

# Occupy ICE Portland Goes to the Movies

**In the midst of closing down the ICE office and fighting against eviction and the cops, gotta take a break to watch a film.**

Muriel Lucas

2019

On June 17, Father's Day, a march and vigil was planned outside of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) headquarters in Southwest Portland, Ore., to protest the Trump administration's policy of separating migrant children from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border. It quickly developed into something that the organizers hadn't planned for: a six week occupation of the building that effectively shut it down for an extended period of time and brought ICE activities into sharp public attention.

The ICE headquarters is housed in a goliath and labyrinthine structure that was formerly a Bank of America branch in the Southwest Waterfront district that goes unnoticed by most Portlanders.

Most on the Waterfront had little clue that the unmarked complex, inconspicuous at the very edge of town and boxed in by the freeway, housed the ICE headquarters. Demonstrations by activists and religious groups were small, albeit not infrequent, and not enough to capture broader media attention. The Father's Day March, fueled by the national media coverage over Trump's horrific Zero Tolerance immigration policy and family separations, over-performed and attracted hundreds. A handful of stalwart protestors decided that night to set up a small camp on the trolley tracks lining the alley behind the ICE—on city, not federal or private property.

That's how it began. Demonstrators blocked the driveways, preventing easy passage in and out for the ICE employees and attracting Federal police. By June 19, I had pitched a tent at the growing encampment with others to support the protest which was gaining considerable momentum, aided by plenty of news coverage.

The budding encampment was buzzing with people and deliveries of supplies. A local ice cream chain sent down a truck to hand out free refreshments.

That afternoon, the owner of the ICE building, local development mogul, Stuart Lindquist, deliberately plowed his luxury SUV into a young demonstrator, which he later proudly boasted about to the local media. Tensions were building.

On Wednesday morning, June 20, we awoke early to meet ICE employees trying to enter the building only to find that they were not coming at all. Word spread quickly that we had scored a major victory: the facility was shut down by Federal Protective Services indefinitely due to, as they claimed, safety concerns for the employees.

Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler's office issued a statement saying that Portland Police would not be involved in policing or removing the encampment.

The heady atmosphere following was almost recklessly jubilant, and what had been merely a handful of tents quickly blossomed into dozens surrounding the building. Construction of a barricade was fast underway.

The vigils were attended by hundreds and included long and moving testimonies, ceremonies, and performances. Similar occupations began popping up around the country.

As Vice media would soon report, it was a "surreal and wildly diverse scene akin to that of an incredibly woke music festival taking place in the Mad Max universe." A colorfully derisive description that somewhat intentionally ducked the political gravity of the occupation.

Vice continued by praising the “military precision” of the camp’s organization, contrasting it with the bogeyman image of “anarchists hell-bent on nothing but destruction.” In fact, in its earliest stages, the camp assumed an almost idealistic model of an anarchist-organized autonomous zone, with decisions made by daily democratic assemblies, and volunteer committees forming groups for media, kitchen, and nursing stations.

Red and Black flags sprouted everywhere. An employee at the nearby Tesla dealership gave me a thumbs up, adding, “We’re not the management here, you know. We’re the, what do you call it?” She nodded to our flags, “the Proletariat!”

In the carnivalesque environment, we settled in for the long haul. After a scheduled screening at the Church of Film (see “No Popcorn...But Portland’s DIY Church of Film Shows What Others Don’t,” FE #400, Spring, 2018) back in town, it occurred to me that I might return with my projector and equipment to the site. The camp was alight with electricity happily donated by the adjacent charter school. It later came out that Lindquist, the developer, and the feds had bullied them into silence when moving the facility in, and they were eager to help.

Our makeshift theater was built with a few sofas, a credenza, a few extension cords, and whatever we could muster by way of speakers. Our screen was the alley wall, along the tracks by the headquarters. Inauspiciously, it was the longest day of the year, complicating an outdoor screening. I had planned a lengthy program of agitprop, including films by Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez, and a host of other films from around the world.

There were a few misstarts. Alvarez’s stark images, including disturbing montages of swastikas and military violence in films like *Now* (1963) and *El tigre saltó y mató, Pero morir...morir* (1973), both screened, made us concerned that they were too graphic for children.

A handful of screened May ’68 pieces, including Philippe Garrel’s *Actua I* (1968) and a segment from Chris Marker’s *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977) seemed too didactic.

I included my own montage compiled from stock footage of the 1968 Paris protests and police retaliation, but it was likewise hardly uplifting. Bernard Nicolas’s UCLA’s “LA Rebellion” contribution, *Daydream Therapy* (1977) seemed to be too arty for the moment. *Wilmington, Delaware* (1970), by the Newsreel collective, too difficult to follow with our meagre audio speakers.

Similarly, Elliott Erwitt’s *Beauty Knows No Pain* (1972) was not only hard to hear, but its subtle and sardonic irony was impossible to pick up on. Finally, we ran a series of films by Soviet animator Vladimir Tarasov. Deliriously colorful and frenetic, they included a wild tribute to the Russian poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky, parables about foreign alien worlds and creatures, and savage satires about work scarcity, exploitation of labor, and consumerism. This finally struck the right chord for the audience.

At Church of Film, the Soviet Sci-Fi Animation programs had been among the best received and most well-attended, and it was the kind of visually captivating entertainment—not absent of polemics, of course—that was called for. The couches filled and others sat along the trolley tracks. Protestors were exhausted, elated by success, and the mood was sleepy, excited and content. Popcorn made the rounds.

Other screenings were not as successful. I quickly realized that this kind of action necessitated a feeling of optimism and invincibility which only existed in that very moment.

Soon federal police returned in force, along with self-imposed curfews, and a dire mood of paranoia and uncertainty moving forward. We cut short a screening of Peru’s first feature film, *Kukuli* (1961), after looking up to see armed federal police lining the building’s roof. Not an ideal atmosphere for light entertainment. I packed up my projector and took it home.

It did not take long for Portland’s elected officials to cave to federal pressure, and by their own admission, to the pressure of fascist groups intent on harassing the camp. There was a bitter, enormous brawl between anti-fascists and fascists in downtown Portland on June 30. In late July, part of the Occupy group, enticed by city officials, broke off from the larger group and abandoned camp. That day the city issued an eviction notice.

On the morning of July 24, the camp was in shambles and largely deserted. I also left after tearful protestors admitted that morale had dropped too low for there to be any real stand against the city. The sweep by Portland Police, apparently ordered unilaterally by the city police chief, Danielle Outlaw, came that night and found no resistance.

On August 4, the bleak summer continued with a major fascist rally downtown, in which Portland police committed unprecedented violence against antifa counter-demonstrators.

The legacy of the Occupy action is uncertain of what it accomplished, and as the movement has withered away, where it will go. Like many, I prefer to fondly remember the brief days when a real insurrection captivated the city and inspired others around the country to take effective actions—even as ours failed.

And, if parts of my small contribution were brief moments when very brave, and very tired people could enjoy the novelty of watching films in an alley outside a federal ICE office, I'm okay with that. The struggle continues.

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# fifth Estate

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