

PERSPECTIVE FILMS PRESENTS

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EL  
SÉLECTION  
2022

# Navigators

a film by Noah Teichner



la Fondation  
des Artistes

Scam\*



FESTIVAL  
DE L'HISTOIRE  
DE L'ART



PERSPECTIVE FILMS PRESENTS



# Navigators

a film by Noah Teichner

*Essay film in 16 & 35 mm  
85 minutes / 2.39:1 / English  
Country of production : France*

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## SYNOPSIS

December 1919. The American government deports 249 anarchists and radicals on the “Soviet Ark”. Five years later, this same ship becomes the decor of Buster Keaton’s slapstick comedy *The Navigator*.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The idea to make *Navigators* dates from my discovery of its stranger-than-fiction premise. While scouting for an MGM swashbuckler, Buster Keaton's technical advisor Fred Gabourie chanced upon an aging steamship – the Buford – set to be scrapped for iron. He convinced his boss to seize the opportunity. With his scriptwriters and gagmen, Keaton built a film around the comic potential of the Buford. In *The Navigator*, Buster and Kathryn McGuire are the two lone passengers of an immense ocean liner set adrift.

The rest is history, so to speak; but the history of cinema has long overshadowed the real-life events that took place on the Buford. On December 21, 1919, 249 other passengers were cast out of the United States on the very same ship. In the company of well-known activists Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman, hundreds of Russian-born anarchists and radicals rounded up during the 1st Red Scare spent nearly a month at sea in their never-ending journey to Soviet Russia.

If the idea to make my first feature dates from my initial encounter with this event, I spent nearly a decade preparing *Navigators* for the screen. I began by researching the deportation and its historical context. I dug through the archives of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman and a wide variety of other first-hand sources. I was aided in this pursuit by my experience as a researcher in the fields of film history and media archaeology, which provided me with a solid methodological background for carrying out historical research and locating archival materials.

I also collected film prints and learned how to use the wide range of machines for shooting, reworking, and developing photochemical film (with the help of the team at L'Abominable, an artist-run film lab in the Paris region). I sought out books, photographs, newspapers, postcards, 78 rpm records, and various ephemera related to the 1st Red Scare, the Buford, and the deportation. The emotions of carefully turning a yellowed page, of inspecting signs of use and wear, of focusing in on texture and printing techniques were all important sources of inspiration to me when filming these physical remnants of history transformed by the tools of photochemical film.

*Navigators* draws on a wide array of materials shot on 16mm and 35mm film to recount the deportation to Soviet Russia: hand-crafted letterpress intertitles excerpted from writings and letters of the deportees; a film print of *The Navigator* reworked frame-by-frame on an optical printer and through various laboratory techniques; footage from other Keaton films and slapstick comedies of the era; newsreel clips of the deportation and the Red Scare; as well as modern-day footage shot on location where the deportees landed in Finland and crossed the border into Russia.

All while fostering an emotional involvement in the plight of the deportees, I make use of footnotes, commentary, and visual bibliographies to provide the spectator with the means of identifying, quite literally, the sources of that emotion. Rather than hiding behind the veil of a rhetorical impartiality, the film promotes a form of historical literacy that engages with the ways that history can be constructed into an emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic experience. Through its mix of registers and materials, *Navigators* makes use of the tools of the photochemical film lab to explore how history can be written on screen.



## BIOGRAPHY

Noah Teichner is an American-born filmmaker, artist, and researcher based in Paris, France. His films, performances, and installations make use of a variety of sound and image technologies to look at issues related to both humor and historiography. He holds an MFA from the Paris-Cergy National Graduate School of Art and a PhD in Film and Media Studies from the University of Paris 8, where he has taught since 2015. In addition to his practice as an artist and filmmaker, he has presented research at conferences and published articles in English and French on subjects related to the history of comedy, media archaeology, and sound studies. He is a member of the artist-run film lab L'Abominable, where he made first feature-length film *Navigators*.

## CREW

a film by Noah Teichner

Optical Printing, Rostrum camera, Lab Work: Noah Teichner

Cinematography (Finland & Russia): Ville Piippo

Letterpress Printing: Éric Nunes (Ampersand Press Lab)

Editing: Emmanuel Falguières, Noah Teichner

Colorist: Catherine Libert

Sound Editing, Mixing: Mikaël Barre

Made at the artist-run film lab L'Abominable

## PRODUCTION

Gaëlle Jones - Perspective Films (France)

With the support of CNC, Région Ile de France – Forte,  
Fondation des Artistes.

Installation at Hors Pistes - 2017

Award Brouillon d'un Rêve - 2016

