



The Movie or the Movement?

A conversation about activist filmmaking
by Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow

For nearly a decade, Berkeley-based rabble-rousers Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow have shared a commitment to producing film, video, and educational media on social issues ranging from race relations to globalization. For this issue, they pause to look back, assess what they've learned along the way, and stew over some lingering questions about filmmaking as an act of opposition.

Kaufman and Snitow's works include *Blacks and Jews* (1997, with co-producer Bari Scott), a feature-length documentary about increased tensions between the two communities despite a history that includes shared struggle. *Secrets of Silicon Valley* (2001) is a dotcom-era look at the myth of the internet revolution and at efforts to organize and give a voice to the have-nots in high tech. Their most recent film *Thirst* (2004) documents community resistance around the world against the corporate takeover of global water resources.

Above: Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow (far left and left) on location for *Thirst*, a film about the impact of global water scarcity and privatization.

Deborah Kaufman It's not hard to recognize a so-called "political" work of art. But political art and activist art are somehow different. One is observational, and the other is engaged. Pablo Picasso's masterpiece *Guernica* is a wholly different animal than Diego Rivera's mural *Epic of the Mexican People* in Mexico City's Presidential Palace, just as the populism at the root of Steven Soderbergh's *Erin Brockovich* is entirely different from the social realism that drives the films of Ken Loach.

Alan Snitow I see your point, but whenever I try to define political art or a "political" film, the definitions seem to snake out from under my categories. Is it more about intention, subject, audience, context, or impact—or all of these? Picasso wasn't an "activist" artist, but *Guernica* provided an agitational intervention in the Spanish Civil War and was an immediately political act in all these ways. In contrast, Rivera's amazing mural showing the horrors and heroes of Mexican history is art as political education: it redefines the past to inspire a struggle for the nation's political future. Generations of Mexicans have visualized that history through the eyes of this Marxist painter.

Which brings us back to the motives of Soderbergh and Loach. *Erin Brockovich* works squarely within the Hollywood frame of happy endings and upward mobility to show an individual's participation in a movement and her emerging outrage at injustice, but I don't think that that alone makes it a political film, much less an activist one. Loach, on the other hand, might be considered an activist filmmaker because so many of his characters—union organizers, Spanish Civil War fighters, political exiles—are defined by explicitly political activities. It's affirming to see those subjects on screen, but I often find the films strangely unconvincing, not so much for political reasons, but rather because I don't find the love affairs believable. Is it fair to ask a political filmmaker for believable romance?

DK I certainly don't have a problem with it. Part of the difficulty, it seems, is that definitions of what is political and what is activist can be so limiting. We both came into filmmaking as a second career, after many years of committed political activism. While I haven't liked being

pigeonholed as an “activist” filmmaker, I realize that this reductive label does have an element of truth. Our long-term engagement with social movements helps define our methods and our work. I don’t feel we are “outsiders,” that kind of chic stance that many independent artists like to claim. Instead I feel that we’re insiders—rooted in, obligated to, and committed to a community, albeit a loose, international, amorphous one that doesn’t require a membership card!

I believe that the engaged artist or activist filmmaker is motivated by a heightened level of involvement in a particular political struggle, and an understanding of that struggle from the inside. This doesn’t mean that he or she gives up observational or critical distance, but it does mean that an insider’s point of view informs the work. A different kind of commitment is made to the subject. It’s not exclusively about advocacy—it’s about making the internal life of the political movement come alive for audiences.

Engaged filmmaking also means staying involved with the subject long after production. It’s about staying in the movement in order to educate, organize, and have a political impact. It might mean organizing screenings in Congress or for policy makers, but more often it means traveling to small community screenings for a couple dozen activists in off-the-beaten-track places where the projection might be poor, the local organizers might be late to their own event, and you don’t get paid. But that’s what musicians have to do all the time. Why should it be different for filmmakers?

AS I’m not sure I agree with you on this insider/outsider thing. Yes, our experience defines a certain perspective on the subjects we choose, but I am wary of “obligation.” Audiences often seem to expect activist films to be affirmations of their point of view, or declarations of a community’s identity. Can such a film work if it includes a targeted critique of political movements or community politics? Perhaps, our commitment as filmmakers has to be not only to a movement, but also to the work itself as an act of opposition.

DK That’s especially true today, when conformity, self-censorship, and media consolidation have watered down political dialogue. What I meant by “insider” is that we are able to show with a certain degree of authority and authenticity the internal dynamics of a community. I’m thinking of our first film, *Blacks and Jews*, in which we told stories about the power struggles *inside*—not between—each community. It was a lucky break for us that the film was invited to Sundance and shown on PBS’s *POV*, but our original goal was that it would be used to help audiences analyze divisions, and to create much-needed dialogue through community screenings. Those post-film discussions were great, if sometimes difficult.

AS I often find it hard to figure out what audiences take away from a film or from post-film discussions unless the film is a Robert Greenwald-style polemic. For me, *Blacks and Jews*’ political value was in its effort to reframe the rituals of conflict and the clichés of coalition. The film focused on people who dared to antagonize leaders or members of their own communities by crossing borders in acts of solidarity or just of humanity. Perhaps political filmmakers have to do something similar. But don’t we want to be popular too?

DK True enough. We’ve been hammered for taking such risks in the past. We are both supporters of organized labor, but *Secrets of Silicon Valley* was critical of the labor movement for not doing enough to address issues of race or to organize temp factory workers in Silicon Valley and other high tech meccas. As a result, the film was contro-

versial to some inside the labor movement and also to some liberal funders. The press and audiences, however, ignored that critique of the labor movement almost entirely. For them, the film’s central message about working conditions and efforts to organize the have-nots in Silicon Valley arrived just as people were looking to explain the collapse of the dotcom boom.

Our next film, *Thirst*, asks whether water is a human right or a commodity, but it’s also about the painful lessons that activists must learn in the movement against corporate globalization. How could we know when we began filming that the community group we were following would lose their battle to keep their water public?

AS We were again surprised by how the film was received. We feared that people in the movement would consider the movie a downer, but the opposite has been the case. Unlike our experience with *Secrets of Silicon Valley*, the film was received as an affirmation, and the global movement against water privatization adopted the film as an organizing tool. Apparently audiences find more inspiration in the stubbornness and learning curve of defeat than the easy satisfaction of a victory. This could be a key difference between Hollywood and inde-



Despite chronicling setbacks in the fight to keep water public, *Thirst* spurred activists on.

pendent filmmaking about political subjects. I always liked a comment by late German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder: “The happy ending should be in life, not in films. If you have a happy ending in films, it becomes a substitute for life.”

But sometimes, thankfully, there’s a happy ending for filmmakers. When *Secrets of Silicon Valley* finally aired on *Independent Lens*—three days after September 11, 2001—our potential audience was naturally preoccupied by current events. We might have given up on the film then and there had it not struck a chord in Europe. It was eventually picked up by European public broadcaster ARTE, and Germany’s two largest unions invited us on a five-city tour to show the film to organizers in the electronics industry. That experience taught us that sometimes a film has to find its audience and that we needed to think globally about our work.

Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow’s forthcoming book Thirst: The Corporate Theft of our Most Precious Resource, written with Michael Fox, will be published in early 2007 by Jossey-Bass, an imprint of Wiley & Sons.