

Making Anarchist Films

Mutual Aid Helps the Process

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In the aftermath of 9/11, I pretty much dropped everything to produce media about the protests against the war in Afghanistan. However, I was clueless about the alter-globalization movement and that mass mobilizations had been happening all over the world for the two years preceding the Twin Towers attacks.

That is, until joining Indymedia in Atlanta.

Indymedia, or IMC, a decentralized network of radical journalists born out of the 1999 anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle, was now a worldwide phenomenon, and when the US was beating the drums of war, IMC centers became the megaphones for anti-war mobilizations.

The anarchists who staffed the centers introduced me to a new world of indie filmmaking that changed my life forever. Watching “Breaking the Spell,” a film about the WTO protests that was filled with “riot porn,” I kept thinking to myself, “Can they really do that? Is this shit legal?” I borrowed VHS copies of such gems as, “Crowd Bites Wolf,” “Fuck the Corporate Media,” and “The 4th World War,” and decided this was the type of media I wanted to make.

What made those films so exciting was that they were unapologetic about their politics. Anarchists were at the forefront of the action, not the cops or politicians. They displayed a creative celebration of movement victories and radical culture, normalizing the sentiments which I had previously felt somewhat alone in—a hatred for capitalism and authority, and an uncompromising love for freedom and social justice.

Over a decade later, however, it is sad to say that the world of radical anarchist filmmaking, which I had expected would develop by now, has not come to fruition. Maybe my expectations were set too high. After seeing the rapid global spread of IMCs, I imagined that anarchists from all over the world would pick up cheap cameras and pirated copies of Final Cut Pro programs and unleash a new wave of radical cinema.

To be sure, the growth of citizen journalism has had a significant effect on world politics, but “radical anarchist cinema” doesn’t mean eyewitness video reports of police brutality or “livestreamed” protest events.

I’m talking about films that present big ideas, or fictionalized sci-fi narratives of anarchist utopias; odes to fallen comrades, dramatizations of past battles, music videos, surreal animated shorts, or documentaries that are unambiguous about their political ideals. Take the whole film spectrum and view it through an anarchist lens.

So, what the hell happened? One factor is that the desire of filmmakers to reach larger audiences led many to bury their politics. Wanting your work to reach a broad audience is understandable, after all, films and videos can be excellent mediums of mass communication. One way to achieve this is to get your films on television. Since the number of radical anarchist TV channels is zero, filmmakers need to either soften their politics or choose topics that are acceptable to the gatekeepers in order to be distributed by mainstream networks.

For example, can we imagine HBO or Showtime broadcasting a film openly calling for the destruction of the state? Instead, we are left with talented radical filmmakers making documentaries about human rights abuses, environmental destruction, war, and sweatshop labour. Films about these subjects may be important and practical

in some instances—documentaries such as “Gasland,” about fracking, for example, can make organizing popular education events easier, and discussions that follow can often kick start community engagement.

However, many people are tired of seeing films that talk in detail about how fucked up this or that situation is yet never fire people up, or inspire us to be unashamed of our desire for impossible worlds, and that show that we radicals are out there and not alone.

Historically and today, anarchists have been quite good at publishing and distributing written works. Websites about anarchist struggles, theory, and history abound. But when you look for contemporary films made by anarchists, the list is short.

For instance, the AK Press website boasts almost 3,400 books, but only 163 films, which include titles that are not anarchist films, but documentaries on subjects that might have general appeal to radicals.

As an anarchist filmmaker, I understand that making radical films is not an easy endeavour. Some of the hurdles are funding and distribution, the same obstacles that lead filmmakers to go on the pre-carved paths of grant writing, film festivals, and broadcast deals. But I’ve been able to crank out radical films consistently for the past ten years, so, it can be done.

Here are a few suggestions about how to go about the process:

1. **Share your knowledge.** Experienced anarchist filmmakers can mentor and skill share. Mentors can save would-be filmmakers a lot of trouble by sharing their experiences, technical know-how, and past mistakes. They can also help to alleviate the fears new filmmakers may have, giving critical feedback, and encouraging them to keep going and work through the rough patches rather than giving up.
2. **Create visibility.** Organize screenings and festivals of anarchist films. The Chicago Anarchist Film Festival is a great example of how we can promote radical cinema to audiences outside our milieu. The CAFF has successfully been doing so for over ten years. Imagine the potential of projects like this cropping up in every major city.
3. **Mutual Aid.** Crowd funding has been instrumental in getting many indie film projects made. If you see an anarchist film project needing financial assistance and have a few bucks to spare, kick it their way. Also, organizations that fund anarchist projects could set up grants, which are specifically for film. Filmmakers who live in the same locality can share equipment and other resources or work on each other’s films as technicians, actors, or production staff.
4. **Think big!** We saw how Indymedia revolutionized online media publishing before blogs or Youtube even existed. We have incredible creative minds in our communities. How about a global collaborative film distribution network for anarchist films? I’m willing to discuss this with serious interested parties; email me frank — AT — submedia — DOT — tv

For the past few years, we have seen how interest in anarchism has grown by leaps and bounds. From Occupy Wall Street to anarchists in Egypt, Turkey, and other sites of resistance around the world, the desire to break from the shackles of the state is reaching global proportions. Anarchists have to recognize that the moving image is among the most effective communication tools available.

Powerful and rousing films can aid in keeping the insurrectionary momentum going and turn on a new generation of people to the most exciting and liberating political philosophy in history.

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Radical Films Are Being Made

“Spied Upon”

Tells the story of activists targeted by undercover agents, such as British cop, Mark Kennedy, who worked undercover in more than 20 other countries including the U.S. It exposes the corporate and secret police international spying apparatus, a system out of control. Written and directed by Jason Kirkpatrick, a project of Berlin-based Black Helmet Productions which has a crowdfunding campaign to finish the film. More info and videos at spiedupon.com.

Franklin Lopez hosts the web site submedia.tv where his commentaries and documentaries, including END-CIV, may be viewed and downloaded for free.



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