

Anarchist Filmmakers

...Video Tape Guerrillas & Digital Ninjas

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2017

a review of

Breaking the Spell: A History of Anarchist Filmmakers, Video Tape Guerrillas and Digital Ninjas by Chris Robé.
PM Press, 2017, 468 pages.

Reviewer's note: I agreed to write this review before being aware that almost an entire chapter is dedicated to an analysis of my video work and that of sub.Media. It also includes some writing about my work with the Vancouver Media Co-op. I know Chris personally, and we've eaten tacos and drunk beers together.

When I decided to destroy any chances at a film-making career, and to instead dedicate my life to producing videos that would hopefully propel people to destroy capitalism, well, there was no road map. There were only war stories from Indymedia folks who had been in the game for a few months.

Ten years earlier, when I was in film school in the US in the late 1980s (a total waste of time and money), there was no mention of the countless radical filmmakers and film collectives. At that critical juncture in my life, I would have greatly benefited from a book like Chris Robé's *Breaking the Spell*.

The first thing that caught my eye was the title. *Breaking the Spell* is the name of a film about the 1999 protests that shut down the WTO in Seattle directed by Tim Lewis and Tim Ream.

This film sent me down the treacherous (and fun!) road of anarchist filmmaking.

Aside from Richard Porton's *Film and the Anarchist Imagination* (an important book), not much publicly accessible writing about anarchist film-making exists. And while Porton's tome is a useful summary of anarchist cinema and representation of anarchists in film, *Breaking the Spell* goes a step further.

Robé not only gives us deep and thoughtful critiques and analysis of films, but discloses the nitty gritty of the processes that went into creating them.

Also, his history is not limited to self-identified anarchist film-makers, but includes "anarchist-inflected" auteurs and collectives, giving us a much broader spectrum of radical films and videos made within the last 50 years.

The book kicks off with the history of Third Cinema, the Latin American film movement of the 1960s and '70s, which aimed to provoke people into action and favored underground viewings to theatrical screenings of their revolutionary cinema.

They attempted to de-commodify films by screening them freely, and emphasized that following the film, the audience would engage in discussions and debates.

By doing so, viewers ceased being passive spectators and became accomplices. The filmmakers wanted to erase the elitist position they often have within movements and place themselves on the same level as the people they were documenting.

They also pioneered the practice of guerilla film-making, the practice of shooting low budget films or videos with minimal crews (sometimes the camera person is the crew), where location permits are usually not obtained, and scenes are shot quickly.

It's only appropriate that the book begins with Third Cinema. Their philosophical contributions to the practice of radical filmmaking can be seen throughout the last half of the 20th century whether or not other people using these practices were aware of their origins. I wasn't until a few years ago.

One interesting aspect of the book is how evolving technology in film, video, and later digital video facilitated the creation of radical and anarchist films.

Breaking the Spell recounts how the Sony Portapak, an early portable video camera and recording deck, allowed collectives like Videofreex, in New York state between 1969 and 1978, to widely distribute their timely "anarchist inflected" video reports to large audiences via the internet.

Robé does not simply glorify these facts, but also explores its contradictions as they pertain to radicals using these technologies. For example, the cost of the Portapak was about \$1,500 when it hit the market in the late 1960s, meaning that the technology was inaccessible to poor people wanting to tell their own stories. The individuals and collectives who were able to take advantage of this equipment were mostly composed of middle class white people.

The most important contribution the book makes is that it digs deeply into the organizational processes behind the production of these films. Robé interviewed dozens of filmmakers to find out how and why they made their films. Similar to his analysis of the technologies used, he gives us an honest look at the incongruities within their visions of equality and inclusion, and how things played out in practice.

The lack of racialized minorities and women, as well as the gendered division of labor in radical media milieus are frequent themes throughout the book.

For example, he describes how rampant sexism plagued the production of "Finally Got the News," a 1970 documentary about the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit's auto plants made in conjunction with New York Newsreel. Or, how the hacker-centric ethic in the early incarnation of Indymedia in the late 1990s failed to significantly include people of color in their productions.

Robé gives first hand accounts of the shortcomings and challenges that independent media initiatives have to endure to keep their operations alive.

He also brings us success stories from media initiatives led by the people during their struggles. Most notably, how Paper Tiger TV's non-hierarchical practices gave space for activists to produce and broadcast videos during the height of ACT-UP and the AIDS epidemic; the way Out of Your Backpack Media make videos by and for indigenous people in Arizona in the early 2000s, breaking the need for white activists to facilitate media creation; and Mobile Voices providing a platform for poor migrants to create media by using mobile phone technology in Los Angeles during the beginning of this century.

My biggest gripe, besides the heavy Marxist lens through which the book draws many of its critiques, is its use of an academic tone and language. This should not be a surprise, after all, Robé is a university professor. Like many anarchist and radical books, there are a lot of assumptions about prior knowledge that the reader possesses, making it at times an inaccessible read. This is unfortunate.

But this should not discourage anyone from picking it up. *Breaking the Spell* is a gift to anyone who makes or is interested in radical cinema. By examining the historical context in which the films were produced, by speaking to those making them, and by not pulling any punches in his criticisms of the ways they are made, Robé gives us a detailed picture of those who came before us.

In the closing paragraphs, Robé gives us suggestions to the way forward that harkens back to Third Cinema's vision:

"Improving the general aesthetic quality of activist video for those who have the time and resources to dedicate in cultivating it is an admirable goal. But to argue that such higher quality videos naturally lead to mass distribution or imply that professional looking video trumps other concerns like skills-sharing and collective organizing seems deeply problematic if not outright misguided."

Franklin Lopez is an anarchist filmmaker from occupied Borikén (Puerto Rico). He has produced hundreds of videos and short films under the subMedia.tv banner, a website he has curated since 2000. He is most well known for "It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine," subMedia's snarky web news/comedy series followed by thousands.

His work also includes mash-ups, music videos, and political documentaries. In 2011, Frank toured the world with his feature film, "END:CIV," presenting it in over 150 venues in 18 countries.

This year, subMedia released "Trouble," a monthly documentary series about radical movement organizing. Frank resides in Montreal. All his films are free at sub.Media.

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