

THIRTY YEARS AND STILL COOKIN'

"I find it hard to believe Berks Filmmakers exists."

- many filmmakers

Amid the hubbub and hullabaloo accompanying the global centennial of the birth of motion pictures, one could quite easily overlook the fact that 2005/2006 also marks a cinema milestone of a somewhat different sort in the US. Far removed from the principal film feting, several intrepid American experimental film showcases are quietly observing major anniversaries this year: the San Francisco Cinematheque marks its forty-fifth season of film exhibition; Millennium Film Workshop in New York City celebrates its fourtiest; and Film forum in Los Angeles (after a brief spell in limbo) and Berks Filmmakers in Reading, Pennsylvania both observe their thirtieth. These are remarkable achievements during a time when dwindling funding has forced the majority of so-called "media arts" centers to cease presentation of experimental film altogether, and when the physical stuff that dreams are made of (i.e., cameras, raw film stock and motion picture projection equipment) has become either prohibitively expensive or very scarce. Each showcase mentioned above owes its success and endurance to a small band of dedicated filmmakers and film enthusiasts whose energy and devotion to film art have made its continued presentation possible. While all share similar concerns and desires, each is as unique as the people affiliated with them and the geographic they serve. In terms of singularity, however, the continued survival of Berks Filmmakers in such an improbable locale a small, dying industrial city in southeastern Pennsylvania makes it a film showcase sui generis.

The city of Reading is located in the heart of the Pennsylvania Dutch agricultural community of Berks County, approximately 60 mile northwest of Philadelphia and 150 miles south of New York City. Although recognized as the birthplace of poet Wallace Stevens, painter William Baziotis, and author John Updike, its population of 100,000 is known far more for their contributions to industry than for their achievements in the arts. Once a thriving manufacturing center, known worldwide for its production of textiles and high-grade alloy steel, Reading's industrial base, like that of many other rust-belt towns of the northeast, has eroded considerably over the last thirty years. And while Reading is eternally tied to its eponymous railroad, once the town's pride, now shamefully decrepit and corroded in the minds of model railroad enthusiasts and Monopoly players worldwide, and serious Brooklyn Dodger fans know that outfielder Carl Furillo "The Reading Rifle" lived on its outskirts, there is now little else of significance that calls attention to the city. It has become a place young artists leave, primarily for New York City. Wallace Stevens, one of the city's most famous abdicators, painted one of the most accurate portraits of Reading's gloomy industrial character when, in a letter to a friend, he likened the ambience of the city to the interior of a dreary, musty hardware store on a rainy day. That an internationally recognized experimental film showcase should take root in such

an inhospitable environment seems unlikely. But Berks Filmmakers has blossomed and thrived here thanks to a combination of luck, vision, will, and careful nurturing.

Berks Filmmakers' origins can be traced to the late 1960s when Harry Koursaros, a painter then teaching at Albright College, a small liberal arts college on the outskirts of Reading, initiated a program of "underground" film screenings on campus. Koursaros, a Reading native, had been living in New York City where he regularly attended film screenings and became friendly with many film artists. For the programs at Albright Koursaros presented the newest films by Jack Smith, Ron Rice, Stan Vanderbeek, Kenneth Anger, Storm De Hirsch, Andy Warhol, Gregory Markopolous and many others. The screenings elicited tremendous interest and enthusiasm; "Underground Movie Night" played to capacity audiences throughout the school year. As a result, a serious interest in film as a legitimate and important form of individual artistic expression developed among the students and community members who attended these programs.

Jerry Tartaglia, an Albright student at that time, and Gary Adlestein, a member of the school's English Department faculty, were among those most deeply affected by the films they saw at Koursaros' screenings. In 1970 Tartaglia founded the Albright College Cinema Club to provide equipment and assistance to students who wished to make their own films. Using funds coaxed from the college, the Cinema Club purchased a few used 16 mm cameras, some editing equipment, and enough raw film stock to spark an initial flurry of student filmmaking activity. Since the college did not provide any film production facilities or instruction in filmmaking, the Cinema Club invited filmmakers Richard Preston, Tony Conrad, and Beverly Grant to teach intensive filmmaking workshops. It was during these workshops that Tartaglia and Adlestein (acting as faculty advisor to the Club) began their first serious experiments with film.

In 1972 Adlestein was introduced to Jerry and Ida Orr, two filmmakers who had recently moved back to Reading from Pittsburgh. The Orrs had attended many screenings of experimental films at the Carnegie Institute and had participated in the first organizational meetings which eventually led to the formation of Pittsburgh Filmmakers. During a casual conversation, Adlestein and the Orrs, together with Albright student Costa Mantis, impulsively decided to make a feature-length film portrait of the city of Reading a part serious, part ironic homage to the great city symphonies of Ruttmann, Vertov and Vigo. None of the filmmakers had ever attempted a project of this scope before; the production of this film was to be their "advanced" filmmaking workshop". The feature-length experimental documentary Reading 1974, Portrait of a City was a resounding success. It was broadcast many times on Public Television stations throughout Pennsylvania, and was shown in New York as part of the Museum of Modern Art's "What's Happening" series. MOMA's William Sloan cited Reading 1974 as "one of the most original and most interesting American feature-length films of 1975."

The idea of forming Berks Filmmakers came initially to Jerry Tartaglia. "Sometime in the autumn of 1974," he wrote, "it occurred to me that there was legitimate experimental film activity going on outside New York City, specifically in Reading, PA where I had gone to college and began my own film work....Reading 1974 [had just been

completed]...My thought was that this creative energy could be sustained if a feasible structure were provided. My idea was: we could all pool our film equipment, conduct filmmaking courses and workshops, sponsor screenings and, modeled after the proven structure of Millennium Film Workshop, offer in-person film shows by independent filmmakers.” Berks Filmmakers was founded in 1975 with a core membership comprised of Tartaglia, Adlestein and the Orrs, plus photographers Linda Adlestein and David Kline.

Berks Filmmakers’ general philosophic/aesthetic approach was announced in its first fundraising letter. “The Berks Filmmakers’ Cooperative is envisioned as an organization which will attempt to make a very real contribution to the American Independent Cinema movement. The possibility of encouraging the film art form in a region which is relatively distant from a major urban environment is an exciting one, since local creative talent, which is so often overlooked, will be afforded the opportunity to blossom and grow.” This emphasis upon the cultivation of local creative talent” was, and still is, Berks Filmmakers’ *raison d’être*. Basic filmmaking workshops, editing and lighting workshops, and 16 mm and Super-8 mm black-and-white processing workshops were conducted regularly in members’ homes, and at local high schools and colleges. Berks Filmmakers also offered a series of film workshops for inner-city youth in conjunction with the Neighborhood Youth Corps, a city-run teen empowerment program. To complement the hands-on instructional workshops, an in-person screening program was started so that the local film community could maintain close contact with contemporary styles of American and international experimental cinema.

A converted auto parts supply loft in downtown Reading served as Berks Filmmakers’ first exhibition site. The first filmmaker to visit was, fittingly, Jonas Mekas, the father of the film cooperative movement in the US. In addition to presenting a selection of his diary films, Mekas provided the large inaugural audience of 4 October 1975 with an oral summary of the film cooperative philosophy. Gary Adlestein remembered this first program well, not only for Mekas’ comments, but also because of the audience’s reactions to the films. “We had all these locals in there, people who had wandered in from the street, who didn’t know what the fuck was going on. They wanted to know why the images went by so quickly, why everything was photographed in short spurts....They didn’t have a clue. They were completely mystified. I thought ‘Oh boy...impending disaster.’ But these potentially embarrassing questions were answered with great interest by Mekas who, I think, found them to be quite refreshing in their innocence.” Jerry Orr’s concerns were slightly different: “We had just patched the ceiling which had had huge holes in it and the plaster wasn’t quite dry yet and I thought that large pieces of plaster would come crashing down on Mekas’ head and that we would be the ones about whom people would say: ‘They killed Jonas Mekas.’” The ceiling remained intact, Mekas survived, the show was a success, and the practice of in-person film shows at Berks Filmmakers had begun.

Other guests that first year included Ed Emshwiller, J.J. Murphy, and an artist who was to play a significant role in the history of the group, filmmaker and poet Storm De Hirsch. De Hirsch, who began making films in the early >60s and who was married to Film Culture editor Louis Brigante, delighted in her role as raconteur, providing a first-hand ac-

count of life in the fertile milieu of New York's nascent New American Cinema movement. The screening of De Hirsch's delicate Super-8 mm *Acine-sonnets* in 1975 was directly responsible for Berks Filmmakers' early commitment to the high quality presentation of Super-8 film and gave birth to the group's strong belief in the importance of Super-8 mm as a serious format for experimental film practice.

Other visitors during Berks Filmmakers' first years included Peter Hutton, Barry Gerson, Elfriede Fischinger and Dr. William Moritz, Tom Chomont, Roger Jacoby, Ondine, Bill Brand, Andrew Noren, Les Blank, Ernie Gehr, Holly Fisher, Taka Imura, Kurt Kren, Tony Conrad, Amy Greenfield, and Mark Rappaport. (One of the most eccentric visitors to Berks during this time and ultimately one of the most tragic was the late Italian filmmaker Guido Raginni. The enigmatic Raginni, whose only American screening took place at Berks, was later fatally wounded while drinking in a tavern in Altoona, PA where he stopped to refresh himself en route to a show in Pittsburgh. Police never identified his assailant and they never recovered any of Raginni's personal belongings. His films, alas, like those of so many others, have been consigned to oblivion.) In addition to in-person screenings, Berks Filmmakers also began screening a wide range of other work: classic films from the early American and European avant-garde, traditional and experimental documentaries, and films by other Pennsylvania filmmakers such as Peter Rose, Tony Buba, and animators Dwinnell Grant and Paul Glabicki. The group also offered regular open screenings in which local filmmakers could show in-progress and finished films in a sympathetic and amicably critical environment. All of these programs continue to form an important part of Berks Filmmakers' current exhibition life.

In 1977 Jerry Tartaglia, who had been acting as program director since Berks' inception, moved to New York City where, shortly thereafter, he wrote the seminal essay "The Gay Sensibility in American Avant-Garde Film" for the *Millennium Film Journal*. In Tartaglia's absence programming duties were assumed by Gary Adlestein, and Jerry Orr took over as the group's administrative director, positions they still hold in 2006. Also in 1977, Albright College agreed to allow Berks Filmmakers to screen films in the school's theater, hoping that the on-campus presence of an arts group with a growing national reputation would enhance the cultural climate at the school. Berks Filmmakers eventually moved all of their screenings to the college and they continue to present all of their programs there. However, it should be noted that the group is not affiliated with Albright College; it remains a separate and completely autonomous entity.

By the late 1970s films by Berks Filmmakers' members began to be exhibited at film showcases and galleries throughout the country, including the Museum of Modern Art, Millennium Film Workshop, the San Francisco Cinematheque, the Pasadena (and later, Los Angeles) Filmforum, Pittsburgh Filmmakers, the Neighborhood Film Project in Philadelphia, and the Philadelphia College of Art. The group also began to co-sponsor film events with other arts organizations in Pennsylvania. The most memorable of these was a rare in-person screening of films in Philadelphia by Stan Brakhage in 1979.

To date, Berks Filmmakers has presented in-person screenings by approximately three hundred and fifty film and video makers. Many of these artists, attracted by the congenial atmosphere created by Adlestein, Orr, and various cohorts (Albert Kilchesty, Jon Stout, Jeanne Badman and Jamie Harrar, to name a few), have returned many times since their initial visits. The lush rural surroundings of Reading, particularly the lovely Oley valley and the gentle rolling hills of Pennsylvania Dutch farm country, have played a large role in luring big city denizens to Berks. But many artists, impressed by the meticulous care given to the projection of their work, return simply because they recognize Berks Filmmakers as one of the premier showcases for experimental film in the United States.

In the mid-1980s Berks Filmmakers began exhibiting video art as well as film, incorporating all video formats into their programming. Video works by Bill Viola, George and Mike Kuchar, Julie Zando, Tony Oursler, Prajna Parasher, Sadie Benning, Willie Varela, Marlon Riggs, and others began to share programming time with a new generation of filmmakers that included artists such as Donna Cameron, Anne Robertson, Leslie Thornton, Craig Baldwin, and Bradley Eros & Jeanne Liotta. Berks Filmmakers also expanded their film programming to include a wide range of commercial and independent feature-length narrative films. Today, Berks Filmmakers presents approximately five different programs each month from September through May. The scope of programming is nicely represented by these excerpts from their 2004/2005 season: The Lovers on the Bridge, Leos Carax ; Greed, Erich Von Stroheim ; Caroline Savage - In Person : Once Upon A Time in the West, Sergio Leone ; Faat-Kine, Ousmane Sembene ; Conspirators of Pleasure, Jan Svankmajer ; Kuchar Brothers 8mm's: Mike Kuchar -In-Person ; Mishima, Paul Schrader ; Jim Hubbard - In-Person ; Berks County Winter Film and Video Show: In-Person, ; John Columbus - In-Person: Selections from the 24th Annual Black Maria Film and Video Festival ; Two Friends, Jane Campion ; Elephant, Gus Van Sant ; Broken Blossoms, D.W. Griffith ; Gary Goldberg Tribute: Jerry Tartag;ia - In-Person ; Tom, Mike Hoolboom ; Deep Red, Dario Argento ; James Harrar (with live music by Marshall Allen) - In-Person ; Moolaade, Ousmane Sembene; James Jennings - In-Person ; Berks County spring film and Video Show: In-Person.

While other film exhibition organizations have either strayed from their founding principles or have gone belly up, Berks Filmmakers continues to fill its original mandate of encouraging and developing local creative talent by providing a surprisingly thorough education of the film senses. Since Berks Filmmakers initiated their instructional filmmaking workshops, over three hundred area residents and students have completed films. Thanks to the presence and support of Berks Filmmakers, several workshop participants have embarked upon successful filmmaking careers, and are currently engaged in experimental, documentary, and narrative film production. Additionally, a number of Berks affiliates have gained notoriety in related fields, working as film programmers and media arts center administrators. Others have also been active in film preservation, and various publication and distribution projects.

That Berks Filmmakers exists is certainly no mystery. One need only look at the number of small, intimate film venues that have popped up in recent years (Total Mobile Home

Microcinema in San Francisco is an excellent case in point) in order to understand the perennial value and virtue of conviviality a quality which has been missing of late in experimental film circles. That Berks Filmmakers has survived so long is really no mystery either. In Jerry Tartaglia's opinion, "Berks Filmmakers has survived because filmmakers have survived and there are still artists interested in the promotion and preservation of the independent, experimental cinema." The success of Berks Filmmakers is due in large part to the devoted husbandry of Adlestein and Orr, but its longevity may also be attributed to the fact that art, with adequate and careful nurturing, can thrive anywhere...anywhere at all.

- Albert Kilchesty

Los Angeles, 14 May 1986

Athens, GA, 28 December 1995

Reading, PA, 31 January 2006

Date/Number Changes - Jerry Orr

This article originally appeared in a different form in Spiral No. 8, July 1986. Used by permission of The Spiral Group, Pasadena, CA 8 1986.