

PERSPECTIVE FILMS PRESENTS



# Navigators

a film by Noah Teichner



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*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*.

## PRESENTATION

“It was aboard the steamship *Buford*, used in 1924 by Buster Keaton for his film *The Navigator*, that 249 anarchists, including **Emma Goldman** and **Alexander Berkman**, were deported from American soil to Russia, via Finland, five years earlier, during a period known as the First Red Scare. Building on this coincidence, Noah Teichner has made an unusual film, both eccentric and marvelous, *Navigators* (2022). Visually, the film evokes the pages of a book; made on 16 [and 35] mm with an optical printer and a rostrum camera, it adopts the principle of the divided screen, which permits the parallel to develop, the comparison of images, and the interpretation of Keaton’s film as an allegory. Through a wealth of documentary materials, made up of photos, press clippings, film excerpts, citations, and by corroborating sources, *Navigators* recounts the different episodes of the militants’ deportation.”

Érik Bulloet (*Trafic Almanach* 2023)





## 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. He convinced his boss to seize the opportunity. With his scriptwriters and gagmen, Keaton built a film around the comic potential of the *Buford*. Buster and the actress Kathryn McGuire became 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 from 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 First Red Scare spent nearly a month at sea in what seemed to be a never-ending journey across the Atlantic.

If the initial idea to make my first feature dates from the moment I learned about this connection between a slapstick comedy and a political exile, 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 variety of other first-hand sources. All while carrying out this research, I collected film prints and learned how to use the wide range of machines for shooting, reworking, and developing photochemical film at L'Abominable, an artist-run film lab in the Paris region. I also sought out books, photographs, newspapers, postcards, and various ephemera related to the First Red Scare, the *Buford*, and the deportation.

The emotions of carefully turning a yellowed page, of inspecting signs of use and wear, and 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 seeks to promote a form of historical literacy that engages with the way that history can be constructed into an emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic experience.





## BIOGRAPHY

Noah Teichner (b. 1987, USA) is a 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 the intersections between humor and historiography. A graduate of the Paris-Cergy National Graduate School of Art (MFA, 2016) and the University of Paris 8 (PhD, 2021), he teaches in the Film Studies department of Paris 8 and in the Master's program of the ArTeC graduate school. As a film and media historian, he has given talks and published articles 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 - Navire Argo, where he made first feature *Navigators* (2022), an essay film that premiered at the festival Cinéma du Réel in 2022 and was released theatrically in France in July 2023.

<https://noahteichner.com/>

## 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

Award Prix Art & Caméra 2017

