

— Laura Ager, Elena Boschi and  
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# A MACHINE WITH MANY LEGS

## The Radical Film Network Festival/ Unconference in Genova

We would be sitting outside on plastic chairs, that’s where you’d find us, when it began to get dark.

We’d be in a small city square, where the streetlights had been covered up with fabric hoods to dim them, drink-



ing cheap beer and fizzy aperitivos. Or in the backyard of a once-abandoned, now squatted university department building, eating cous-cous from plates balanced on our laps. We’d be watching films and talking (and listening) late into the night and Elena would be translating constantly between Italian and English, so that nobody missed what was being said.

In June 2022 this was our communal luxury, in Genova, Liguria. We (the authors) organised the Radical Film Network’s “Festival/Unconference,” a series of events that took place over (officially) five (but technically six) days in a range of venues around the city. Anyone familiar with activist film events will recognise the scenario: free spaces + free films + free labour = free film culture.

The Radical Film Network (RFN) is a loose affiliation of individuals and organisations that

brings together film makers and film distributors, scholars, writers, curators, archivists and other culture workers. The way the Radical Film Network uses the word “film” covers an expanded set of forms, including artists’ films, commercial cinema releases, archive footage, television programmes, movies made with mobile phones, all kinds of video projects, live-streamed performance and more.



The RFN has no formal structure, nor any paid roles. It is primarily an activist network, but also a social one. Within it there are many “regulars” and longstanding network organisers who enjoy meeting in person. Since its inception in 2013, the RFN has collectively organised an event every year to share research, practice, and to watch and discuss films collectively, with the exceptions being 2020 and 2021. When a member of the RFN

suggests that they might want to host one of these events, the proposal is received with great enthusiasm, because we know that the labour involved is considerable. We have written this article because the theme of this issue – “communal luxury” – offers us a way to explain our motives for taking this on.



The summer of 2021 marked 20 years since the Genova G8 protests. The Genova G8 was a significant moment in the development of the anti-globalisation movement, but the state-orchestrated police repression of the protests was horrifically violent. Amnesty

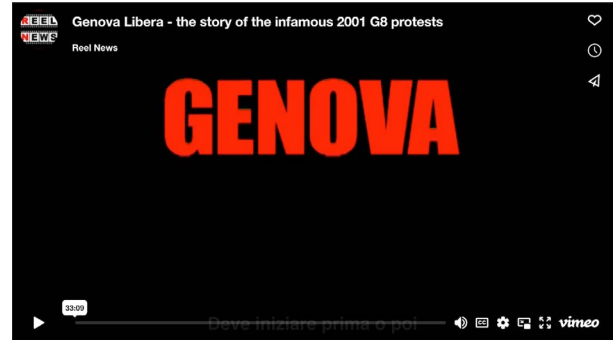
International have since called the event “the most serious suspension of democratic rights in a Western country since the Second World War.”<sup>1</sup> It was also a key moment in the wave of videoactivism that exploded out of Indymedia<sup>2</sup> at the turn of the century, laying the foundations for so much that has come since.

One of us, Elena, had recently moved to Genova. Here, with one (precarious) foot in the local university, she found support for the conference within the sociology department. She was also running free screenings in two of Genova’s organised squats.

*Shaun: I remember Elena talking about the idea of doing an RFN event in Genova to coincide with the 20th anniversary of the infamous G8 protests – and done in the spirit of those protests – and I immediately felt excited and wanted to be involved. Genova was a pivotal moment for me in becoming a videoactivist – it was the first protest I had ever filmed on and the film we produced (Genova Libera)<sup>3</sup> was the first film I ever helped to edit.*

*Pretty much every key collective was there, from Indymedia Italy, obviously, to Ak Kraak from Germany and Big Noise from the USA, on the frontlines using cameras as weapons, sharing footage to build the anti-capitalist movement and sharing the real story of what*

*happened.*



*It is a moment that is very rarely talked about, and this felt like an opportunity to celebrate that – not in a nostalgic way, but to look at how that moment can still inform how we relate to struggles now and in the future with radical film.*



The RFN’s proposed Genova gathering had originally been mooted for summer 2021, however, COVID restrictions made it impossible to organise such an event safely. COVID also made mass film watching near impossible in most parts of the world, for variable amounts of time. So in 2022 we were excited at the prospect of bringing people from different places together again and we felt confident that this conference would be popular. We were counting on it, really, as we needed it to self-subsidise its running costs.

To raise enough money without having to charge everyone a fee, we devised a sliding scale: a free registration option for unwaged participants, a pay-what-you-can system for self-funded ones, and a fixed €125 registration

fee for those with institutional support. This income would cover some of the film and venue costs and the conference had the support of some lecturers who were permanently employed by the university, but the income was never going to be enough to pay anyone else a proper wage. A call-out for helpers went out via the RFN list.

*Laura: My reasons for volunteering for this had a lot to do with the pandemic, which had removed me from a job I loved. I had been working in a cinema which hosted a lot of community film-based projects and I used to organise heaps of events. In the UK I experienced lockdown and furlough – being paid despite not working – while my fragile work ecology collapsed. Helping to curate and plan the Genova film programme was a first step back into feeling useful again.*

The finished programme consisted of five full days of conference-type presentations and six evenings of free cinema. The conference days were held in rooms at the Università di Genova's campus and the presentations covered many different aspects of film practice, theory, spectatorship and scholarship. An online feed provided off-site access to the proceedings, with video and a choice of audio in English or Italian.

Two professional translators worked for a fraction of what they would normally have been paid because they were interested in the project. They both worked remotely and received instruction by mobile phone. Audio feeds of their voices could be accessed by delegates in the room using digital receivers, which were generously lent to us free of charge by a comrade from Interpretation Services.<sup>4</sup> These had stickers on them that said 'Solidarity Gear'.

The complex audio-visual set-up was assembled with detailed guidance from the interpreters and more than a little help from a sound technician, a comrade who had learned how to do this job in one of the city's

organised squats. This was only one of the many technical and organisational challenges we faced, but sharing the weight of all this stuff that had to be done was key and the joy of finally making it all happen was our greatest reward.

*Shaun: A lot of the conference was quite a lot of excitement in learning how to do things – at the time hard work but always at the back of my mind I was thinking I'm going to enjoy this once it's finished.*

Later, on reflection, we weren't sure that as many people made use of the translation service as we had originally thought, but just by having it available and inviting people to take a receiver to their seat with them we created a buzz. People told us that it made the RFN event feel like "something else." Were we turning into a "serious conference?" Not really. We just didn't take for granted that everyone who wanted to be part of this should have to be proficient in English. What many might have seen as an unnecessary luxury, for us was a matter of inclusivity.

Films were shown in the daytime at the conference venues, these screenings were held in classrooms in the lunchbreaks. They were organised into curated programmes of about 90 minutes, with six thematic areas:

- ▶ Climate justice
- ▶ Digital and video-activism 20 years after the Genoa G8
- ▶ Feminism and LGBTQIA+ activism
- ▶ Gentrification and touristification
- ▶ Migrations, borders and antiracist struggles
- ▶ Work, anxiety and precarity

In the evenings, longer films were shown for free in public outdoor spaces and at participating venues across the city, including an independent cinema and locally organized squats. People could just walk in, there were no tickets or ticket-checkers. Sometimes there would be a simultaneous screening of

the same film, with one subtitled in English and the other in Italian. Shaun did a lot of that subtitling work himself, for both the daytime and evening screenings.

Support came from other sources, too. A pop-up cinema group called CinePanda came all the way from Marseilles with a mobile cinema stuffed into a tiny Fiat Panda and helped to run three nights of screenings. The Monday night screening was particularly memorable. CinePanda put up a screen in a small square near university to screen the film “Genova Libera,” which was made at the time of the protests by Reel News.

*Shaun: The screening felt reminiscent of that whole period for me. A thing that people don't really talk about is how theatrical it all was, the anti-capitalist movement. Movements from all over Europe, and delegations from movements from all over the world. Bringing everyone together in Genoa kind of recreated that a bit – that Monday night screening especially, it felt like we were back 20 years ago again.*

*Elena: Talking about the Genova G8 here is complicated. [...] A lot of shit went down that week and the aftermath was long and painful, it paralysed the Italian movement for years to come. The G8 brought a lot of people and organisations together, but what people remember is the fallout, they don't remember how amazing it was.*

*Shaun: I was very aware that many of us from the British anti-capitalist movement had a very different perspective to most of the Italian movement, and that maybe this was a chance to talk about that too. Whereas the Italians saw Genova as a traumatic defeat, we saw Genova as a victory, as the moment when movements from literally all over the world came together, and where the extreme violence we were subjected to ultimately failed. To our minds Genoa was a stepping stone to the highpoints of the anti-capitalist movement yet to come.*

*I must admit I was very reluctant to show Genova Libera at the RFN event, mainly because I thought it was a bit rough and ready and amateurish. But Elena persuaded me to do it and I'm glad she did. It's actually one of the most magical screenings I've ever been involved in. Seeing CinePanda from Marseilles turn up in an outdoor piazza in a tiny car and proceed to pull an entire cinema and sound system out of it was just the start. Then the entire square seemed to fill up with people – locals, RFN members, children playing, food and drink stalls set up – and then I realised the film had never been shown in Italy before. Much to my amazement it seemed to go down quite well.*

The Festival/Unconference was divided between two types of place: the institutional space of a university and the reclaimed spaces occupied by political collectives.

*Elena: There was a rather different atmosphere in terms of collaboration, in terms of mutual support and involvement between university and the squats. I didn't feel anywhere near as much pressure on me when we were doing things in the squats. At the University I felt like we were working in isolation.*



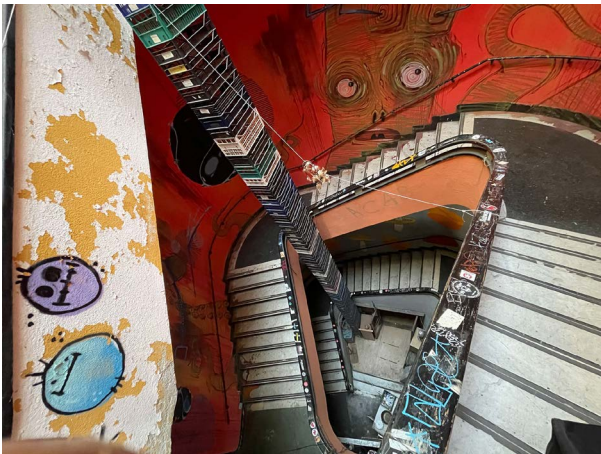
*In the squats, doing stuff together feels natural, it just happens, but it's not natural, it's cultural, it's part of the culture of self-management. That's how squats are run. Everyone does their bit and everything comes together, that's how our communal luxury is built. A machine that runs with many legs.*

The university side felt more ordinary and neo-liberal. Because everything there is constantly and chronically under-resourced, the technology wasn't great. If there were support staff there, they'd have a million other things to do.

*Shaun: We had stress about opening and*

*closing times. Pressure coming from the structured way of doing things. If the university influences the way you do things, is it such a great resource?*

The squats create something that cannot be found anywhere else, carving out spaces free from consumerism and bringing the luxury of a rich social, cultural, and political life to their local communities. And yet, the threat of eviction is looming for LSOA Buridda, the university department that's been squatted for almost ten years, and for other squats in neighbourhoods currently threatened by 'urban renewal'. *Elena: To make communal luxury, we have to break individualisation. In a way we did break individualisation. There were still a few of us busting our asses in the run-up and at the beginning. Then something changed.*



*Shaun: As the week went on people realised how much work was going into it and started to help. People saying they'd quite like to be involved more next time.*

And so, for one week, we met in small, dark Genovese squares and in the backyards of squats, to talk about forest occupations and video-activism. It may be a small thing, but about 90 participants from all over world were able to be part of it. (Re)learning what we are capable of when we come together to build something we believe in is a feeling that will stay with us. We want to share our collectively built communal luxury with anyone who, like

us, still believes that another world is possible.

*A note on the RFN –*

*Membership of the network is voluntary and free, individuals can sign up to receive the emails sent by other members and then they can post their own news, campaign updates and requests for help or advice. The 'directory' on the RFN website lists film organisations, who are either invited, cajoled into being added by other RFN members or they send a request themselves to join. There are no published regulations for membership, no exclusions via definition. The level of involvement is left up to the individual member. radicalfilmnetwork.com<sup>5</sup>*

#### REFERENCES

1. See: [https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2017/06/22/rights-court-condemns-italy-again-over-genoa-g8-3\\_4b217568-b43a-4102-9d84-95276b8192df.html](https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2017/06/22/rights-court-condemns-italy-again-over-genoa-g8-3_4b217568-b43a-4102-9d84-95276b8192df.html) and <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2013/may/22/g8-italy>.
2. The Global Network of Independent Media Centres, Indymedia: <https://indymedia.org/>
3. Genova Libera - the story of the infamous 2001 G8 protests: <https://vimeo.com/803396289>.
4. See: <https://interpretationservices.ch/en/>.
5. See: <https://radicalfilmnetwork.com/>.

**LAURA AGER, ELENA BOSCHI AND  
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Laura Ager is an independent researcher, free-lance event organiser and film programmer. She programmes films for the annual Leeds International Film Festival and for her own project Film Fringe. Her research interests and academic specialisms include cinema history, cultural studies, the politics of the cultural economy and nonhierarchical models of organising.

Shaun Dey is the co-founder of the London based video-activist collective Reel News, an anti-capitalist group which uses film to help bring about social change and support rank and file workers movements.

Elena Boschi is an independent scholar, activist, and film curator based in Genoa, Italy. Her research on alternative screening practices has informed her curation of interrupted screenings in England, Scotland, and Italy, working primarily with film festivals, charities, and self-managed squats, and coordinated the organization of the Radical Film Network (Un) conference/Festival in June 2022.