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Now Playing, a Digital Brigadoon

By Chris Thompson

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LIKE most cities in Silicon Valley's outer stratosphere, Santa Cruz has a district dedicated to an odd marriage of high and low tech, where lumber mills and cement factories squat beside gleaming software business parks. But the geeks and hipsters who parked their bikes on this slab of broken land and sneaked past the ''no trespassing'' sign were not here on business. They were going to the movies.

Few theaters consist of dead weeds and a mound of gray slag squeezed between a laboratory and an alloy manufacturing firm. But these movie buffs have brought their own theater with them. For three years, cult-movie buffs have been organizing ''guerrilla drive-ins'' in a number of cities, rigging together a nest of digital projectors, DVD players, and radio transmitters or stereo speakers, spreading the word online, and assembling on parking lots or fields to watch obscure films beneath the stars.

They project the image onto warehouses or bridge pillars, tune their car stereos to a designated FM frequency, and sit back and enjoy the show. The only thing they do not do is ask for permission.

As dusk crept over the hills on a Friday night, a 1964 Ford pickup careened to the curb, and out jumped Wes Modes, the impresario behind the Santa Cruz guerrilla drive-in collective. Dressed in black and distinguished by a shock of frizzy red hair, Mr. Modes, 37, reached into the truck bed and began hauling out milk crates bristling with surge protectors and extension cords, a DVD player wired to an amplifier, and two 50-pound golf-cart batteries.

The police had broken up two showings in the last few weeks, so he kept his eyes peeled for patrol cars. As about 100 slackers, electrical engineers and graduate students unfurled blankets and waited for the opening credits to Richard Linklater's 2001 movie ''Waking Life,'' Mr. Modes checked his equipment. ''I don't

know how good the batteries are going to be,'' he fretted. ''So I think I want to run backup.'' With a few sidelong glances, he strung out 300 feet of extension cord, crept down to the adjacent lab, and plugged into a socket he found in the driveway.

VCR's and specialty video stores may have exported art films to every corner of the country, but to Mr. Modes and his friends, they also left people stranded in their living rooms, starved for the community and fun of rep houses and B-movie drive-ins. In the mid-90's, cultural pranksters like David Krzysik, who runs the annual Brainwash Movie Festival in Oakland, Calif., experimented with replicating the ambience of old drive-ins, organizing movie showings in empty lots and open-air art spaces. But 16-millimeter projectors were too bulky and expensive for any but the most dedicated movie lover.

Now, high-quality DVD players, digital projectors and iPods have put the technology of drive-in movies into the hands of anyone with $1,500 to spare, giving rise to outdoor movie nights in locations from warehouse packing districts to suburban cul-de-sacs. Instructions on converting iPods into radio transmitters are available at Web sites like engadget.com, many DVD players cost less than $100 and any blank wall will work as a screen.

In cities like Tampa, Fla., and West Chester, Pa., as well as Santa Cruz, people are pirating a piece of that old Hollywood magic and challenging conventions on the role of public space in the process. ''The one I used last week was unbelievable,'' Mr. Krzysik said of the latest liquid-crystal-display projector he set up in Oakland. ''And it's cheap, too. I think it cost $1,200, whereas in the old days it would have cost $30,000.''

Even $1,000 was too steep for John Young, a technophile in West Chester who became infatuated with guerrilla drive-ins after reading about them in a hobbyist magazine. So Mr. Young decided to build his own projector and found step-by-step instructions after just a few minutes of Web research.

''There's a community out there for some serious home theater geeks,'' he said. ''They're using parts from old rear-projection video systems, from sports bar televisions from back in the day.'' Within a few weeks, Mr. Young had assembled his Commando Projector, a mass of circuit board and liquid crystal encased in an old heating duct mounted on the handlebars of his motorcycle.

For a year, Mr. Young has cruised the roads of Pennsylvania, scouting sites and tipping off his friends when he finds a winner. His Web site, www.tikaro.com/gdi, is emblazoned with an image of Che Guevara wearing 3-D glasses. ''There's no novelty in watching a movie by yourself anymore,'' Mr. Young wrote in a recent e-mail. ''It's way more fun to watch 'The Bad News Bears Go to Japan' on the back of the old Y.M.C.A. building than it is to watch reruns of 'Jerry Maguire' on cable by yourself.''

Unlike Mr. Young, most guerrilla drive-in ringmasters seem to have come up with the idea by themselves and for their own reasons. In Florida, a pirate-radio enthusiast, Kelly Benjamin, staged a series of drive-in screenings to raise money for a quixotic 2003 Tampa City Council race. A Los Angeles filmmaker, Lawrence Bridges, has used guerrilla drive-ins to get around traditional distribution networks.

Mr. Bridges, an advertising executive who heads the digital design company Red Car, spent 12 years and $300,000 making a movie about ancient Greek demigods condemned to live in Los Angeles and act as characters from ''The Importance of Being Earnest.'' By the time he finished his project, he decided that the best showcase for this elegy to his hometown would be in the open air, with the cityscape as a living backdrop. So his staff spent a year sneaking onto parking lots and projecting his film against a wall on Saturday nights.

Red Car employees are currently showing his film at various locations in Dallas and plan to take the movie to an empty lot somewhere in Brooklyn. ''We don't say, 'Can we use the space?'" said Mr. Bridges's executive assistant, Destiny London, in a telephone interview. ''But we've never had any problem.''

Mr. Modes and his Santa Cruz friends started showing movies in the backyard of the house they shared (their ''collective'' is largely a grander reference to their former living arrangements) before taking their act on the road, as it were. But Mr. Modes aspires to more than a good time on a Friday night: he wants to change the way people use public space, and return the commons to an idealized past untainted by money.

''Part of why we're doing this is to reclaim public space and give people a way to use the nighttime that's not mediated by commerce,'' he said. ''In our town, the parks close at sundown, you have to buy something at coffee shops. We wanted to

give people a way to interact with each other outdoors without having to spend any money.''

Of course, he is also organizing guerrilla drive-ins for the thrill of being naughty. Not only are Mr. Modes and his friends trespassing when they set up their events, they are not exactly clearing their project with the companies that own the rights to the films they show, either.

Michael Bergman, a Los Angeles-based entertainment lawyer, said the fact that Mr. Modes does not charge admission does not diminish his basic violation of copyright law. ''The copyright proprietor for the film has the exclusive right to publicly perform the work,'' he said in a telephone interview. ''Projecting a rented DVD onto the side of a building, where anybody who wants to can come and watch it, is certainly a violation of the copyright act.''

But whether Hollywood would bother to crack down on a few enterprising movie fans is another question. Breena Camden, a spokeswoman for Fox Searchlight Pictures, which owns the rights to the Linklater film that Mr. Modes showed here in mid-July, refused to comment, if only because her company has never encountered this situation before. ''This is the first I've heard of it,'' Ms. Camden admitted.

So for now, Mr. Modes and his friends seem safe. Even the police do not really care; the Santa Cruz deputy police chief, Patty Sapone, said her officers had shut down the previous movie because Mr. Modes was using public property; as far as trespassing at the new site, it is not a matter for the police unless the property owner complains.

As the ocean breeze took the edge off the summer heat, Becca Anderson, 24, sat on a blanket and waited for the show to start. Ms. Anderson moved in May from Wisconsin to San Mateo, south of San Francisco, looking for work and a taste of the Bay Area's counterculture, she said, but found herself surrounded by computer geeks who talked endlessly about gaming.

The San Francisco club scene was too fast for her, she said, so she and her friends logged onto www.squidlist.com, the local Web clearinghouse for subversive culture, and found out about Mr. Modes's labor of love. ''They show some awesome movies,'' Ms. Anderson said. ''You don't often see a drive-in with 'Waking Life.' Or 'Dr. Strangelove.'''

Just before the main feature, Mr. Modes showed a few experimental short films as appetizers. The clear crowd favorite was ''Round and Round,'' a 1939 General Motors educational cartoon about the laws of economics. After all, buying and selling was exactly what these people have come here to avoid.

Last Picture Show

Offbeat Screenings Under the Stars

Oakland, Calif.

www.oaklandish.org/nonchalance/drive.html

The Liberation Drive-In screens short films and left-leaning documentaries once a month in downtown Oakland.

Santa Cruz, Calif.

www.thespoon.com/drivein

Every Friday night, the Santa Cruz guerrilla drive-in collective airs Hollywood films deemed ''culturally subversive'' by its members. Location subject to change.

West Chester, Pa.

www.tikaro.com/gdi

John Young projects movies like ''Repo Man'' and ''Caddyshack'' from the handlebars of his motorcycle. Viewers must submit an e-mail address to be notified of the time and date of each film.

Los Angeles, Dallas

www.12.org Lawrence Bridges is staging weekly screenings of his experimental film ''12'' at various locations in downtown Dallas and West Los Angeles. Although his final summer showing is on Saturday, he is planning to show the film in New York soon.

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