardized, subservient, and *only* about wages. In Rick's words, "Video is just another extension of my creative side. That's why I can take my time and be interactive, because I'm not working on the clock. There was a guy last year who was shooting for like an hour and then put his camera in the room so he could go party. I saw him with this woman and said, 'What the heck are you doing?' He said he was paid to just get an hour every day, so that's what he did. Me, I'm going to be out here all the time perfecting my art because I'm serious about it." Rick's separation of slow artistry from quick assembly and creativity from instrumentalism seemed to deny any careerist aspirations. They were tinkerers, hobbyists, artists—all terms for those whose creative labor might be considered leisure. Other cameramen likened their trade to duck hunting and fishing: two sports activities that involve patience and technique to garner the prize, whether a fish, a duck, or a naked woman. "Even the worst day of fishing beats going to work," said Fred, reminding me that even if they were not having the best time of their lives, at least they were not doing their regular day jobs.

The freedom of the profession allowed the cameramen to experiment as well, as evidenced by technology talk. At first, the continuous chatting about technology seemed like a tangential issue in the fieldwork. For months, I paid little attention to the camera model numbers and zoom capacity numbers that cameramen frequently shared with me. Yet this was precisely the kind of talk that helped initiate me into group conversations with them. Rick, for example, was eager to show me a milk carton he had cut up to use as a light diffuser. Attached with a strip of Velcro, the