The French anarchists who took on sinister tech giants

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Machine in Flames — A new documentary delves into the mystery surrounding an anonymous activist group who carried out a series of arson attacks in Toulouse in the '80s.

In the 1980s, the French city of Toulouse played host to a series of companies using computers to further the goals of France's police and military-industrial complex. These firms, such as Sperry Univac – a major American equipment and electronics company – were among the first to create digital surveillance systems and made products that would make warfare easier for the state by improving the accuracy of missiles.

As well as containing these private military companies, Toulouse was also home to a swirling milieu of radicals, including Spanish anti-fascists who fled Franco; the communist guerrilla assassins of Action Directe; and a new left forged in the aftershocks of May 1968, when students and workers led a series of strikes rejecting the authority of the Gaullist ruling party and the orthodox Marxism of the French Communist Party.

It was from this milieu that an activist group called the Committee for the Liquidation and Subversion of Computers (CLODO) emerged, carrying out several arson attacks on the computers at Toulouse's military tech firms during the '80s. Not a lot is known about CLODO. They disappeared almost into thin air after committing around six successful and two failed attacks on technology firms, leaving playful communiques as the only evidence they ever existed.

An introduction to a translation of one of their communiques suggests that the group may have emerged out of a city-wide coalition to prevent the construction of the Golfech nuclear plant on the local Garonne river. In 1981, when this movement reached an impasse, some participants turned to a cloak and dagger campaign of sabotage. CLODO, who claimed to be computer workers themselves, may have taken this impulse to sabotage and applied it to computers, which they believed were "the preferred tool of the dominant. It is used to exploit, to put on file, to control and to repress."

> 1983 clodo communiqué after bombing of government data-processing centre outside of toulouse:

While other groups of left-wing radicals at the time, like the Red Brigades or Action Directe, were deadly serious, committing assassinations and writing dense anti-imperialist tracts, CLODO operated more like pranksters. After their actions (which never hurt people), they left behind humorous graffiti and satirical documents, such as the "self-interview" they sent to the magazine Terminal. In the interview, they respond to their own questions with barbed insults, suggesting their fellow IT workers "rarely use their grey matter", and provocations, such as asking "what could be more ordinary than throwing a match on a package of magnetic tapes?". Even their name was a joke; CLODO is also untranslatable slang along the lines of 'bum' or 'dosser'.

Yet it was never clear who the jokers were. In a new documentary, *Machines in Flames*, filmmakers Thomas Dekeyser and Andrew Culp investigate CLODO and the mystery surrounding them. Culp and Dekeyser use unconventional techniques – such as allowing part of the narrative to unfold on a Macbook screenshare – that remain true to the anarchic spirit of the group.

"[Culp and I were] immediately drawn to this group," says Dekeyser, "not just because there was so little information (although that added to the mystery about them), but also how they stood out from other groups in the '70s and early '80s; their playfulness, the fact that they were never caught and that they claimed to be computer workers themselves. All of these small elements added up to a bit of an obsession."

CLODO were not primitivists like the Unabomber or the contemporary ITS group in Mexico who want to return to a pre-industrial state of society. According to Dekeyser, CLODO weren't against all technology, but attacked computers because they saw "computation, particularly in the hands of the military or police as a way of reducing chance and cancelling the possibility of revolution". Nor were they luddites because "they were not concerned with the conditions of labour".

A day after President Reagan ordered the invasion of the Caribbean nation of Grenada, CLODO attacked Sperry Univac's offices in Toulouse, setting fire to their computers and spraying the phrase "Reagan attacks Grenada, Sperry a multinational accomplice" on the wall. According to Dekeyser, this shows CLODO retained a connection to the ultra-left milieu from which they emerged. "[The attack on Sperry] places CLODO in a long lineage of anti-imperialist struggle in continental Europe at that time which saw finding structural weaknesses in global imperialist capitalism as one of its central goals," he says.

The attack on Sperry was revenge for Grenada. "When corporations initiate these forms of violence there is always going to be a response to that," says Dekeyser. "CLODO were just closing the circuit of violence. In the logic of anti-imperialism, Sperry Univac had it coming."

While these actions generated widespread attention, "CLODO covered their tracks," Dekeyser adds. "They wrote very proudly of their own anonymity and how they knew more about the state than the state knew about them." He says that quite quickly, he and Culp began to realise that by collecting all of this new information about CLODO, they were partially reproducing what the police were probably doing at the time to track down the group. But rather than looking to expose them, the project endeavours to stay true to CLODO's logic. The filmmakers are currently designing USB sticks containing the film that will temporarily disable computers that use them. They intend to distribute these to corporate campuses of tech companies and to project the film onto the sides of their buildings.

> besides fire and explosives, clodo's favourite weapon was graffiti. they wrote:
>
> "no the information police" (non a l'informaflic)
> "out with computers"
> "scientist swine. no to capitalist data processing."
> "stop nuclear power, stop profiling"
> "clodo-1984" pic.twitter.com/OrEnbAGt2M
>
> — Machines in Flames Film (@flames_film) June 28, 2022

Although relatively unknown and only around for a short three years, CLODO has had a strange afterlife. Dekeyser gives the example of a group that was put on trial in the early 2000s for attacking the power lines of TGV trains in an action that was reminiscent of, and likely inspired by, CLODO. While no one was found guilty, the group on trial were widely believed to be the people behind the Invisible Committee, an ultraleft cell whose manifesto included a passage about attacking TGV power lines in order to reduce the speed at which society operates and prevent people from being forced to go to work.

The film also hints at the possibility of a modern CLODO. In 2017, a 'fablab' – a laboratory that makes products by combining computer-aided design and 3d printing – was burnt down in Grenoble by an anonymous ultra-left group described by the police as "anarcho libertarians". In their communique, the group described Case-Mate, the owners of the lab, as "a notoriously harmful institution" because of the way they used computers to interact with previously offline processes like construction and design. They also wrote that society was falling prey to a "technological totalitarianism". CLODO may have disappeared into the Toulousaine twilight in the 80s, but their ethos – raging against a society dominated by networked technologies by using fire as a weapon – lives on.

Dekeyser says it's possible that CLODO were in their 20s or 30s when they committed their attacks, so the members are likely still around to witness the present era of technological saturation. "I'm pretty certain that they're unhappy about how things are," he says. "But they would also have known all along that this is where we would end up."

Find out more on *Machine in Flames's* official website.

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