

ANARCHIST FILM FESTIVALS

Pietro Ferrua

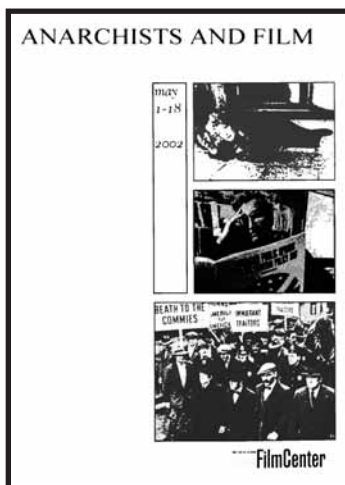
As far as I can ascertain, the first festival of films devoted to anarchism took place in Copenhagen in 1979, although, during a visit to the Danish Film Institute I was unable to find any publication documenting this event. Quite coincidentally, the Danish festival was being inaugurated at the same time we were preparing what we thought would be the first world festival of films on anarchism in Portland, Oregon. We were then surprised by the news coming from Europe and therefore did not insist on the pioneer aspect of our initiative, given the uncertainty of what had happened in Denmark. For this reason, when we announced the First International Symposium on Anarchism at Lewis and Clark College, in February 1980, we did not boast that our event was the first anarchist film festival anywhere on the globe. This was as much a matter of contingency as necessity since we could not, nor did we want to, christen our event a 'festival of anarchist cinema'. First of all, because the event was taking place in academia, financed with grants from a governmental institution (e.g. the French government provided a travel grant for Jean-Louis Comolli's journey to the United States, the use of the diplomatic pouch for several French — and one German — films) and also because we wanted to maintain academic objectivity. A preposition was enough to establish the distinction (as it had happened when I founded the CIRA). Instead of saying for anarchism we chose to say on anarchism, which does mean neither for nor against. The program indeed featured openly anarchist films but also anodyne or objective ones, and even a feature so anti-anarchist — Philip Fourastié's *Les anarchistes ou la bande à Bonnot* — that Dr. Carlos Peregrín Otero, a professor of linguistics at



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U.C.L.A. would have liked to stop the projection of the film. We had to explain that it was not a film that the French government had sent free of charge in order to discredit or provoke us, but rather an independent filmmaker's perspective on an actual event. He depicted the story (partly fictionalized) of the relationship between the gang of the self-labeled French anarchist Jules Bonnot and the editors of an anarchist newspaper of that period, among them the famous Victor Serge and Rirette Maîtrejean, who after the events wrote a memoir detailing the events of this era. Fourastié's film had been selected, by the way, by the Academy of Cinema, directed by an old acquaintance of mine, Georges Franju.



Our Festival Program

Monday, February 18, 1980: A documentary by Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher, *The Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists* — presented as a world premiere in the presence of the two filmmakers and also of Kristina Boden, Maria Gil and Erika Gottfried, all members of the Pacific Street Film Collective. Ahrne Thorne, the last editor of the Yiddish anarchist newspaper *Freie Arbeiter Stimme*, was also present at the opening — as well as a Polish comrade then living in New York but since deceased. Two other interviewees in the film, Esther and Sam Dolgoff, flew to Portland expressly for the premiere. Another historical event was the

May 1 — 18 beginning of shooting of the Collective's subsequent

2002 documentary, *Anarchism in America*.

Tuesday, Feb. 19 *Sacco and Vanzetti* by Giuliano Montaldo.

Wednesday, Feb. 20 the short *Homage to Durruti* (with the famous impressive scene of the funeral) from the CNT-FAI archives, followed by the German long feature *Malatesta* by Peter Lilienthal.

Thursday, Feb. 21 the Argentine film *La Patagonia rebelde* by Héctor Olivera.

Friday, Feb. 22 *Os libertários* by Lauro Escorel Júnior and *Les anarchistes et la bande à Bonnot*, the French film that proved so controversial.

Saturday, Feb. 23 *La Cecilia* by Jean-Louis Comolli. The French

director was to be present but he was instead replaced by Eduardo de Gregorio, an Argentine filmmaker living in Paris, one of the film's screenwriters.

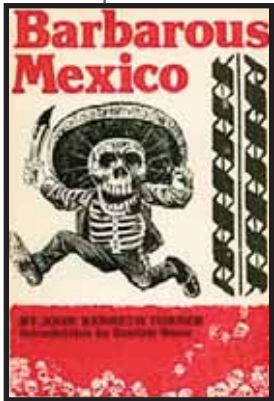
Sunday, Feb. 24 Waldo Frank's short documentary about the Spanish Revolution, *The Will of the People*, followed by Jean Vigo's *Zéro de conduite*.

During a round table on cinema moderated by the local film director Penny Allen, it was proposed that this festival became an annual event. In the wake of this enthusiasm, the project of an annual symposium was also examined. Back to daily routine and reality we quickly concluded that such an event could not take place in Portland on a regular basis, and no one offered to organize it elsewhere.

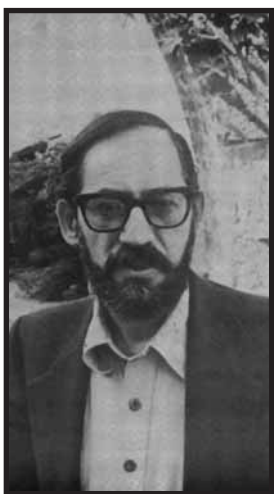
Ultimately, there wasn't a second symposium but instead the launch, at the University of Montreal, in the Summer of 1983, of the Anarchos Institute. I was invited as a co-founder and as a speaker, and I met for the first time Murray Bookchin (with whom I even shared a room), Noam Chomsky, Dimitri Roussopoulos, among many others. My task was mostly to talk about 'Surrealism and Anarchism', another topic that became 'fashionable' and inspired research and numerous publications. Immediately after my sojourn in Canada I went to Paris, where I shared my enthusiasm with José Pierre, whom I convinced to gather in a volume all the 'Billets surréalistes' that André Breton and his followers had published regularly in the weekly organ of the French Anarchist Federation, *Le Libertaire*.

Our project to organize a series of anarchist film events was not neglected, however. In 1983, I was able to organize another world premiere, Oscar Menéndez Zavala *Barbarous Mexico* and was able to invite the filmmaker to Portland. I had discovered him through the Locarno International Film Festival where he had previously screened *El periodista Turner*. In Mexico, John Kenneth Turner is a hero, considered one of the great literary proponents of the Mexican Revolution. His book, *Barbarous Mexico* is required reading in Mexican high schools. When I wrote to Menéndez that I wanted to show his film in Portland he was so shocked (flattered? moved?) that he answered enthusiastically and decided that he would blow-up the 16mm





copy to 35mm, add some more materials, include the voices of John Kenneth Turner and his wife Ethel Duffy (who remained involved with the Mexican anarchists all her life) etchings by José Guadalupe Posada, a noted artist and collaborator in the campaigns of the brothers Flores Magón, who began plans to topple the tyrannical Porfirio Diaz government ten years before the revolution took place. Despite being born in Portland, John Kenneth Turner was forgotten or shamelessly ignored, and we did our best to commemorate him in the press as well as appealing to the state of Oregon, which published a booklet honoring its native son.



Oscar Menéndez Zavala

In 1984 I went to Mexico to visit Menéndez Zavala, who helped me discover other Mexican filmmakers who had endeavored to chronicle the anarchist contribution to the Mexican Revolution: Raúl Kamffer (since prematurely deceased), Ramón Aupart and Marcela Fernández Violante. Together we planned festivals and other events which that only materialized at a much later date (In 2002 we were able to invite Marcela Fernández Violante to Portland, the charming director of *Cananea*, a film that reconstitutes a famous 1906 strike in the copper mines of that border town, an event often considered the first spark of the imminent revolution.)

In 1985, the Australian comrade Hilary May, who had attended the 1980 Portland Symposium, wrote to ask for our help in organizing an anarchist film festival in her country. We readily agreed to collaborate with her and the International Anarchist Film Festival became a reality and took place in Melbourne May 2-4, 1986. The program encompassed some of the films included in our 1980 series, as well as some other local productions which we were not aware of: *Elsie. A Study of a collective* (Australia, 1977, 12') directed by Liz Rust and Toni Colston, and *Harry Howton* (Australia, 1970, 83') by Arthur and Corinne Cantrill.

From this point on, festivals and film series devoted to anarchist subjects multiplied and scattered around the world — with or without our input. In most cases, however, they were not real festivals, with new films and the presence of filmmakers, but mere projections of videos.

In 2000, Bill Foster, director of the Northwest Film Center (Portland Art Museum) and of the Portland International Film Festival, called me. Twenty years had passed since the first Anarchists in Film series, an event that he had attended (and in

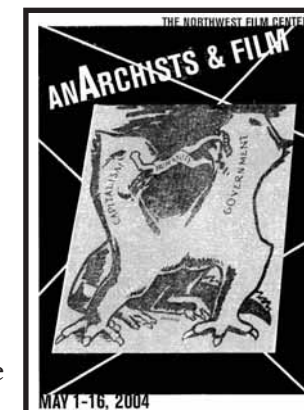
which he participated as a panelist in a round table discussion) and he thought it was time for us to revive the festival's original impetus. He invited me to assemble an annual festival, lasting about two weeks, with a daily show. He did not have funds for honoraria but could offer travel grants and local hospitality to guest speakers coming from out of town or even from abroad. He could also afford to publish a program and promised a generous advertising budget. Moreover, he would give me carte blanche in the choice of films and guests. I accepted without hesitation and on May 1st 2002 we inaugurated the festival in the presence of the directors of *Anarchism in America*, Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher, who flew in from New York for the screening, and we also welcomed Marcela Fernández Violante from Mexico City, and Nick Sheehan, a Canadian graduate student, author of a thesis on anarchist film attended and lent his expertise. The program comprised about fifteen titles.

In 2003, we showed an equal number of films and the guests of honor were Barry Pateman, from the Emma Goldman Archives of the University of California at Berkeley, and Richard Porton, the author of *Film and the Anarchist Imagination*. Dave Milholland, an old friend, and a distinguished director of shorts and documentaries, moderated the round table.

In 2004, the visitors included Marianne Enckell, the director of the library at the International Center of Research on Anarchism (C.I.R.A.) in Lausanne. She also distributed a recently issued publication—*Bulletin du C.I.R.A.* n.60 (May 2004), an extremely useful anarchist filmography. The film director of the year was Mel Bucklin, who screened her latest feature, a documentary on Emma Goldman commissioned by the Public Broadcasting Service's American Experience series, a film that generated considerable discussion within the anarchist community.

In 2005, the Festival moved from Portland to San Francisco's Yerba Buena Art Museum. Among the people present were Audrey Goodfriend and Jean Pauline, old acquaintances of the 1980 Portland Festival. Our honored guest was Dr. Candace Falk, the dynamic founder of the Emma Goldman Archives. The festival closed with the visit of another old acquaintance, Judy Stone, a B. Traven specialist and the sister of the late I.F.Stone, the subject of one of the films screened during the festival. Before concluding

May 1 — 16
2004:
Cover
illustration by
Man Ray "The
Monster of
Capitalism and
Government
Devouring
Humanity".
Cover
Illustration of
Mother Earth
(New York)
August 1914





La Cecilia assisting him on *La Cecilia*, Xan Leira (Spain), Héctor Olivera (Argentina), John Sayles, Steven Soderbergh (Usa), and Noam Chomsky. Professor Ronald Creagh, of the University of Montpellier was a particularly regretted absence, due to the fact that he founded the most important research site on Anarchism, the *RA_Forum*, that dedicates unlimited space to the study of the relationship between cinema and anarchism.



May 2 — 18
2003 sufficient. Works of art need listeners, readers, and spectators — in other words, a public. Not necessarily a big crowd but ‘an interested group of persons’. Every year I receive hundreds of messages (by letter, e-mails, fax, telephone) asking for help in organizing film projections. Some ask me if I can send them copies of films without realizing that we are (almost) all slaves of the local market conditions.

Our festival in Portland is sponsored by a museum and it is unthinkable that we’d screen pirated copies of a film on video support. The film society rents films (preferably in 35mm) from distributors and pays royalties. Because of matters of principle (ethical, aesthetic, political, etc.) we don’t show films that have

this chapter I would like to mention the names of invited guests who we invited but unfortunately could not make the trip to Portland for various reasons: the historian Paul Avrich (since unfortunately deceased), the filmmakers Jean-Louis Comolli (France — at the last minute, Comolli was replaced by Eduardo de Gregorio, one of the screenwriters

Creators and Spectators

Since we first organized anarchist festivals in Portland, technological innovations can now enable even inexperienced artists to shoot their ‘anarchist film’ on a shoestring budget. Up to a few years ago, one needed complex devices, teams of technicians, hundreds of thousands — if not millions of dollars — to produce a film. Today, a basement, a cheap camcorder and a desktop computer with abundant memory suffice to solve complicated problems of sound, light, editing.

Yet filmmakers, even more than writers and painters, require an audience. The efforts of lone creators enclosed in their ivory towers are not

not been solicited or selected and previewed — with the exception of films that have been brought by a film director, producer, distributor to illustrate his/her lecture. My criteria for selection are not whimsical, but neither are we one-sided. We have even shown anti-anarchist films when the film language proved innovative and the directors intellectually honest. On the other hand, we’ve rejected mere provocations such as Jordan Susman’s *The Anarchist Cookbook* (which features pseudo-anarchist drug peddlers and whose main protagonist heroically becomes an FBI snitch) or *Anarchy USA* (a product of the Cold War financed by the John Birch Society).

In any case, leaving aside these frivolous titles, there is still an enormous number to choose from. CIRA lists over two thousand titles, and international production adds at least about one hundred titles every year. All this should suffice to cover the leisure and cultural activities of groups, associations, unions, and anyone else interested in organizing an ad hoc festival.

The only problem involves knowing where to start. Of course, this has to be decided by the parties involved. I’ve observed that Spain is perhaps the greatest producer of films on anarchist subjects — and it’s also worth noting that the Latin-American market of Spanish speaking countries extends to over twenty nations. With English subtitles the potential public would double.

Besides being a hint, this is meant to be also an invitation...

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Useful Sites

cira@plusloin.org

(The most complete filmography related to anarchism)

<http://raforum.info>

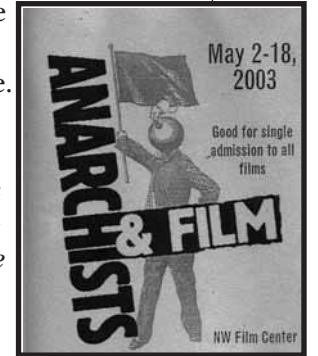
(The University of Montpellier site created by Prof. Ronald Creagh specialises in anarchist research and contains hundreds of film synopses)

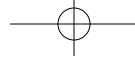
<http://www.brightcove.tv/channel.jsp?channel=219646953&first>

Video=0 or go to <http://www.brightcove.tv> and type in ChristieBooks (Many films on the subject of anarchism, most of them not commercially available, can be watched for free on this site)

<http://www.christiebooks.com>

(Anarchism and Film database compiled by Santiago Juan Navarro)





ARENA | ON ANARCHIST CINEMA AND VIDEO

