

# releaseprint

THE MAGAZINE OF FILM ARTS FOUNDATION



Illustration by Julia Gandrud

## Media Activism Timeline

Films that make a difference

In preparation for the special focus on Media Activism in the July/August issue of *Release Print*, I asked several filmmakers, writers, and programmers to contribute a blurb about a film, filmmaker, or media event that influenced their own work, sparked a movement, or illuminated a social justice issue. Some contributions reach as far back as the silent era, others are fresh from recent street protests. Some are short and to the point, others are more in depth. All are passionate defenses of media activism in all its forms and remind us that, more than ever, our media matters. —Shari Kizirian, editor

## 1922 NANOOK OF THE NORTH

by Robert J. Flaherty

&

## 1957 THE HUNTERS

by Robert Gardner and John Marshall

Picked by Les Blank

I think I was most inspired by NANOOK OF THE NORTH and THE HUNTERS. I had gone to film school in 1960 hoping to write and direct like my heroes, Bergman, Bunuel, Fellini, De Sica, but when I saw ethnographic films with soul, I altered my course. If we don't feel what others feel and know their joys and struggles, we tend to become shut off and distant from our neighbors on this planet. Well-made nonfiction films can open our eyes to who's really out there, what they need and want and fear. In the current times, it's more important than ever to have a working knowledge of the other.

Les Blank's films include CHULAS FRONTERAS (1976), GARLIC IS AS GOOD AS TEN MOTHERS (1980), BURDEN OF DREAMS (1982), among others. He is currently working on a documentary about Richard "Ricky" Leacock, a documentary film pioneer living in France.

## 1932 I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG

by Mervyn LeRoy

Picked by Jennine Lanouette

One day back in graduate school, I walked into Andrew Sarris's American Film History class and encountered a film I knew little about, but whose title had always struck me as sounding rather cheesy, I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG. Expecting campy, farcical diversion at best (just the week before, after all, we had seen GOLD DIGGERS OF 1935) or over-the-top melodrama at worst, I settled into my lecture hall seat wondering what Sarris was up to. What unfolded in front of me was perhaps the most compelling and effective film of social criticism I have ever seen.

Out-of-work war veteran James Allen (Paul Muni) is tricked into participating in a restaurant holdup for which he is sentenced to ten years of hard labor on a Georgia chain gang. The conditions are brutal and Allen escapes. He goes to Chicago where he fulfills his dream of becoming a civil engineer building bridges and roads. But his landlady learns of his past and forces him to marry her. When he falls in love with another woman and asks for a divorce, she turns him in. The Georgia governor promises to pardon him. But instead, he is sent back to the chain gang from which he escapes a second time. In the final scene, he visits his beloved but is too flinching and paranoid to stay long. The film ends with a devastating line of dialogue that I will not reveal here so as not to deprive those who haven't seen the film of the shocking effect it had on me.

I then learned from Sarris that the film, considered a hallmark of the Warner Bros. "social consciousness" films of the thirties, was based on the autobiography of Robert E. Burns, and had led to the reform of the Georgia chain gang system. At that point (the early '80s), it was the only known example of a dramatic film managing to

effect concrete social change. This distinction inspired me to study the film and its sources in more depth.

Over years of continually referring back to CHAIN GANG, it has become clear to me that its strength is in the careful balance it manages to achieve between the foreground personal story of James Allen and the background societal story exposing and criticizing the chain gang system. James Allen's personal story engages us in the

---

**In the early '80s, I WAS A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG was the only known example of a dramatic film managing to effect concrete social change.**

---

drama, but the context in which he is presented is what teaches us the wider social significance of his circumstance. To create this revelatory context, the film story takes some dramatically important departures from the real life story on which it is based.

For one example, Burns, the real fugitive, was not a decorated war hero as portrayed in the film but a shell-shocked, broken man, and was by some accounts a more willing participant in the robbery than the film's James Allen. Clearly, the war hero choice is dramatically motivated, making the character more unassailable in his later victimhood. But it also provides the opportunity for one of the more stark uses of imagery when, at the beginning, the down-and-out Allen tries to pawn his war medals and the pawn broker points to a display case full of war medals, as if pointing to a dustbin of forgotten war heroes.

Similarly, where Allen is an engineer in his underground life, Burns was a real estate man who became an editor and publisher of a real-estate trade magazine, while also a respected civic leader as indicated in the film. Cinematically, the occupation of engineer enables more visually arresting scenes of Allen presiding over bridge building sites rather than bent over a typewriter. But again, it also elevates the film to a metaphorical level with Allen, the escaped convict, becoming visibly constructive in his new citizenship. This metaphor is then played out when, on his second escape, Allen must blow up a bridge in order to prevent his pursuers from overtaking him, being reduced to destroying that which he intended to devote his life to creating.

On the one hand, a straight telling of Robert Burns's story would not have had the same dramatic thrill as his method of escape the second time was by bribing a local farmer to hide him in his truck. Sacrificed to truth would have been the tension-filled dump-truck hijacking and chase, culminating in a climactic explosion on a bridge. But by making dramatic choices, the filmmaker also achieved the broadening of the film story which could speak to the plight of all forgotten war veterans trying to get by, and to the justice system's potential to lay waste to the most well-intentioned of human endeavors.

**Jennine Lanouette** is a screenwriter, screenwriting teacher, and screenplay consultant living in the Bay Area. She can be reached at [lanouette@comcast.net](mailto:lanouette@comcast.net).

**1961–1991****SANTIAGO ÁLVAREZ AND NOTICIERO ICAIC  
(THE CUBAN NEWSREEL)**

Picked by Travis Wilkerson

The films of Cuban director Santiago Álvarez are inextricably linked to the United States. His first exposure to radical politics came while he worked briefly as an immigrant coal miner in Pennsylvania in the 1940s (with the outbreak of war, he returned to Cuba). And nearly all his key works concern some matter of American history: the civil rights movement, the wars in Southeast Asia, U.S. interventions in the Americas. They exist as a kind of fractured mirror on the last 40 years of American history—a subversive alternate history.

Álvarez didn't produce his first film until he was in his '40s. But the indefatigable Cuban director more than compensated for lost time. In a film career which began with the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, and continued until his death in 1998 at the age of 79, he directed nearly 700 films. Lacking formal training of any sort, Álvarez was tapped to direct the Cuban Film Institute's (ICAIC) newsreel division, *Noticiero ICAIC*. The choice was one of political utility, and little of artistic value was expected from the novice director. Yet over the next 30 years, he would supervise the production of nearly 1,500 weekly newsreels and in the process transform a banal and wholly utilitarian genre into a veritable laboratory of radical innovation.

Working under extremely tight temporal and material constraints, Álvarez became a master of improvisation. He combined the use of limited found materials—archival footage and photographs—with a dynamic graphic sensibility, bold and unexpected music-image pairings, and a highly contemporary use of rapidly paced editing. Fusing the avant-garde with popular culture, he sought to synthesize a filmic style as revolutionary as the changes then sweeping his society. As Álvarez moved from the highly condensed newsreel into longer documentaries, he would only deepen his exploration of radically motivated experimentation.

The resulting films were always political, often didactic. They could be playful or deadly serious. They were borne of rage, bitter irony, and an almost limitless solidarity. They could be raucous or silent, brief or monumental, laconic or verbose. They were prone to tangents, but could be as eloquent as poetry. They never sought perfection. They were never made with posterity in mind. They were made for the here and the now. They showed the world to be forever changing, and changeable.

What is striking, even today, is the manner in which the films successfully balance goals that we tend to regard as irreconcilable. They are at once highly experimental, yet completely accessible. They were produced by a state-financed collective, yet register an unmistakably personal vision. They were produced without regard to posterity, yet they reverberate with a timeless vitality. They used every means at their disposal. Frequently, this meant they were made with next to nothing at all. "Give me two photos, music, and a moviola..." he said, "and I'll give you a movie." And what a movie it would be.

**Travis Wilkerson's** films include *AN INJURY TO ONE*, about the 1917 lynching of Wobbly organizer Frank Little, *SUPERIOR ELEGY*, which documents a twenty-five-hour concert held in Duluth, Minnesota, to commemorate the life of a murdered 25-year-old man, and *THE PRICE OF COPPER*, his first fiction film.

**1965****THE WAR GAME**

by Peter Watkins

Picked by Christopher Beaver

The filmmaker who has primarily influenced me has been Peter Watkins, whose Academy Award-winning *THE WAR GAME* was banned for 20 years by the BBC. Its BBC premiere finally occurred in 1984, in Peter Watkins words, "in a perverse and insensitive gesture, on the 40th anniversary of the nuclear bombing of Japan."

From his first film in 1959 to his most recent work, Watkins has remained edgy and controversial, not only for his content but for the originality of his filmmaking. Watkins has maintained such integrity that he's often been unable to make films. In response to this marginalization, at one point Watkins began showing slide shows in college classrooms to illustrate the link between high technology and nuclear weapons. (Who couldn't love this guy?)

Recently, he declared his farewell to film in the face of extreme critical antagonism to a retrospective of his work presented in Ontario, Canada.

I was extremely upset when I read this news as I've often felt a similar despair about filmmaking possibilities. I immediately wrote Watkins a long-overdue note of support informing him how much his career had influenced me and asking that he once again, somehow



find the strength to persevere. Otherwise, I said, the forces arrayed against independence of thought will have won another battle.

Watkins replied:

"There seems to be quite a fear of alternative ways of working, and an especial fear of any kind of social commitment, or ethical or moral inquiry as to the role of the mass media, or a seeking for more pluralistic and less manipulative ways in which to work with the public.

"My wife Vida and I are moving back to Lithuania for a year (we were living there earlier) to work on a sort of multimedia DVD/book project on the history of the country since 1919, which we are funding and producing ourselves.

"The purpose is to ask 'what is 'history'?' and does the way we receive it in the contemporary age, indeed the way we receive so much of our information today, via the mass audiovisual media, affect the way we react (or rather, don't), to the process of life and what is happening around us?"

We should all be writing letters to Peter Watkins, to honor his work and our own aspirations. He is one of the most important and least recognized filmmakers in the history of cinema.

In many ways, my own history mirrors the career of Watkins, as I've been surprised to discover over the past thirty years. In 1982, PBS reneged on a commitment to show my nuclear film, *DARK CIRCLE* (made with Judy Irving and Ruth Landy). Partly as a result of this plight, Marc Weiss founded the series *P.O.V.* to provide a place for explicitly point-of-view documentaries. When finally broadcast by *P.O.V.* seven years after its premiere, *DARK CIRCLE* won a National Emmy. *TALES OF THE SAN JOAQUIN*, which I completed earlier this year, has been under assault by two Republican congressmen who want the public funds returned for the making of the film. *CALFED*, the state organization that funded the film, is undergoing a major reorganization due to the pressure from the conservative Congressmen, while other screenings have been delayed or postponed, not, of course, due to censorship.

**Christopher Beaver** is currently working on a film about the desert. Visit [www.peterwatkins.lt](http://www.peterwatkins.lt) to read Peter Watkins thoughts on his own work. For updates on *TALES OF THE SAN JOAQUIN*, visit [cbfilms.net](http://cbfilms.net).

## 1970 SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM by Warren Haack and Dan Lovejoy

Picked by Sam Green

One of the most powerful political films I've ever seen—actually one of the most powerful films I've seen, period—is a thirteen-minute documentary called *SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM*, made in 1970 by two students at San Francisco State, Warren Haack and Dan Lovejoy. Amos Vogel described *SELECTIVE SERVICE* as “one of the most shocking documentary films ever made.”

---

**Lovejoy had been eligible for the draft, but rather than sleaze out of it the way the chickenhawks who run this country did, he turned his defiance into a powerful political statement.**

---

Made at the height of the Vietnam War as a protest against the draft, the film is devastatingly simple. It's basically one long shot: Lovejoy sits on his living room couch, he takes off his left shoe and sock, he picks up a long carrying case and removes a shotgun from it, he extends his left leg out in front of him, and then—a moment of horrible realization for the audience—he brings the tip of the shotgun to his bare foot.

Lovejoy pauses for a moment. And then pulls the trigger.

For me, the devastating power of *SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM* is that we see thousands and thousands of people killed in dramatic movies and on TV all the time, we even see a fair amount of war and killing on the news, but this is death without the mess. The protagonist shoots from the hip, and his or her nemesis crumples to the ground, perhaps mutters a few dramatic final words, and then expires.

In *SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM*, after Lovejoy shoots a hole the size of a quarter through his foot, he spends the second half of the film thrashing around on the floor screaming and writhing in pain. The camera zooms in to show blood spurting out of the wound like a geyser. It's extremely nauseating. The camera zooms back out and Lovejoy continues to thrash about and moan in agony. This goes on for about five excruciating minutes until the roll of film runs out. It is a record of horrific pain and suffering—the reality behind even a relatively minor gunshot wound.

I'd never seen anything like it. And obviously that's the point of the film. It is a reminder of the utter horror of war—a fact that most of us, almost by necessity, become numb to. The film is also one of the most brave and eloquent protest statements I've ever seen. Lovejoy had been eligible for the draft, but rather than sleaze out of it the way the chickenhawks who now run this country did, he turned his defiance into a powerful political statement.

I first saw *SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM* several years ago. Portland filmmaker Bill Daniel did a segment on the film for the IFC (Independent Film Channel) show *Split Screen*, hosted by John Pierson. In his piece, Bill tracked down Haack (who now works in the film department at S.F. State) and Lovejoy (who owns a pottery business in North Carolina), and interviewed them about making the film. Bill's piece helped to introduce *SELECTIVE SERVICE SYSTEM* to a younger generation of activists and filmmakers, which is extremely important because the film is in reality timeless in its significance.

**Sam Green's** *THE WEATHER UNDERGROUND* was nominated for a 2003 Academy Award.

## 1970 THE ACT OF SEEING WITH ONE'S OWN EYES by Stan Brakhage

Picked by Morrie Warshawski

In 1971, I was a student at the Graduate Writers' Workshop in Poetry at the University of Iowa, and purely by chance wandered into a room in the Student Union one night where they were showing the films of Stan Brakhage, including *THE ACT OF SEEING WITH ONE'S OWN EYES*. This film is a work that is very difficult to view. When I entered the dark room the screen was showing a cadaver during an autopsy, with the shaved head being slowly pulled away from the skull in a dispassionate way, as impersonal as peeling the skin from a grapefruit. People around me were leaving in droves, and yet I could not *not* watch this quiet film meditation on mortality that had more to say about living than all the poems I had ever written on the subject. Brakhage provided a powerful filmic wakeup call to those of us who find ourselves occasionally sleepwalking through life.

**Morrie Warshawski** is a writer, consultant, and facilitator who has worked in the arts and with independent filmmakers for many years. He is the author of *Shaking the Money Tree*, 2nd Edition (Michael Wiese Productions, 2003). [warshawski.com](http://warshawski.com).

## 1972 WINTER SOLDIER

Picked by Jasmina Bojic

As a longtime member of the jury for different film festivals and a film critic, I have reviewed hundreds and hundreds of films. The film that stayed in my mind longer than any other and made a profound influence on my students and audiences is the timeless documentary *WINTER SOLDIER*, which screened at the United National Associa-



tion Film Festival (UNAFF) in 1999. Produced in 1972 by sixteen filmmakers, the film successfully engages the viewer to participate in a journey into the relationship between ethics, politics, and war. The film features footage of testimony from Vietnam veterans at the 1971 Detroit Winter Soldier Investigation. It gives a glimpse into the ambiguity inherent to thinking about war, which is a big step toward tolerance and wisdom.

Using a refined film language, *WINTER SOLDIER* makes us uncomfortable and confused, and presents an introspective challenge to those who have a need for truth and internal consistency. Having that choice, which the filmmakers are presenting us through their inspiring work, is infinitely better than just consuming what we get served through the media alone, irrespective of the quality of their coverage.

At the UNAFF screening of *WINTER SOLDIER*, one of the sixteen filmmakers who worked on the film, Lucy Massie Phenix, was present as was the Vietnam veteran Scott Camile. They met again after thirty years.

**Jasmina Bojic** is a film critic and founder and executive director of the UNAFF.

## 1974 HEARTS AND MINDS by Peter Davis

Picked by Mark Achbar

The first feature documentary I ever saw in a movie theater. It had a huge impact on many people's view of the Vietnam war. I can still remember General William Westmoreland calmly saying, "Life is cheap in the Orient," as the homes of traumatized Vietnamese villagers were burned by U.S. troops.

**Mark Achbar** is a Canadian filmmaker whose most recent documentary, *THE CORPORATION*, diagnoses the most powerful entity in the world today as a psychopath.

Picked by **Joe Berlinger**

*HEARTS AND MINDS* made a deep impression on me when I was a teenager and made me want to become a documentarian committed to making films about injustices—hence, my films with Bruce Sinofsky, *BROTHER'S KEEPER* and *PARADISE LOST*. I wonder now how unlikely it would be for students to see this film in a high school classroom.

## 1974 ONE WAY OR ANOTHER (DE CIERTA MANERA) by Sara Gomez

Picked by B. Ruby Rich

This landmark Cuban film mixed documentary and fiction to illuminate the nature of prejudice in the "new" society that Cuba had proclaimed, focusing on a light-skinned middle-class schoolteacher's difficulties in dealing with the street-savvy "lumpen" attitudes of her Afro-Cuban boyfriend as well as the mothers of the children she was trying to teach. Gomez herself died in an asthma attack during post-production, but the film was completed by her mentor Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and finally released in 1978. Gomez became a legend—and to this day remains the only Afro-Cuban woman filmmaker and the only woman to make a feature fiction film in Cuba—and her brilliant film galvanized media activists in the U.S. to break out of stale formulas and try new ways to get at the truth of people's lives. I still love it.

**B. Ruby Rich** is an author, film critic, independent scholar, and frequent contributor to the *Village Voice*, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, and the British Film Institute's *Sight and Sound*. She lives in San Francisco and teaches documentary film and queer studies at the University of California, Berkeley. Scroll down to 1979 and 1989 for two other timeline contributions by Ms. Rich.

## 1976 HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A. by Barbara Kopple

Picked by Judy Irving

In my view, *HARLAN COUNTY, U.S.A.* was the inspiration for my film with Christopher Beaver, *DARK CIRCLE* (1983). Not only the dramatic storyline of the film, but the filmmaker herself. Beaver and I both met Barbara Kopple in NYC in 1976, and she encouraged us to 1) start our own nonprofit, as she'd done with Cabin Creek Films; 2) not be afraid to tackle a big issue (we'd been researching the nuclear weapons/power industry); and 3) tell a story, rather than recite facts. The story of the coal miners' strike and the violence used against them was absolutely riveting, and the use of music to "narrate" the film—providing transitional and expository material under the guise of country music—was inspired. Barbara's appearances in *HARLAN COUNTY*, however brief, sufficiently broke down the divide between filmmaker and film subject for me to consider later narrating *DARK CIRCLE* myself, a very difficult decision to make.

Also, HARLAN COUNTY took four long years to finish; this was a source of great solace during our four years of production on DARK CIRCLE. Although there were doubters among friends and acquaintances (“When are they ever going to finish that film? What’s taking so long?”), I knew that difficult-to-fund, difficult-to-film feature documentaries do take time. Both films, it turned out, had “legs,” as they say in Hollywood, and are still in distribution. We did follow Barbara’s advice and founded a nonprofit, the Independent Documentary Group, in 1978, which made fundraising from foundations, individuals, and organizations easier. I’ve been earning a living making documentary films ever since. It’s an up-and-down existence, but you get to put your two cents in, and it’s never boring!

Judy Irving’s most recent film THE WILD PARROTS OF TELEGRAPH HILL, about the relationship between street musician Mark Bittner and a flock of wild parrots in San Francisco, is currently making festival rounds.

## 1977 DOING IT YOURSELF: A HANDBOOK ON INDEPENDENT FILM DISTRIBUTION

A pamphlet written by Julia Reichert; coordinated and edited by Amalie Rothschild. Published by AIVF in collaboration with New Day Films

Picked by Arthur Dong

It was 1982, and I just finished my film SEWING WOMAN. I also had just graduated from SFSU’s Department of Cinema, and, I just been “duped” into violating a technical union rule at the local corporate ABC station and was “asked” to resign. What’s a recently fired film grad to do?

---

**The basic lesson I learned still applies: There’s no substitution for a little sweat equity, plain old business smarts, and a quest for social justice by any independent means necessary.**

---

I don’t remember how I got a hold of the booklet, but I do know that it gave me much needed inspiration and practical advice on how to make a living as an independent filmmaker through the self-distribution of my films. The authors, members of New Days Films, a cooperative for the distribution of feminist films, articulated a premise that I maintain to this day: “We make films that raise social and political issues. Finishing a film is only half the process, the other is to get that film to its audience.”

Although some things have changed these last 20-plus years—now that we have videos, DVDs, and the Internet, and I don’t spend much time cleaning prints and making telemarketing calls anymore—the basic lesson I learned from this little 76-page booklet still applies: There’s no substitution for a little sweat equity, plain old business smarts, and a quest for social justice by any independent means necessary.

Arthur Dong is a three-time Sundance Award-winning filmmaker who established DeepFocus Productions Inc. in 1982 to produce and distribute socially responsible media. He serves on the board of governors at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, representing the documentary branch. He recently released a DVD box-set of his films, STORIES FROM THE WAR ON HOMOSEXUALITY, available online at deepfocusproductions.com.

## 1977 WHO ARE THE DEBOLTS AND WHERE DID THEY GET 19 KIDS? by John Korty

Picked by Dorothy Fadiman

A pioneer adoption documentary, WHO ARE THE DEBOLTS? is about a family of 19 children, most adopted and most of them physically and/or emotionally challenged. As the mother of young children, I was riveted by the intimate details of these interrelated lives. As a budding filmmaker directing my first film (RADIANCE, 1978), I saw the power of film to pierce the heart just by showing the truth of real people living out their hopes and fears, facing struggles with courage. I loved that it made me laugh and made me cry, inspired me and broke my heart, angered me and gave me hope—and that it was possible to make films that are excruciatingly up close and personal and yet universal. We all struggle, we all rejoice, and in this film I saw all of it in one amazing, human interest story.

Dorothy Fadiman has been producing documentaries for 25 years. Her Oscar-nominated, Emmy-winning works include films on nuclear issues, women’s rights, a miraculous recovery from spinal cord injury, progressive education, and AIDS in Ethiopia. Her newest film is MOTHERHOOD BY CHOICE, NOT CHANCE.

## 1979 ALTERNATIVE CINEMA CONFERENCE

Picked by B. Ruby Rich

Folks from all over the U.S. traveled to Bard College for a national meeting on the goals and practices of radical media. Carter was president, the war in Vietnam was over, and hardly anyone there described themselves as filmmakers or educators; everybody was a “media activist.” San Francisco’s own Peter Adair turned the conference into an historic coming-out moment which illustrated all the tensions as well as connections between Gay Liberation and the Left at that time. Inspired by the examples of filmmakers in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Bolivia, there was even a panel (I was on it) debating “Is the camera a weapon?” The conference created a new network that shaped the next decade and helped us all survive the Reagan/Bush Sr. years.

See 1974’s ONE WAY OR ANOTHER (DE CIERTA MANERA) for B. Ruby Rich’s bio.

**1979****KILLING US SOFTLY****by Jean Kilbourne**

Picked by Jennifer L. Pozner

Ad critic Jean Kilbourne's groundbreaking and illuminating film *KILLING US SOFTLY* was especially formative to my development as a feminist media critic. At the time, it was the first major film to illustrate in clear, inarguable terms that negative representations of women in advertising are harmful to girls and women's social, sexual, and political development, safety, and equality. When the film was released, Kilbourne was sometimes dismissed by the powers-that-be as a flake, an oversensitive feminist, or a filmmaker with a chip on her shoulder and without a substantive leg to stand on. How times have changed. Now considered the mother of feminist advertising criticism, her work is included as a must-see in most 101 classes for those who study the impact of advertising on American culture.

*KILLING US SOFTLY* has been updated three times (the most recent version is being distributed by the Media Education Foundation), and Kilbourne has expanded her analytical scope to include films on the ways advertisers target children, the cooptation of liberation themes to sell addiction to women, media and the culture of violence, and more. Among the most well-respected American scholars on the field of advertising, her arguments are always grounded in very specific examples, and her humor and biting style allows audiences to make deeper sense of the images they see uncritically every day. I am lucky to have studied her work in college in the early '90s. I consider myself honored to count Jean among my strongest allies and friends in the movement for media reform for women.

**Jennifer L. Pozner** is the executive director of Women In Media & News (WIMN). She can be reached at [director\\_wimn@yahoo.com](mailto:director_wimn@yahoo.com).

**1981****SOUTHERN AFRICAN MEDIA CENTER**

Picked by Cornelius Moore

I came to California Newsreel in 1981 to work with its Southern African Media Center project, which made films on South Africa and the region available to the anti-Apartheid and solidarity movements. From the Soweto uprising in 1976 until the triumph of the anti-Apartheid movement in South Africa almost exactly ten years ago, California Newsreel's Southern Africa Media Center provided films and videos, including *GENERATIONS OF*



*South African Belongs to Us*

**Alternative Cinema Conference: 1979**

**The conference created a new network that shaped the next decade and helped us all survive the Reagan/Bush Sr. years.**

—B. Ruby Rich

*RESISTANCE* by Peter Davis, *YOU HAVE STRUCK A ROCK!* by Deborah May, *SOUTH AFRICA BELONGS TO US* by Gerhard Schmidt and Chris Austin, and *THE CRY OF REASON* by Robert Bilheimer and Ronald Mix. These films were used on college campuses, in churches, and other community groups across the country.

I arrived having already been active in Philadelphia, having been moved by some of the films distributed by California Newsreel. At the time, the mainstream media was barely mentioning South Africa, and certainly not presenting the perspectives of the disenfranchised and exploited black majority. The various films showed the history and reality of real people being forced to live in shanty towns and carry pass books, and who also faced brutal repression and imprisonment if they resisted. And it showed the peoples determination to be free. These films often formed the centerpiece of events that helped galvanize the successful movement to boycott South African goods and to disinvest from corporations doing business with South Africa—ultimately bringing down Apartheid.

**Cornelius Moore** is the executive director of the San Francisco-based distributor California Newsreel ([californianewsreel.org](http://californianewsreel.org)).

**1982****IF YOU LOVE THIS PLANET****by Terri Nash**

Picked by Mark Achbar

This deceptively simple, deeply affecting film centers on a lecture given by Dr. Helen Caldicott to American students in 1981 on what the effects would be of detonating a single twenty-megaton nuclear bomb on a civilian population. The film was labeled “propaganda” by the Reagan administration, which severely limited its distribution in the United States. This powerful short film helped catalyze my media activism around nuclear issues and led to working with Robert Del Tredici on his photojournalism book, *At Work in the Fields of the Bomb*, and with Peter Watkins on his film *THE JOURNEY*, as well as inspiring my own efforts in a short film called *THERE IS A RALLY*, about the 1982 million-person march in New York City for disarmament.

One day in 1985, I sat in a lecture hall listening to a talk by Noam Chomsky. I remember thinking, maybe I can do for Chomsky's analysis, what Terri Nash did for Caldicott's. That thought led to the making of *MANUFACTURING CONSENT: NOAM CHOMSKY AND THE MEDIA* (1992), which became the most successful Canadian feature documentary in history, a record now surpassed by *THE CORPORATION* (2004).

See *HEARTS AND MINDS* (1974) for **Mark Achbar's** bio.

## 1983 BORN IN FLAMES by Lizzie Borden

Picked by Xandra Castleton

The setting is the future: New York City, ten years after the Social Democratic War of Liberation. Class, race, and health care issues have all been adequately addressed, but the best the government has done for women's rights is institute a "Wages for Housework" program. Women around the city, of all backgrounds and political leanings, decide that is not enough. Spurred by two underground radio personalities, Honey and Isabel, the Women's Army is born.

I saw BORN IN FLAMES in a film studies class in 1990 and practically leapt out of my seat to take up arms against "the Man." I was deeply involved in evangelizing the use of media for social change at the time, and I organized a 300-person screening of the film with

---

**BORN IN FLAMES isn't the greatest filmmaking, but there's a pure punk energy that'll infect anyone who's open to Lizzie Borden's ideas.**

---

various political organizations. We watched the film and later broke down into small groups to discuss what feminism means, and how we could work together across racial, cultural, and class issues to advance a progressive agenda on campuses nationwide.

This April, I flew to DC for the March for Women's Lives. I was there with the co-creators and funders of our film, LIFE, LIBERTY & THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS, which was screening throughout the weekend. It felt great to be contributing to the flow of activist media again. We were giving away copies of the film, urging people to have screenings in their hometowns. BORN IN FLAMES isn't the greatest filmmaking, but there's a pure punk energy that'll infect anyone who's open to Lizzie Borden's ideas. Maybe the great beast of feature fiction filmmaking isn't leading me entirely astray after all, thinking back on that day of conversion.

**Xandra Castleton** is the writer and co-producer of Tiffany Shlain's short documentary, LIFE, LIBERTY & THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS. She and filmmaker David Munro started their own production company, Grottofilms, and are currently producing a feature-length narrative, FULL GROWN MEN.

## 1987 THE JOURNEY by Peter Watkins

Picked by Scott MacDonald

The most profound media activist project I've been involved with was and is Peter Watkins's mega-film, THE JOURNEY. Long before I became producer for the segments of THE JOURNEY that were shot in the Mohawk Valley of New York State, I had been involved in presenting and teaching Watkins's THE WAR GAME (1965) and PUNISHMENT PARK (1971), both of which were/are what might be

called community psychodramas: in both instances, community groups with little or no experience with media were asked to dramatize traumatic social possibilities, in one case the beginning of a nuclear war; in the other, a military tribunal and a camp for political dissidents committed to resisting the expansion of the Vietnam War. THE JOURNEY was, and remains, Watkins's most elaborate project—an attempt to use the making of a film to create an international grassroots community dedicated to serious conversation about and social action regarding international crises such as world hunger, the arms race, ethnic bigotry, sexism, and the general failure of educational and media systems to ameliorate the problems we face.

Shot in locations around the globe, with families and community groups, Watkins offers a new way of thinking about filmmaking: not as simply the production of a product that is/is not shown in theaters and on television, but as a way of creating new, progressive forms of international community dedicated to a safer, more humane world. Hundreds of people from the U.S.A., France, Germany, the USSR, Sweden, Norway, Scotland, Canada, Mozambique, Australia, Mexico, the Island of Tahiti, and Japan participated in the various phases of THE JOURNEY: fundraising, nearly all of it small community-based events; research into then-current government crisis planning; preparation for shooting; the shooting itself; and the presentation of the finished film.

For many of us, each phase of the experience was memorable and transformative. The extended analysis of conventional media provided by THE JOURNEY has never been more relevant; and not surprisingly the 14 1/2-hour mega-film has been screened, complete, in recent months in London and in New York. THE JOURNEY, like PUNISHMENT PARK (at long last), is available at Canyon Cinema. For those who do not have the resources to present the entire film, I'd suggest Sections 1, 2, and 8 for a powerful 2 1/2-hour experience (the 35-minute credit sequence—Section 19—is a remarkable text/image tour de force).

**Scott MacDonald** has been writing about alternative media since the 1970s. Three volumes of *A Critical Cinema* are in print; two more are in preparation at University of California Press. His most recent books are *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place* (California, 2001) and *Cinema 16: Toward a History of the Film Society* (Temple, 2002). He teaches at Bard College, Hamilton College, and Utica College. He wrote about filmmaker Robert Nelson, recipient of the 2002 Phelan Award in Filmmaking in the November/December issue of *Release Print*.

## 1988 THE THIN BLUE LINE by Errol Morris

Picked by Oriana Zill de Granados

THE THIN BLUE LINE is a landmark film that follows the murder trial of Randall Dale Adams, a man whom the filmmaker believes was wrongly convicted of murdering a police officer in Texas. The film's style is particularly daring for that era, with repeated dramatization, multiple points of view, and wonderful music. As the film unfolds, the audience understands the depth of the corruption in the criminal justice system and the immense responsibility in death penalty cases. Eventually, THE THIN BLUE LINE led to the acquittal of Randall Dale Adams and

stirred up important national concern over police corruption and the death penalty.

After seeing the film, I knew that I wanted to use this powerful medium in order to tell real people's stories. Because truth can truly be stranger than fiction, I began to believe that true stories could entertain while educating and informing the audience about important issues. Soon after, I began working at San Francisco's Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) as they began production on *GLOBAL DUMPING GROUND*, the first of many investigative documentaries. This special for PBS *Frontline* traced the export of toxic waste from the United States to countries in the Third World.

CIR has since produced more than twenty documentaries for PBS *Frontline* and other outlets. Many of these documentaries have sparked major public policy changes and have been viewed by key members of Congress responsible for reforming U.S. law, including 1997's *HOT GUNS*, which revealed how cheap guns were finding their way onto city streets because of lax security at a manufacturing facility, and inspired California State Assembly member Jack Scott to author the Firearms Manufacturing Accountability Act in 1998.

**Oriana Zill de Granados** is an investigative journalist and documentary filmmaker with ten years of experience on programs for network, public, and cable television. She is currently a producer at the Center for Investigative Reporting ([muckraker.org](http://muckraker.org)).

## 1989 SHOW THE RIGHT THING CONFERENCE

Picked by B. Ruby Rich

I was a bureaucrat in New York City in the late '80s. I had funded Spike Lee's first feature, *SHE'S GOTTA HAVE IT*, and I was galvanized when he made *DO THE RIGHT THING*. Independent production was becoming a force to be reckoned with, but independent exhibition wasn't



keeping pace. There were sharp dividing lines separating mainstream and alternative circuits, and I wanted to bring multiculturalism and film exhibition together in a powerful way that could diversify the field, so I got the Rockefeller Foundation to agree to join me in funding a major conference. The Film News Now Foundation (Renee Tajima, Christine Choy) partnered with us. The resulting conference at NYU over an autumn weekend was electrifying. It helped to energize people, forge new connections, launch careers, and get folks lined up for the Clinton years.

See 1974's *ONE WAY OR ANOTHER (DE CIERTA MANERA)* for **B. Ruby Rich's** bio.

## 1991 DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST by Julie Dash

Rahdi Taylor

As a narrative filmmaker, I feel it's important to highlight nontraditional narratives that echo or illuminate social movements or simply social moments. While I could consider many films that may have a closer relationship to activism, no single film has had a greater impact on me as a woman of color in America than Julie Dash's seminal work, *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST*. Nothing less than an epic of the

---

**While I could consider many films that may have a closer relationship to activism, no single film has had a greater impact on me as a woman of color than Julie Dash's seminal work.**

---

redemption of black women's full humanity in inhumane times, the film chronicles the interwoven lives of several women faced with dramatic choices trying to answer the ever-present question: Which way forward for the survival and spiritual redemption of black people? Placing the life-altering dilemmas and emotional truth of marginalized women at the center of a breathtaking picture, *DAUGHTERS OF THE DUST* was a critical moment for me in realizing the revolutionary power of healing storytelling.

**Rahdi Taylor** is a feature film director currently in post-production on *CONVENTION*, a feature film set at the Democratic National Convention. Out of Taylor's top ten list of influential works, two films vie for second place: Gillo Pontecorvo's *BATTLE OF ALGIERS* (1965) and Charles Burnett's *KILLER OF SHEEP* (1977).

## 1991 LUMUMBA: DEATH OF A PROPHET (LUMUMBA: LA MORT DU PROPHETE) by Raoul Peck

Picked by Barbara Hammer

I watched it in 1993 at the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar in upstate New York, and saw that an "essay documentary" (a film about ideas and themes) could carry a powerful personal story. Chris Marker's work has influenced my own essay documentaries, but his work refuses the personal. Here, for the first time, I saw Raoul Peck's mother on her porch in Zaire (Congo) at the time of Lumumba's assassination. This was filmed in Super-8 and combined with other material textures and released as 16mm. I had just finished *NITRATE KISSES* (1992), and was screening it at the Seminar. Seeing Peck's work plus my own call for peoples made invisible to save their histories made me decide to make my own autobiography, a personal story set within the feminist communities of the seventies. The personal within the broader political context!

*LUMUMBA: DEATH OF A PROPHET* was successful because of the multilayered approach to documentary filming, the revelation of the probable CIA connection to the assassination, the release of an

international film in a country swollen with mistaken nationalist self-pride, and the presence of a director whose Haitian, Zairean, and European education had a profound effect on the audience. To watch the film with Raoul, to sit with him later on the dock over the lake discussing film, to hear his erudite and dignified responses to personal emotional issues evoked by his film, as well as the devastating long-term political consequences of the assassination of democracy in Zaire made me grow, breath deeply, and promise myself to continue to take on political and personal filming in my own form.

**Barbara Hammer** is a New York-based, internationally recognized film artist who has made 80 films/videos for which she received the prestigious Frameline Award, for making a significant contribution to lesbian and gay cinema. Hammer has completed seven features in seven years. Her trilogy of experimental documentaries on lesbian and gay histories is already considered classic cinema: *NITRATE KISSES* (1992), *TENDER FICTIONS* (1995), and *HISTORY LESSONS* (2000).

### 1993 **BARBIE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION (BLO)**

Picked by Craig Baldwin

My ideal is a media activism that doesn't just say "yes" to the corporation's "no" (or the other way around), but actually initiates a more engaged set of activities that in fact disturbs that equilibrium. Helter-Skelter: it may even confuse people, present them with a conceptual problem (puzzle) that they have to solve; they have to

---

**An activism that doesn't necessarily announce itself as such sends a jolt of radical insight more transformative than the petition-and-placard tactics of the liberals.**

---

reassess their assumptions about services, voices, and commodities within a "naturalized" status quo in which "protest" itself has already been assigned its place, and so has lost its threat/power. This is the problem with PSAs, for example—despite a progressive agenda, they still remain "contained" within the logic of TV viewing. So, an activism that doesn't necessarily announce itself as such—nor as Art either, something more in the realm of Prank—subversive theater that is not only clever and comic, but, through resonant gesture as opposed to explicit message, sends a jolt of radical insight more transformative than the petition-and-placard tactics of the liberals.

One such intervention was the Barbie Liberation Organization's switching of Barbie Doll and GI Joe voice boxes. (Are talking-dolls "media"? Damn right, they are, as well as the electronic environment, including marketing, around them.) I can't really remember where I first heard of it, but very quickly it was everywhere; the BLO had followed its gender-switching play with a broad campaign of press releases—I call it "amplification"—piggy-backing on the news media's built-in publicity apparatus. This provocative, Situationist-inspired stunt had enough humor in it that it afforded even the national broadcasters an

irresistible "human interest" item. And in turn, these reports were harvested from the info-stream, re-edited, and sent back again in novel and continually circulating forms, including bogus "video news releases" (what video news release isn't bogus, by the way?—see how this action continues to raise questions?), video art, and even appearing in my own doc *SONIC OUTLAWS*.

In terms of activist history, the BLO initiative raised the stakes, taking critique beyond mere arguments and into a world of possibility where even non-ideologues were invited to seize the ugly plastic things around them and *CRACK THEM OPEN*—a veritable metaphor for media activism!—"how-to" instructions were also part of the grand scheme. It delivered the delirious thrill of transgression—a kind of direct-action writ small—yet by the same outlaw ethic was ultimately generous—the dolls were placed back on store shelves ("shop-giving"). The project was way more than "media activism"...why stop there anyway?

Filmmaker **Craig Baldwin** is the founder and curator of San Francisco's Other Cinema ([othercinema.com](http://othercinema.com)).

### 1994 **UNDERCURRENTS**

Picked by A. Mark Liiv

Undercurrents ([www.undercurrents.org](http://www.undercurrents.org)) is a video collective based in England which inspired us to form *Whispered Media*. We watched their videos shared by fellow activists and heard about them through Artists' Television Access (ATA). Undercurrents put out periodic video magazines in the mid-'90s, collections of short news pieces and humorous edits from the direct action campaigns around the U.K. and Europe, as well as a roundup of global actions from radical and progressive causes.

I think what was so inspiring about it for me was that they were so consistent. Here they were, scrappy and confrontational, and of course self-righteous with a sense of humor, producing and distributing these tapes about twice a year for several years. Undercurrents was able to do a nice mix of their own in-house productions and include bits other people had done, then package it with a proper cover (that is still hard to do!), distribute it to some paid subscribers, and screen it regularly across Europe. We showed some of these tapes at places like ATA and Cellspace. At the time it was like, "Oh my god, we are not alone!"

This rough-and-ready DIY distribution model is something we are still working on here in San Francisco with the collaborative documentary *WE INTERRUPT THIS EMPIRE...*, and more generally with the *Indymedia.org* movement. We are building widespread and sophisticated grassroots networks which are "vertically integrated" from videographer to production through screening and back to new videographers, who are inspired by what they have seen as part of an audience at Dolores Park or a rooftop in NYC.

**A. Mark Liiv** is a member of the *Whispered Media* collective.

1996

**ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE**

by Lee Lew Lee

Picked by Kevin Epps

Lee's documentary gives a very accurate account of events and happenings of the '60s, the Black Power movement, Cointelpro, the assassinations of outspoken leaders and the various individuals who were directly or indirectly involved.

**Kevin Epps** is the maker of *STRAIGHT OUTTA HUNTERS POINT*, about life among rappers in his Bay Area neighborhood, and *RAP DREAMS*, which made its world premiere at the San Francisco Black Film Festival in June. He is currently working on a documentary about African American prisoners and guards at Alcatraz.

1996

**BONES OF THE FOREST**

by Velcrow Ripper and Heather Frise

Picked by Doug Hawes-Davis



Having begun my filmmaking career as a media activist, I've been inspired by dozens of advocacy films over the years. But more often than not, it's been the work of documentary filmmakers who would probably gasp at the idea that they have created advocacy works that have profoundly influenced my documentary form and style. I'm constantly amazed by the work of Errol Morris, Frederick Wiseman, Albert Maysles and many, many others. One work of advocacy media that particularly stands out for me, however, is Velcrow Ripper and Heather Frise's *BONES OF THE FOREST*. The film transformed my idea of what advocacy media is and what it can be.

The impressionistic beauty of the imagery, both in the scenes of the natural environment and of mechanized destruction, combined with the poetic nature of the intellectual content, as recorded and assembled by the filmmakers, combines with a subtle contemplative soundtrack to create an extraordinary effect. One character in the film, Velcrow Ripper's grandmother, speaks strongly on behalf of a conquered and industrialized British Columbia, yet she is portrayed with dignity like every other character in the film and is given time to fully express her strongly-held opinions. Unlike most "environmental" films where the lines between hero and enemy are clearly drawn, there is no

specific enemy here. The enemy in *BONES OF THE FOREST* is all of us who sit idly by while the commodification of nature continues unimpeded. Powerful advocacy indeed.

**Doug Hawes-Davis** is a filmmaker and co-founder of High Plains Films ([highplainsfilms.org](http://highplainsfilms.org)) and the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival in Montana.

1996

**LOST BOOK FOUND**

by Jem Cohen

Picked by Stephanie Gray

I first saw this work probably in 1998 or 1999 at Squeaky Wheel/ Buffalo Media Resources. While I am now aware that city symphony films and just plain city films have been made since the beginning of cinema, prior to Jem's monumental work, I had never seen a film before that so captured the personality of the city, and exposed urgent urban issues without being preachy. One can watch Jem's work, and simply take it as an intriguing film that delves deeply into the city—into the heart and soul of its buildings and people that are usually ignored—and conclude the viewing process there, and that is fine. But something in the film resonated with me, which I was only able to see in retrospect.

Jem's film focused on looking at older buildings and forgotten people, and it jumpstarted my vision to look more closely at the city I lived in. A city where people drove by everyday to their fancy jobs downtown, without seemingly remembering that they have driven by miles of abandoned storefronts. Why don't the city's urban planners notice this stuff? Jem's film showed how one can look more closely at a city one day, and immediately see how—while there is beauty in cities—they can be lacking and ignored in an age of urban sprawl, suburbanization, and gentrification.

It's very possible that Jem didn't mean any of these things in his film. He started to make it while working as a pushcart vendor on Canal St. in New York City, and accumulated much footage. It could very well be a city poem to him, without any overarching goals to combat poor urban planning and misguided urban planners.

But *LOST BOOK FOUND*—whether it wanted to or not, and as with all good art—leads you in a new direction and calls attention to the importance of cities and how we are in danger of losing them if the world continues to build super-chain everything in the middle of nowhere. Jem Cohen's *LOST BOOK FOUND* started me on a journey to a sort of quiet film urban-planning activism. I've made many city films, and while I don't think they've yet to make a dent in Buffalo's thickheaded city planners, I hope that they sparked some ideas in city residents' heads wherever they have screened.

**Stephanie Gray** is a committed Super-8 filmmaker who received a 2003 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship in Film. Her films have shown at festivals around the world, and she has served as a juror and panelist for the Thaw Festival (Iowa City) and Experimental Television Center's finishing fund grants. After living in Buffalo, NY, since 1997 and working at Squeaky Wheel Media Arts Center from 2000–04 as development director and editor of the *Squealer*, she recently relocated to New York City where she works as development associate at Creative Capital Foundation.

1999

## Breaking the Spell by Tim Lewis and Tim Ream

Picked by Scott Beibin

One of the major cinematic turning points in terms of aesthetic, lifestyle, and art meets idealism and activism is the anti-corporate-globalization agit-doc. On November 30, 1999, at the intersection of 4th and Pike in Seattle, police officers began an attack on thousands of protesters and journalists with teargas, pepper spray, concussion grenades, and clubs. The violence would last about a week. Dressed in riot gear, with badges hidden in order to not be identified, thousands of black-clad cops in full riot gear followed orders to quell the voices of those in the streets by assaulting the crowd, and performing



mass arrests of nonviolent protesters. Indymedia.org had been pulled together by a ragtag group of activist technologists and journalists in order to bypass the inevitable censorship by the corporate media. Their goal was to make the voices of the people on the streets heard internationally by allowing folks to post uncensored video, audio, photos, and stories in real time.

I stood at the intersections, fly-on-the-wall style videotaping the police state along with hundreds of others, while the TV network camera people ran and tried to protect their gear. Seasoned forest campaign videographers Tim Lewis and Tim Ream from Eugene, Oregon, had amassed video footage of the police riot shot on the streets the day before and within 24 hours used nonlinear editing to put together RIP WTO N30, a 20-minute piece that served as a precursor to the 60-minute BREAKING THE SPELL, made by the same folks who had put together PICKAXE. When I saw RIP, I immediately knew that something new was in the air. Many of the activist-produced docs I'd seen before were fairly drab, academic, and lifeless. Yet here was a different and engaging doc, with a strong storytelling structure, capturing the days events on the streets with the same urgency you feel at a punk-rock show.

The camera angles were more skate video than MTV. You could feel the risks that the doc-makers went through. These were not the well-framed images of effete *auteurs*, but something new created with the handcam. This film is truly the beginning of cinema created by and for the everyman. Immediately, we added RIP WTO N30 to the Lost

Film Festival roster and it marked the beginning of the voracious hunt for similar work. Since then, a slew of docs have followed in its path, containing what is sometimes called "riot porn" (in either a complimentary or derogatory fashion). Some of the agit-docs marking the evolution of the anti-corporate-globalization movement include CROWD BITES WOLF (Guerillavision, 2000), CAPITALIST WALLS (ohmsmedia, 2001), WE INTERRUPT THIS EMPIRE... (Video Activist Network, 2003), A YEAR IN THE STREETS (Cascadia Media Collective, 2002), EYE OF THE STORM (Raphael Lyon & Andres Ingoglia, 2002), and the Big Noise Tactical classic capturing the past few years of anti-globalization protests, FOURTH WORLD WAR (2004).

To me, RIP WTO N30 represents the first of this new breed of films made by using handheld video cameras, furiously edited and cut to the latest "copyleft" underground music, and distributed over the Web and on VHS and DVD. Most folks making these films don't think of themselves as filmmakers, and in that they are maverick; for all they care, they could just make one film, and that's the end of the story. Many of the films are created by collectives making decisions through consensus, bypassing the tradition of hierarchy in media production. The filmmaking comes as long as the inspiration is there. No thought is put into budget, as there usually is none, except what can be raised at vegan potlucks and benefit shows. It's filmed using instinct and the ability to get a steady shot under fire by repressive authority figures. An amazing body of radical film work was produced in the '60s, but it was captured on film, which is too pricey to use liberally. Now with the availability of cheap mini-DV cameras, computers, and community resources like Indymedia centers around the world, the power of the visual medium is accessible to everyone who can shoot and edit.

**Scott Beibin** (scottb@lostfilmfest.com) is the founder of the Lost Film Festival ([www.lostfilmfest.com](http://www.lostfilmfest.com)).

1999

## COMING SOON TO A FINANCIAL CENTER NEAR YOU

### Collection of videos by Reclaim the Streets, Undercurrents, Adbusters Media Foundation

Picked by Jino Choi

It was the early summer of 1999. I had been hearing about a call for an international day of simultaneous action on the 18th of June when the leaders of the G8 nations were to meet in Koln, Germany, to further promote their vision of "free" trade, economic growth, and corporate dominance. It wasn't just any typical call for an international day of action. This was a call coming out of a new movement inspired by Reclaim the Streets protests that originated in the U.K., which used tactics such as spontaneous street parties and carnivals to shut down financial centers and to celebrate anti-corporate globalization movements. This was not a centrally coordinated effort, yet it was spreading quickly as many activists were learning to use online communication effectively. It was less than a month before June 18 when some friends and I decided to do something in Los Angeles on that same day. We somehow assembled a handful of dedicated anarchist activists, some of whom came in from out of town, to help plan a street party at the last minute.

An Earth First! activist from out of town happened to have a copy of a promotional video for the upcoming June 18th protests and gave me a copy. It just said COMING SOON TO A FINANCIAL CENTRE NEAR YOU on the spine and “JUNE THE 18TH: An international day of protest, action, and carnival aimed at the heart of the global economy” on the cover, with a photo of a stock trader sitting on the trading floor that looked as though it had been hit by a tornado.

The video contained four shorts: J18 TRAILER (spoof Hollywood trailer for June 18th) by Reclaim the Streets, WASHES WHITE RESISTANCE AGAINST THE IMF, WORLD BANK & WTO by U.K.'s Undercurrents, BULL IN A CHINA SHOP (spoof advert about growth economics), and G8 ECOSIDE (spoof advert about G8 summit) by Adbusters Media Foundation. All the shorts were impressive in terms of productions and aesthetics. I particularly liked the spoof concepts based on “found footage” that all the videos effectively used to make their points in entertaining ways. The J18 TRAILER was my favorite, as it reappropriated the typical good vs. evil Hollywood trailer concept, while showing images of global resistance to corporate globalization. I think the trailer greatly influenced me in the way I approached my work when I began producing videos myself. I can even see a lot of its influence on my work on the collaborative documentary, WE INTERRUPT THIS EMPIRE...

Inspired by these videos, we were able to put on a successful spontaneous street party in the heart of the financial district of downtown Los Angeles on June 18, 1999. We took over an intersection with a sound-system van, live DJs and turntables, a mud-wrestling kiddie pool, a sacrifice graffiti car, and lots of booty shaking. The LAPD responded with the riot cops and the bomb squad and eventually declared a “tactical emergency” over the city of Los Angeles, shutting off the entire financial district area for many hours. The footage that many of us shot on that day even helped save an innocent bystander who was arrested after being attacked by the riot cops, and was being charged with assaulting the cops.

**Jino Choi** is an independent filmmaker and a media activist. He has produced short films with topics such as anarchism, Reclaim the Streets, antiwar protests, and police brutality. He has worked with various Indymedia projects and has contributed to Free Speech TV. His latest works include the collaborative documentary WE INTERRUPT THIS EMPIRE... and a series of shorts involving anti-capitalist hobbies.

## 2000 LEGACY

by **Tod Lending**

Picked by Alyce Myatt

A 90-minute, Academy Award-nominated documentary, LEGACY aired on HBO in the spring of 2001 and later on public television. The film chronicles three generations of the Collins family as they struggle individually and as a family to move out of a Chicago public housing project, from dependence on welfare into the workforce and from drug addiction to recovery.

Outreach Extensions designed one of the most comprehensive outreach campaigns for LEGACY. Partnerships on the national and local levels were formed to reach public policy makers, community leadership, the faith community, local community service agencies,

community housing organizations, and youth and families at risk. The tools and resources created were tailored specifically to each constituency. They were intentionally designed for use independently from, and well beyond, the airing of the LEGACY documentary.

LEGACY inspired the introduction of legislation to help provide safe and affordable housing for grandparents and other relatives raising children across the U.S. As represented by one of the subjects in the film, more than 2 million grandparents in the U.S. find themselves unexpectedly caring for their grandchildren. This phenomenon, which cuts across socioeconomic groups, race, and geographic areas, is due to a variety of factors, including parental substance abuse, incarceration, child abuse and/or neglect, abandonment, death of a parent, family violence, and mental health problems. The LEGACY Act (Living Equitably: Grandparents Aiding Children and Youth) is the first piece of major federal legislation designed to create affordable housing opportunities for grandparent and other relative-headed families. It was signed into law on December 16, 2003.

**Alyce Myatt**, currently media consultant for OneWorld TV (tv.oneworld.net) and MediaWorks, funded LEGACY when she was the media program officer at the MacArthur Foundation. She then helped the project migrate from HBO to PBS as one of PBS's programming vice-presidents.

## 2000 THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Picked by Joan Sekler

I am a founder of the Independent Media Center (IMC) in Los Angeles and was a principal organizer of IMC media coverage during the protests at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles in August 2000. Richard Ray Pérez, another member of the IMC, and I were among the producers of a subsequent documentary of the protests, called CRASHING THE PARTY, which was widely circulated around the country and was an eye-opener for many people, as the mainstream media barely covered the protests or touched on the issues.

When the November 2000 election occurred, I was horrified at what was happening in Florida over the course of the 36-day recount debacle. Then through the IMC Web site (indymedia.org), I found out that more than 20,000 people went to Washington DC on inaugura-



tion day, Jan 20, 2001, to protest the legitimacy of George W. Bush as he took the oath of office. At that moment, I decided to produce a documentary investigating what happened in Florida and how George W. Bush landed in the White House. I recruited Pérez to work on it with me and we became co-directors and co-producers.

After one and a half years, we completed **UNPRECEDENTED: THE 2000 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION** in September 2002. Since then, it has been a very inspiring journey as our film has been screened in hundreds of venues around the country by grassroots groups—student organizations, voting rights and civil rights organizations, church groups, activist groups, neighborhood associations, and others. The reaction to our film is not just anger at what happened in Florida, but determination to make sure that the election is not stolen again in November 2004.

Our film has energized people to register to vote, to volunteer as poll watchers, to set up registration tables wherever they live or work, and so on. Our film has also screened in more than 60 film festivals and at many independent theaters. This year, registration tables have been set up for people to register after each screening. There are also many Americans who live in Europe where **UNPRECEDENTED** has been used to kick off a campaign to register 100,000 Americans to vote by absentee ballot for the November election.

The power of a political documentary cannot be underestimated. **UNPRECEDENTED** has been a true organizing tool for democracy. Visit [www.unprecedented.org](http://www.unprecedented.org) for information on **Joan Sekler**, Richard Ray Pérez, and the latest about their documentary.

## 2000 **THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE**

Picked by Sarah George

**DEMOCRACY** is a collective vision of direct action. Shot by more than 100 activists during the WTO protests in Seattle, **DEMOCRACY** was released on November 30, 2000, to mark the anniversary of the protests with simultaneous screenings in 50 cities worldwide. The film represents the birth of a movement that melds arts and action in the struggle against corporate globalization: protesters on the street with digital video cameras document what they witness and then donate their footage to the cause, without payment or credit on the film. This is tactical media, and it pulses with the power of the people.

**DEMOCRACY** was made by activists, for activists, about activists, and was distributed by hundreds of organizations and thousands of people who organized screenings in more than 100 cities on five continents. At Docs Online in Amsterdam in November 2001, I sat on a panel with one of the filmmakers. He told me that they received more feedback from a screening of **DEMOCRACY** in a community hall in Nova Scotia than they received from the national CBC broadcast. He also reminded me that as filmmakers we cannot allow the Hollywood establishment to judge the value of our work. He taught me to find an audience and engage them. And so **THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE** inspired me to distribute my film

---

**This is tactical media and it pulses with the power of the people.**

---

on a grassroots tour, and will continue to inspire generations of filmmakers to follow.

**Sarah George** is a documentary filmmaker based in Los Angeles, California. Her recent film, **CATCHING OUT** (7th Art Releasing), follows several train hoppers who dissent against mainstream American consumer culture by traveling for free on freight trains. After the premiere at the Seattle International Film Festival in May 2002, George decided to self-distribute the film. Hopping freight trains to venues across the country, she spent the summer of 2002 on the road. In September 2003, she launched a screening tour in Europe. The film premiered on the Sundance Channel in May.

## 2001 **ECHO PARK FILM CENTER**

Picked by Paolo Devanzo

The more I thought about contributing to the timeline the more I realized that it was not one event or situation that drew me to art and activism. But rather a lifetime spent examining how I could replenish the system. Having parents that were immigrants from Europe and devout Socialists, I was taught me at an early age that I needed to help others.

Thus, I will talk about the **ECHO PARK FILM CENTER**, an organization I co-founded almost three years ago. It is not out of self-promotion or ego that I discuss this endeavor...but rather because I feel it personifies what is real and tangible in the media arts. The combination of filmmaking, activism, and education under one roof.

In a town completely obsessed by filmmaking as a product, the Los Angeles-based film center celebrates filmmaking as a means of social change and exploration. We hold free media classes for youth and seniors, curate a weekly cinema series, and operate a retail space catering to filmmakers. It is our goal to empower and excite people to take media production into their own hands.

This is a true catalyst for change. Once the masses begin to take control of the creation and dissemination of news, then and only then, will we be able to begin engaging in true dialogue between people. Join the cinematic revolution. Sell your TV and buy a movie camera.

**Paolo Devanzo** is a filmmaker, educator, and the director and co-founder of the Echo Park Film Center ([www.echoparkfilmcenter.org](http://www.echoparkfilmcenter.org)).

## 2003 **DOGVILLE by Lars Von Trier**

Picked by Miles Montalbano

As someone who considers themselves a filmmaker as well as an activist, I have been trying to reconcile my work as a filmmaker in this time of war and oppression. With so many important issues that need to be addressed, is making film of any real importance? Is political documentary where we should be working? Then a film like Lars Von Trier's **DOGVILLE** comes along to remind me of the power and importance of art and the artist in times of political crisis. A subversive Brechtian critique of American capitalist society, which has managed to make its way into the multiplexes of this country when its message could not be more timely. A brave and challenging film that takes big chances in both style and content. Whether it be hailed or reviled, the film is to me, an inspiring example of film as political art.

Writer and director **Miles Montalbano** is currently working on a upcoming feature-length narrative, titled **REVOLUTION SUMMER**.