

Damn Dirty Apes

Dead Festivals in the USA

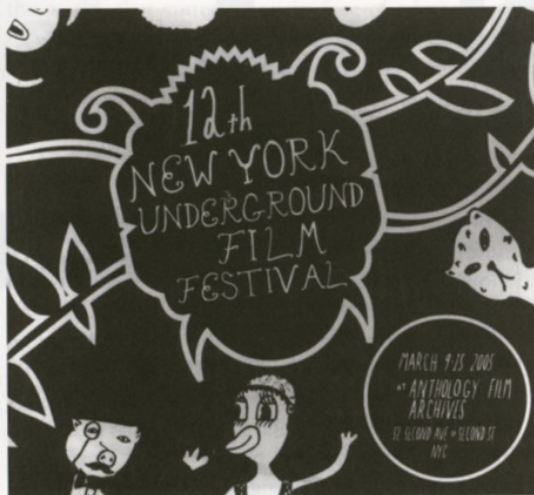
by Jim Finn

In a country that forgets everything, it's worth remembering that the New York Underground Film Festival, Austin-based Cinematexas, and Iowa City's Thaw were three of the best festivals for films that opened up new, contemporary ideas of what cinema could be. All three of these "underground festivals" mixed satire and difficult conceptual work with personal docs and performative videos, focusing on film and video as an artistic expression without playing to the fantasy of modernist high art or preconceptions of genre and expectation. Experimental film and video in the US are often treated as a genre apart from mainstream film, but these festivals showed work across the spectrum of filmmaking, including formal experimentation, video art, radical political work and a low-budget fuck-you kind of underground cinema.

Each festival gave audiences, critics, and filmmakers a chance to play with the rules and to see loads of work all at once. They avoided screening the dreaded commercial horrors known as calling-card films and let filmmakers play with in-between genres and show films with odd running times like some personal favourites: the 52-minute *Blockade* (2006), Sergei Loznitsa's film about the siege of Leningrad, and Deborah Stratman's 30-minute look at the ways privacy, safety, convenience, and surveillance determine our environment, *In Order Not to Be Here* (2002). Over long weekends, all three festivals celebrated work that really got at what's going on beneath the headlines both in this country and on our planet as a whole, without playing by the rules set out for us by the folks who are running the show.

When I screened my first 16mm shorts in the late '90s at artist-run spaces in Chicago, the work got a lot of love but little attention. But then I was contacted by a programmer from a small experimental festival called Thaw, based at the University of Iowa. They screened my film *Sharambaba* on a sunny spring afternoon, in a large auditorium packed with about 20 film nerds. I was annoyed since I thought I deserved more after two years of editing my three-minute film, not to mention having to drive to Iowa City to screen it. But it didn't take me long to learn that 20 nerds who see and love your work are equal to or better than 300 who see it and are mildly annoyed. The Thaw programmers—University of Iowa grad students mostly—knew how to tap into the wider college crowd, with evening screenings comprising funny political films by groups like Negativland along with strong docs and some mildly experimental fare. The film that stuck in my head from that year was Bill Brown's film about re-purposed missile silos in North Dakota, *Buffalo Common* (2001)—an amazing portrait of a state and the swords-into-plowshares activists. After that long weekend in Iowa City, I felt like I had arrived—that these were peers and audiences that I could relate to.

From other artists and curators in Iowa, I heard about a better-funded cousin of Thaw in the state of Texas. Cinematexas called itself a "laboratory for cinema." At the Austin-based festival, shorts weren't just programmed to fill some extra slots—they were the slots. Cinematexas had programmers with diverse tastes who put together strong, well titled programs with great write-ups for every short film and video. They programmed video art alongside formalist 16mm film, student work, and personal and experimental docs; they even cooked Texas barbeque for everyone. Though there wasn't much of a travel budget, the organizers found apartments for the filmmakers to crash in, as well as providing a bike to use during the festival. One year, my local host was a sci-fi nerd, and we stayed up late after the festival



watching a laser disc copy of *The Andromeda Strain* (1971). The first year I was accepted I couldn't go because all the planes were grounded the weekend after September 11. The next year I was rewarded with a lecture by radical historian Norman Finkelstein, who gave a brief sketch of the Israel-Palestinian conflict that started in the '30s and ended with him calling the Bush administration a "gang of freaks."

One of the few festivals open to experimental work outside of college towns and mid-size cities was the New York Underground Film Festival. It was peaking around the early 2000's: the programming was strong; the theaters were packed. The staff programmed smart short films but also brought in outside curators like Astria Suparak and Lauren Cornell to put together programs for them. Run for 15 years on a thin budget (sometimes bloated with a Pabst or some liquor sponsorship), they figured out how to pay the bills and expand their audience by bringing in skateboard and horror films, or inviting bigger name filmmakers like Asia Argento and Crispin Glover. My worst experience at the festival was trying to watch a 16mm-shot recreation of the Manson Family after a bad Brooklyn juice bar order—I got to know all the Anthology Film

Archives bathroom stalls (basically clean though at times filled with the remnants of marijuana clouds). At a normal festival, I would have cut my losses and written off the trip. But somehow it was different there. Some of us had the shits, some were stoned, some were trying to hawk serial killer soft-porn DVDs and some were happy to have found the right edits to be able to screen their stuffed-animal bluescreen movies. We were all in it together.

Cinematexas, Thaw, and the NYUFF were feeding into a nascent microcinema movement that started at the same time that digital video was really getting going. It was easy to meet touring filmmakers like Matt McCormick and Roger Beebe and programmers from microcinemas like Houston's Aurora Picture Show. All of the festivals introduced me to a whole scene of small weird filmmaking happening in the US at the time I was getting started: video artists and filmmakers like Jeff Krulik, Ximena Cuevas, Jim Trainor, Alex Rivera, Bryan Boyce, Jem Cohen, Kathy High, David Gatten, Ben Coonley, Tara Mateik, Kevin Everson, James Fotopoulos, and Jennet Thomas. Some of the videos they screened could be overdone: the Bush-Cheney fascist videos, the super-slo-mo voices and repeating clip edits, and videos heavily reliant on Final Cut effects like mirroring. But while the mainstream indie cinema was thrilled about PD-150 features, video artists and experimental filmmakers were breaking down the rules (including the rules of experimental film) about what film is. Do-It-Yourself, or DIY, wasn't just a schtick but a way for film and video to be more like poetry, painting, or any other art form where artists are allowed to make up the rules as they go along.

But reality is reality and somebody's got to pay the bills in this country. Thaw was the first to go under after their 2003 festival. Cinematexas threatened to close for a couple years, but hung on until this past December, when they closed shop with a small "Viking Funeral" for the festival. I'm not sure what that meant; they may have burned old VHS tapes or effigies of Miranda July and Will Oldham. The New York Underground had its last year this past April. Boxes of old programs and T-shirts can still be seen in the hallways of their old Chrystie Street office building.

A number of things have happened in recent years to speed along their demise. For one, the art world has extended its Mafia-like protection to media artists, giving them money and opportunities in galleries to make their work. Video art and now even feature films are marketed more as visual art with limited editions viewed on a screen or projected in a gallery. On the other end of things, a lot of funny and smart (and, of course, lame) political videos are going up on YouTube, which takes a good chunk of the traditional material

out of festival circulation. The underground and experimental festivals are also getting squeezed out to a certain degree. In the cases of Cinematexas and Thaw, the universities that sponsored them cut back, or perhaps more likely switched their funding to sports or various post-9/11 police-state activities. Probably the biggest problem for low-budget festivals is hanging on to people who know how to get things done, i.e., pay the bills. High staff turnover and budget issues are killers.

I have somewhat of a social Darwinian attitude towards these things. If a festival can't hack it, it's better for it to slink off and die than to hang on as some pathetic imitation of what it once was. New mushrooms will sprout up in rotting logs. Maybe they served their purpose: Iowa City has another small festival, while the programmers from NYUFF are now running a screening series in Brooklyn called Light Industries. Plus other experimental-friendly festivals remain like Ann Arbor Film Festival, FLEX in Florida and PDX in Portland, Oregon, as well as the Chicago Underground Film Festival. But the reality is that it is hard to get one of these things started and sustained long enough for anyone to notice. A name and good reputation goes a long way. Outside the US, experimental festivals can thrive a little better. A Canadian

festival like Media City actually pays fees to play films; a Dutch festival like Impakt houses and feeds the filmmakers a cafeteria lunch every day. Of course, those are non-empire countries that subsidize the arts. For filmmakers in the free-market USA, the importance of being an imperial filmmaker is to get on with making the imperium prosper.

Festivals like NYUFF, Cinematexas, and Thaw provided models for how to make films as art or films for love or films to experiment with and pull across genres or films that *can* be made for much less money than they *should* be made for. Though flawed and plagued with issues endemic to low-budget festivals like projection problems, uneven programming, and disorganization, they were bubbles that allowed film and video makers to get together at one time and mind meld with an audience and with each other and with programmers outside of the pressure of the art world or the film industry. In the original *Planet of the Apes* (1968), Cornelius and Zira helped the semi-nude man Taylor and his mute woman ride off down the beach. These festivals, like highly evolved educated chimpanzees, helped give all of the filmmakers who screened at them the opportunity to live as humans in a world that often seems like it's made for apes 🐒