



The truth is out there Film programs take on disinformationBy Dennis Harvey>
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Most Americans have at least heard the argument that recent wars have been for oil, not freedom. But where's the popular awareness and mass media exploration of how US corporate interests (often conjoined with that strange bedfellow evangelical conservatism) have been a primary player in seeding chaos, rebellion, and anti-Americanism worldwide? Bring that up, and most ears will close as magically as they open-sesame on hearing the word "TomKat." We've dug in this deep, and still the audience willing to hear real-world facts isn't much larger than those who'll listen to Noam Chomsky. Disinformation rocks!

Sure, the Dems have momentarily turned the tables a bit, even promising to put a chokehold on pay-for-policy Capitol Hill lobbyists. We'll see if that's just talk or not. Meanwhile, it's timely that two expansive film and video events have arrived in the Bay Area to shed light on some of the more dimly lit but important aspects of where we are now and why. This weekend sees the first ever CounterCorp Film Festival at San Francisco's Victoria Theatre, while over the next few weeks the San Francisco Cinematheque and Berkeley's Pacific Film Archive will host programs of (largely) Middle Eastern works curated by visiting Lebanese video artist and author Akram Zaatari.

A new San Francisco organization seeking to "document, reduce, and ultimately prevent the corrosive political, economic, and social effects that large corporations have in the US and around the world," CounterCorp reflects that ambitious agenda in the wide swath cut by its three-day festival. Some of these films have been seen in the Bay Area before, including *The Corporation*, 2003's crash course in international corporate realpolitik. But all of the entries focus attention on fascinating ways in which vast yet often concealed business concerns directly alter our political, environmental, educational, and personal experiences.

Landing closest to geographic home is Bernadine Mellis's *The Forest for the Trees*, an hourlong look at the aftermath of firebrand Earth First! activist Judi Bari's 1990 car bombing — a life-threatening event that, insanely, the FBI then accused her of having caused. Other highlights include *Making Waves* and *Pirate Radio USA*, two documentaries about the struggle of ever more numerous pirate radio stations against not only commercial radio's banality but the Federal Communication Commission's hostile regulatory manipulation by the monopolistic National Association of Broadcasters. *Alternative Freedom* takes a similar look at the various issues flying around Internet usage, another communication frontier corporate and political powers are trying to wrestle away from individual citizens.

Not every message CounterCorp offers is entirely sober. Striking a bloody yet antic note is British horror film *Severance*, about UK sales reps for a US weapons manufacturer who travel into deepest Eastern Europe for a team-building retreat. Unfortunately, Palisade Defense Co. has a few disgruntled ex-customers in the area, and they turn this weekend into one extended Friday the 13th. In its setting and occasional sadism, *Severance* (due in regular theaters this spring) recalls *Hostel* — but it's a lot funnier and less mean-spirited.

Prolific Beirut video maker and author Akram Zaatari brings to his Bay Area dates a critical interest in how media reflects (as well as impacts) the realities of Lebanon and surrounding nations. He cofounded the Arab Image Foundation, and his own works have included unconventional documentaries about topics from Lebanese gay male life to his country's political prisoners in Israel. But in the Bay Area he's showing provocative pieces by others, not all of them Middle Eastern in origin — the PFA's six "Radical Closure" programs include titles from France's Jean Eustache and Canada's Lisa Steele, for starters.

Showcasing just about every genre save feature narrative, these thematic evenings most often provide various angles on what Zaatari calls "the Middle East as a site of successive wars, excessive division, abundant stereotyping — militarization of public life, rising ideologies and the oppression of the diversity of political beliefs and religions." A rawly videotaped