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Notes on  
The Media Crisis  
**Peter Watkins**

# Notes on The Media Crisis

## Peter Watkins

Since the time of the 1966 banning by the BBC of my film *The War Game* (which dealt with the consequences of using nuclear weapons) I have been concerned with the increasing 'dumbing down' of the MAVM (mass audiovisual media) and the development of what I now refer to as "the media crisis". Key elements in this crisis include the heavily circumscribed agendas of the MAVM, the forced development of the media popular culture, the standardisation of the audiovisual form resulting in the creation of an increasingly hierarchical and manipulative relationship with the audience (the public), and education systems which are largely compliant with this system.

As the professional repression against my work became more extensive, I travelled to schools and universities in North America, Europe, Scandinavia and Australasia, speaking about the media crisis and trying to organise critical media education. In the mid-1970s I ran two summer courses under Dr. James Shenton at Columbia University in New York City, in which we analysed a series of American news programmes. From this emerged my awareness of what I call the Monoform - I have written about it extensively over the past 30 years.

Our research at Columbia revealed the development of a formatted and repetitive TV language-form of rapidly edited and fragmented images accompanied by a dense bombardment of sound, all held together by the classical narrative structure. Although this language-form had originally been conceived by Hollywood, it was disturbing to discover its common use throughout virtually all contemporary TV programming, from soap operas to news broadcasting. This standardisation - and the imperatives behind it - has become worse in the last decades, and now embraces virtually all forms of 'professional' film and TV usage, including 'reality TV', sports broadcasting, most documentary films, etc.

Because of its extreme rapidity (especially the version developed over the past 20 years), the Monoform gives no time for interaction, reflection or questioning. Its dense layering of sound, its lack of silence (except for manipulative purposes), is again hostile to reflection. The rapidly edited images are like small railway cars, and the rails they run on the monolinear narrative structure as originally developed by Hollywood and designed to move the story (the message) in a *pre-determined* line (pre-determined by the producers, not the public), rising and falling between impact points to a final climax and termination.

This Monoform is designed to entrap - to catch and hold the attention of the public over prolonged periods of time. It is organised to create *pre-determined* responses, which means that before the audience sees any Monoform film or television programme, its producers already know how they (the audience) will react - or at least such is the intention. No allowance is made for any reaction from the audience which might be different to the anticipated and created one.

The media, and probably many media scholars, would claim that the use of the Monoform in this way is a widely accepted practice. But accepted by whom? Who has discussed it? And what do we know about its impact?

Given the sheer breadth and universality of the media crisis (its effect on the creative and pluralistic development of cinema and television on the one hand, its detrimental social, political and human consequences on the civic process on the other), the silence that reigns over the subject publicly, within the mass audiovisual media (MAVM) themselves, and throughout the education sphere, is shocking. The multiple holistic issues of the media crisis remain undebated by the public nearly 100 years after the emergence of Hollywood!

Many factors are involved in this issue, but here I will outline just the bare bones:

**The Monoform and ‘objectivity’** The smothering of virtually all TV and commercial cinema within the limiting structure of the Monoform presents many problems and contradictions - especially in a profession claiming to uphold ‘objectivity’, ‘impartiality’, ‘fairness’, ‘balance’, etc. Related to this issue is the fact that commercial cinema producers universally claim that their products are uniquely “entertainment”, the “telling of a good story with strong characters” - and deny that there is any *social* or *political* agenda or impact (intentional or not) behind the making and screening of their films.

The notion of ‘impartiality’ (the idea that the message is unbiased and can convey ‘facts’), when applied to the consequences of receiving information from the MAVM, is a complete myth. If the MAVM are impartial, why is it that we can still claim to know so little about the consequences of the sustained impact of audio-visual messages? - it is certainly not ‘objective’ for the MAVM to withhold that information from us!

It is not uncommon for media professionals to say that they too understand that ‘objectivity’ does not exist... and to continue by saying that, “all you can strive for is some kind of balance and fairness when you present something in a documentary or news programme...”.

But this claim holds no water either. “Balance” and “fairness” are meaningless concepts when one considers that the products parading under this banner are invariably structured by the Monoform, and deliberately not discussed by the media... again, this is hardly ‘fair’ or ‘balanced’.

**Culture of suppression within the MAVM** The Monoform is now compulsory as media practice in all but name - a widespread repression throughout the profession enforces its use, and all attempts, either publicly or on the screen, to debate the issue are blocked. We have only to look around us to see the fruits of this silence - as we have only to look at TV, or visit the commercial cinema for some months, to see it in practice.

Filmmakers today have the utmost difficulty in making a film for commercial cinema or TV unless they use: a) the ideology of the media popular culture, b) the Monoform. Both are mandatory in all but name, and have resulted in the widespread professional rejection / banning of a broad swathe of alternative forms of audiovisual communication - especially ones using slower, more contemplative and complex editing and narrative forms, or ones that present less brutally simplistic themes with a social concern and a critical edge.

The nature and extent of this internal repression remains a secret to the public, even though its evidence is seen and heard every day on the screen. The MAVM refuse to debate the significance of this problem, and suppress any film or TV production that attempts to raise it.

As a consequence, it is now very common (and has long been the practice in commercial cinema) for commissioning editors and senior producers in TV to intervene directly in the creative process of TV programmes, forcing material to conform to ‘accepted practices’ and the dictates of commercialism. TV and commercial cinema executives insist on the use of the standardised Monoform (without of course referring to it as such), and tell directors (and editors) that without it “we lose our audience”.

It is impossible to exaggerate the extent of the repression that is now in place within the MAVM or the extent of the culture of compromise that allows it to happen. This is further illustrated by the emergence of the “universal clock” and “pitching” (see my writing elsewhere on these practices). Unfortunately, many filmmakers and related professionals have accepted all of these repressions for fear of jeopardising their possibilities to obtain production funding, or work of any kind.

One of the many glaring contradictions in the contemporary MAVM is that, alongside the repression, TV organisations still carry official texts of *Broadcasting Codes, Standards and Practices*, which herald the notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘fairness’!

**Agendas and process of the MAVM** The media crisis does not only relate to the enforced use of the Monoform, but also to the *agendas* of the MAVM - what the media decide to show on the TV screen or to produce for the cinema (or print in the press). With some exceptions (notably in the print media), the agendas of the mass media are extremely conservative and based on a national ideology (or lack of one) - which in the West implies the maintenance of neoliberal globalisation.

One way to consider the impact of media agendas is to contemplate how different the planetary situation would be, had the MAVM not been incessantly bombarding us for the past half-century with consumer-society values.

The issues of language-form and control agendas are only part of the media crisis. Another aspect is the undemocratic *process* of the MAVM towards the public - and this touches upon every element regarding the decisions that the media make about what to say/tell, or not, to the public (*agenda*), and about how to structure the presentation (*form*). The *process* involves every other aspect of the relationship: the training that professionals undergo, how they dialogue and communicate, or not, with the public (via public meetings, etc.),

how much they share their power, or not, what sort of interaction and feedback they allow the audience during the programming or afterwards, etc.

**Impact on documentary film** Probably the genre of mass audiovisual media that has suffered the most from the media crisis and the imposition of the Monoform is what we call (or used to call) 'documentary film'. Further on, I describe my own attempts to challenge the traditional notion that this genre is 'objective', or that it has a particular role to play in conveying 'reality'. Other filmmakers too have worked with this issue. But these attempts to subvert the authoritarian use of 'the documentary' have themselves been appropriated and subverted by the commercial dictates of the MAVM - especially in what is now known as "reality TV".

Many documentary films have become circus acts full of explosive impact and aggressive audiovisual tricks, with an ever-present 'ringmaster' (the director or narrator - often the same person) facing the camera. The aim of the filmmaker certainly may be genuine, but he or she almost invariably smothers the work (and the subject) in an 'entertaining', aggressive, and hierarchical language-form - the Monoform.

Of course there are the exceptions, informing us that entirely different ways of working with documentary film, both in language-form and subject, do exist. Unfortunately, the existing media circus means that such films are seldom funded. And seldom seen by the public.

**Contemporary media education** Not only have the MAVM grievously impacted on contemporary society (including by abetting the development of the consumer society and the resulting environmental disaster), they also harbour within their core another crisis, in the shape of "education" systems that have misused the process of education: instead of teaching students to challenge the MAVM, and encouraging them to develop their own alternative forms and processes of audiovisual communication, they have indoctrinated several generations of young people to pursue the 'pleasures' of the media popular culture.

Media education, which has now become a vast industry, includes teaching digital forms of a/v media and their use in cyberspace, introductory media or film courses in secondary schools, practical or theoretical courses at the university level, professional training in TV and journalism schools. With few exceptions, it is nearly all based upon the unquestioned and unchallenged use of images and sound to 'communicate' stories, ideology, social themes, entertainment, commercial messages, and 'pleasure' to mass audiences. Period - no question about the impact of the process itself.

**Mass popular culture** Justification by many media academics and MAVM professionals for the explosion of media popular culture was developed during the later 1970s, and was originally based on the theory that popular TV programmes (soap operas, police dramas, celebrity guessing-games, etc.) are a democratic vehicle of communication. According to the theory, "ordinary people" (meaning the working class) could enjoy, via such populist programmes, a shared and democratic experience, and identify with the characters, and with the "everyday" plots and issues involved. As a result, the teaching of TV popular culture soon laid an anaesthetic blanket over whatever remained of the critical media teaching arising in the 1960s; by the early 1980s, widespread acceptance of the role of the MAVM was being taught at all levels of education throughout the world.

Notable among the many contradictions in the claims for the media popular culture by its scholars is that it enables the viewer to "negotiate" the text - all the while de-emphasising the fact that there is no possibility to challenge or change that text. Media scholars also claim that the viewer can "subvert" the material - while they simultaneously glorify the pleasure-syndrome. As well, their emphasis on the need for "critical autonomy" exists alongside the reality that the very same education process indoctrinates students with standard media practices - including the Monoform.

The theory of "reading" or "negotiating" the text of popular culture appears to have one supreme aim: to teach students how to appreciate the pleasures of the MAVM - with no implication of any critical intent.

Furthermore, it was - and probably remains - fashionable among many media academics to label critics of media popular culture as "middle-class moralists" and "elitists" with a "high-culture" attitude towards the use of the audiovisual media. This stance has played a strong role in anaesthetising critical thinking towards the MAVM, with the ironic consequence that the teaching of the "democratic" popular culture (cinema and TV) has established a highly authoritarian, centralised and reactionary mass audiovisual media on a global level.

There are countless examples of the MAVM's devastating role on the plight of the entire planet. One obvious one is the part that popular American TV programmes played in inflaming American public support for president Bush's attack on Iraq in March 2003. These highly subjective programmes totally negated any pretence by the MAVM to 'objectivity' and 'impartiality', and manifested the extent to which professional TV has adopted a contradictory and false position - not least in its relationship to the public.

This contradictory position continues to be reinforced in most a/v and journalism training schools, which completely ignore the fact that the enforcement of the Monoform is itself a total denial of 'objectivity'. I emphasise this problem of 'objectivity' including because

the MAVM also use the criticism that something is too 'subjective' as an excuse for marginalising alternative materials.

This crisis has developed to the point where we can (or should be able to) now discern the impact of the MAVM on the survival of the planet. As my wife Vida said the other day, "the MAVM have always tainted our thinking, but now they're doing it big-time".

**Soft edges of the repression** There are many other aspects, though seemingly positive or well-intentioned, of the MAVM process that contribute to the media crisis.

The fact that many filmmakers and media intellectuals believe that a radical subject or a powerful theme *in themselves* create an 'alternative' cinema is another paradox. In most cases it is only the content that could be considered alternative: a radical theme per se does not challenge the over-riding problem of hierarchical form, process and structure. In fact, it only confuses the issue, and is a prime reason why critical thinking on the role of the MAVM has not developed beyond a limited point.

In other words, it is not just the visible content of programmes or films that is problematic - it is the way they work with time, space and rhythm, and the invisible process they use to create a centralised relationship with the public, which is at the core of the media crisis. Here we come back to the role of the Monoform again.

This practice usually throws many contradictions at the themes and claims of the filmmaker, at the notion of 'objectivity', and at the notion of democracy, which many documentarists claim to struggle for. An example of this aspect of the media crisis are the films of the American filmmaker Michael Moore, whose work is representative of a broad swathe of the 'in-your-face' style of documentary filmmaking which is now heavily profiled in the commercial cinema.

Michael Moore was recently quoted as saying that he wants his audience to be engaged in their democracy, that he wants them "to get off the bench and become active". The paradox here is that he himself uses a very hierarchical structural form to 'engage' his audience.

Moore is apparently asking for a new economic order - one that "has an ethical and moral core to it". But he is also quoted as saying that, "the idea that cinema can be dangerous is a great idea". Does this mean that Michael Moore believes that "dangerous" cinema can play a part in an order with an "ethical and moral core"? If so, I believe that he is juggling

with the same contradiction as are many other committed documentary filmmakers who use hierarchical language-forms to achieve their ends. (I think I understand how Michael Moore intends to use the word "dangerous", but, with respect, I would suggest that another interpretation might also apply here.)

Linked to this problem is the role played by many art cinemas, film and documentary festivals, and a whole range of other cultural events which often revolve around the presentation of Monoform-based "alternative" documentary or feature films. Here again, despite well-meaning intentions, there are numerous paradoxes, including that the hierarchical process of the films presented is rarely or never disclosed or discussed with the audience. Neither, invariably, is there any discussion on the media crisis at these events.

Even the existing process of showing and discussing films contributes to the crisis. We ask audiences sitting in front of the dominating screen to watch a series of one-way audiovisual messages, then we switch on the lights and ask them to "debate" with the producer or director for half-an-hour, then we clear the hall for the next film. The lack of genuine contact or holistic communication in this industrial process speaks for itself. I have engaged in it too often myself not to know how problematic that is. We urgently need to seek alternatives.

Thirdly, there is the problem that filmmakers of otherwise good intention, quite apart from their use of the Monoform (and maybe sometimes because of it), participate in the repression of their colleagues who want to escape from its clutches. The repression by the MAVM that I have described could not take place without the tacit complicity of large numbers of media professionals, including many filmmakers.

Furthermore, within the infrastructure of the MAVM, many film institutes, directors' guilds, producers' associations, etc., contribute directly to the media crisis by never challenging the status-quo practices that I describe here. Some of these groups may challenge the lack of funding for 'alternative' filmmakers, but when did one last see media workers protesting the hierarchical impact of the Monoform on the public?

From now on, it is very urgent that we challenge the practice (and teaching) of "business as usual" in the cinema. Every audiovisual act, including the most complex piece of video art, raises questions. Every time we pick up a camera and point it at a subject, every time we make a cut in the editing room (where much of the Monoform is locked into position), every time we present the work to an audience and only discuss camera lenses and excellent producers, every time we avoid discussing the role of our own audiovisual messages and their relationship to the holistic impact on the entire social process, we contribute to the crisis.

**My own work** Here I would like to speak about the contribution of my own films, both as challenging, and contributing to, the media crisis. I hope that many other filmmakers and media teachers will also become involved in this debate as it applies to their own work.

My work broadly divides into two periods: before and after the making of *Evening Land* in Denmark (1976). The production of this film came during the time that I was teaching the summer courses at Columbia University - where I first came to understand the structure of the Monoform. My films up to, and including the Danish film, all use the Monoform. My last films, *The Journey* (1986), *The Freethinker* (a co-production with students, 1994), and *La Commune de Paris* (1999) all consciously strive to break away from the Monoform in one way or another.

However, even my earliest professional films - *Culloden* (1964) and *The War Game* (1965) - though structured by the Monoform, consciously tried to challenge the concept of a 'pure' documentary form that depicted 'reality'. *Culloden* was a direct development from my amateur film *The Forgotten Faces* (1960), a reenactment of the 1956 Hungarian uprising - which I filmed in a backstreet in Canterbury, England, in a newsreel manner, as though it was actually happening.

I extended this idea of the 'fake' documentary into my professional films essentially to de-code and challenge some of the so-called 'objective' practices of the MAVM. After all, we know that there were no cameras in 1746, at the time of the Battle of Culloden, and we all know that England has not yet been attacked by nuclear weapons - yet I was filming these events with all the appearance of the 'verisimilitude' of a traditional documentary film, or the TV evening news. My hope was to initiate a dialogue within my profession, and with the public, on the manipulative dangers of the so-called 'realist' film or 'objective' documentary. I feel deeply that I have been unsuccessful in this task.

From the outset, a further purpose to my work has always been to use my films to give expression to the voices of the public. With a few exceptions when I mixed professional and non-professional actors - *Privilege* (1977) and *The Gladiators* (1969) - I have tried to work for the most part with 'ordinary people', i.e., the public. I feel that the public have for too long been shunted into an entirely passive role by the MAVM, and I also believe that the public are an immense resource of feelings, ideas and points of view, that could have contributed in a revolutionary way to the development of the MAVM - had this been allowed by media professionals, and encouraged by education systems. I believe that my work is important because it indicates this potential.

On the negative side, my films often reveal (or perhaps they conceal - for which they should be even more criticised) the role of the hierarchical director (myself) at work. There are

many signs of this, which I leave for others to discover and discuss. I would guess that this tendency has been prompted by my own inner reluctance to relinquish total control to cast members. A number of the women who took part in *La Commune* criticised me for this, and to a considerable degree - though not entirely - I agree with them. However, there was also a great deal of freedom of speech within *La Commune*, and I hope that, at least to some degree, this offered a balance to the hierarchy of the director (me).

I see *La Commune* and my other films as occupying a 'half-way' stage between the MAVM, with its control and its popular culture, and the more radical alternative films of the avant-garde. I have always been interested in this 'middle-ground', in the possibilities to involve the local community and thereby enlarge the whole definition of popular culture. I wish that more filmmakers would endeavour to occupy this terrain - or at least to take a step away from the Monoform, and to open up the creative process of the MAVM to the public.

**In summary...** The challenge, after so many years, is how to encourage film-makers and media teachers to wean themselves away from the existing form of the MAVM. How to help them to understand the holistic relationship between their (our) work and the nightmare of mass consumerism and resulting environmental crises facing the planet. How to better understand the many debilitating psychological and social problems involved in the centralised mass distribution of repetitive and closed audiovisual language-forms (including increased privatisation, resistance to collective behaviour, acceptance of authority structures, fear of 'the other', aggression, etc.). All of which the MAVM has been fostering for many decades, and especially since the development of TV in the 1950s.

Even the use of the word "communicate" by the MAVM should set off alarm bells. "Communication" is meant to be an exchange between two or more persons. How can this be possible when one (or more) of the parties is using a highly coded language-form to impose a centralised and hierarchical relationship on the others? And especially when neither the MAVM nor the education system are prepared to reveal these codes, or the real imperatives behind them.

Today, young people who aspire to enter the world of cinema or TV have to submit to education systems that insist the Monoform is crucial to their future as media professionals. They will invariably be taught the necessity of formatted time structures and ever decreasing time-slots within which their work has to be presented: usually within a subverted "hour" of 40 minutes or less (the so-called "universal clock") - with the rest carved out for advertising. They will be taught how to "pitch" their projects to producers (one of the most invidious and dangerous of the new age professional practices). They will be indoctrinated with the need to succumb to the existing media order, and imbued with

the notion that “professionalism” means inflicting the power of their images on the public (= the imperative of ‘impact’).

As I hope I have managed to convey here, the problem of the media crisis reaches far beyond its impact on the creative possibilities of TV or the cinema - it impacts on every single person living on this planet.

## **A non-Monoform media... public participation... is there a future?**

I believe that the potential role of the mass audiovisual media lies far beyond an ability to give pleasure, or to satisfy the creative needs of filmmakers. The world is in a terrible mess and getting worse every day, and we are hardly going to tackle existing and future problems by settling down to exclusively enjoy TV, the cinema, or any of the other digital forms that continue to propel us into a state of permanent audiovisual overload. At the same time as we indulge in these diversions, we need, at the very least, to create a left-brain-right-brain awareness of the multiple *problems* inherent in the Monoform popular culture.

The Monoform is only one of countless different ways of combining images and sound. The cinema is like a rainbow, and the Monoform one small sliver in the vast spectrum of colours and shades. The MAVM have usurped and magnified their use of this sliver to Orwellian proportions, but I believe that the situation can be challenged. It must be - for the sake of the planet.

New means of interaction with the public must be initiated in order to develop alternative forms of engagement with the audiovisual media - forms and processes that move far beyond the strictures of the Monoform. The first step includes a holistic awareness of the many problems accompanying the Monoform media - not the least of which is the acceleration of a consumer society. Filmmakers must be willing to let go, at least to some degree, of the power inherent in using the Monoform media. Cineastes, alternative distributors, owners of art-house cinemas, media academics must extend the debate beyond the production values or intellectual pleasures inherent in the films they show. A new terrain is possible: to enlarge the concept of creativity, the pleasure of producing a film, so that it involves the direct, critical participation of the public in ways that have not existed thus far.

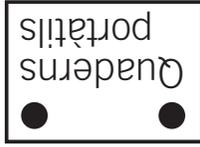
I would like to end on what I hope is a positive note. Over the past year or so, I have noticed the beginnings of a response to these issues from teachers and students, along the lines of what I experienced years ago, before the clamp-down of popular culture. Here in France, I have been contacted by several students and teachers open to the idea of moving

beyond the Monoform. There are teachers working with pupils in the French secondary system, critically analysing TV news broadcasts, and a number of film students who have expressed the need to advance beyond the limitations of their present media education. The latter have shown me some interesting work which really has little to do with what we see on TV.

So, is genuine change possible? Yes, I think it's possible. Very difficult, but possible. Or am I too naive, and are we too flawed a species to allow holistic change to happen? I do know one thing for certain - that we need many, many people to challenge the present MAVM system. The clock is ticking, and time is running out.

Peter Watkins  
Edited by Vida Urbonavicius,  
Felletin, France, March 2010



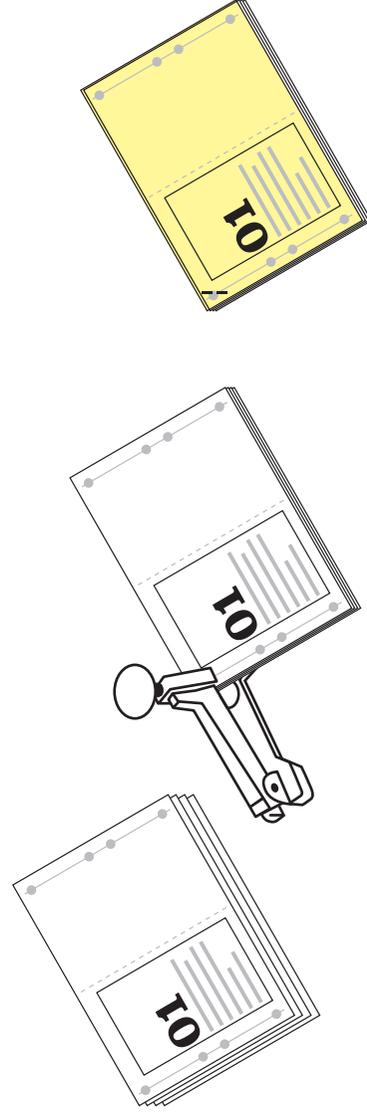


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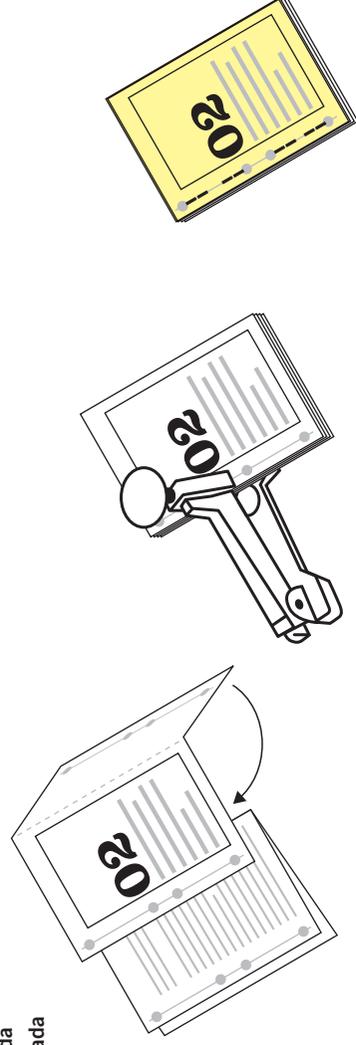
## Tres maneras de encuadernar tus Quaderns portàtils

### Three ways of binding your Quaderns portàtils

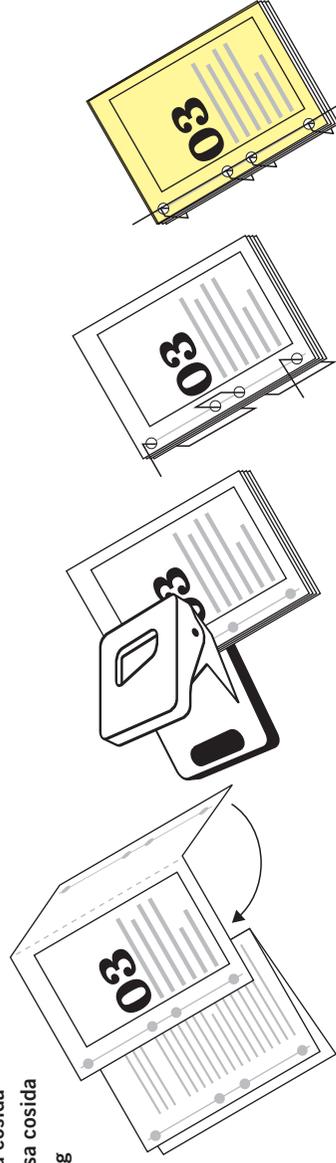
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Enquadrernació japonesa grapada  
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Enquadrernació japonesa cosida  
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Llenceu aquest manual d'instruccions una vegada utilitzat (no enquadrernar).  
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