

## Birthday Reflections

The first time I encountered the name of Peter Kubelka occurred in 1961 when I saw the manuscript of Stan Brakhage's *Metaphors on Vision*. In a note, subsequently removed from the printed book, he included *Mosaik im Vertrauen* among the films that impressed him at the *Second Experimental Film Competition* (Bruxelles, 1958). At that time it was impossible to see a Kubelka film in the United States.

Two years later, during the fall of 1963, I began to organize the *International Exhibition of the New American Cinema*, a collection of some forty hours of American avant-garde films that would tour European film archives, museums and universities between January and July 1964. Initially Peter Konlechner wrote to me to invite the exhibition to Vienna. Then Dr. Ludwig Gesek of the Oesterreichisches Filmarchiv asked for the program, informing me that his institution would be the appropriate venue, not Konlechner's *Cinestudio* – his pre-Filmmuseum screening space at the Technical Hochschule. In the end, both »invitations« fell through. I was annoyed that Vienna would not be showing the films at all.

Before the European tour began I attended the *Third Experimental Film Competition* at Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium (December 25, 1963 to January 1, 1964). There I met both Kubelka

and Konlechner and heard of the byzantine politics surrounding the creation of the Oesterreichisches Filmmuseum. According to Konlechner, Dr. Gesek deliberately sabotaged his effort to bring the American films to Vienna. Now it was too late to rectify the damage.

Kubelka showed *Schwechater* at Knokke-le-Zoute. Jonas Mekas was there at the time and met Kubelka with me on Christmas Day. We quickly established a strong rapport. I liked Konlechner as well. They gave us their addresses and urged us to visit them in Vienna. So one day in June, when I had a break as my exposition was winding down, I showed up, almost without a Groschen, at the door of Gertie Fröhlich in Sonnenfelsgasse, looking for Kubelka. He and Konlechner were screening Vertov's *Čelovek s kinoapparatom* at the Stift Klosterneuburg that night, as part of Monsignore Mauer's 10<sup>th</sup> »Internationales Kunstgespräch.« I made my way to the screening, utterly surprising them, and stayed with Kubelka for two weeks, during which time I saw Peter's four films for the first time and decided to write an article on them for *Film Culture*. That turned out to be the first time they ever received extensive attention in print.

As a consequence of the generosity both Kubelka and Konlechner showed me in those two weeks and in sharing their enthusiasm for

the Filmmuseum they were preparing, I promised to send them all the films I had with me after a final screening in July in Porretta Terme (the film festival of the Italian Communist Party) on the condition that they would ship them back to New York. I believe they looked at most of the films themselves that summer (1964), at Gertie Fröhlich's apartment and with a few friends – the small community of artists I met through Kubelka, including Nitsch, Fröhlich, Rainer, perhaps Priessnitz, etc. I cannot remember all the titles but certainly the following were included. Rice: *The Flower Thief*, and *Chum-lum*; Markopoulos: *Twice A Man*; Brakhage: *Mothlight*, *The Dead*, *Anticipation of the Night*, *Blue Moses*, *Prelude* and *Part One of Dog Star Man*; Breer: *Blazes*, *Breathing*, *Pat's Birthday*; Landow: *Are Era*; Warhol: *Sleep*; De Hirsch: *Goodbye in the Mirror*; Higgins: *Flaming City*; Anger: *Scorpio Rising*; VanDerBeek: *Breathdeath*, *Snapshots of the City*. (I had left *Flaming Creatures* in London.)

When I returned to the United States in August 1964, Mekas and I set in motion a plan to bring Kubelka to New York. Eventually we were able to arrange a series of lecture/screenings that would cover the expenses of his trip. In those days he disdained the idea of lecturing. He considered it a stupid and useless American diversion from the essential project of showing the films over and over. His lectures always began with a prefatory remark about how meaningless and useless they were. Yet he found the American audiences very eager to hear his ideas, to see his films repeatedly, and to ask him questions. Soon he warmed to public

speaking, dropped the negative preface, and acknowledged his talent as a theorist. He was an Austrian filmmaker but an American film theoretician; at least in our eyes. Always a splendid story-teller, he fascinated us with accounts of the opening of the Österreichisches Filmmuseum, its initial struggles, and its triumphs. That same year (1966) he completed the editing of *Unsere Afrikareise*, while visiting Stan Brakhage and his family in Colorado, and had the first prints of the film made.

Once the Filmmuseum was on solid ground and a clear success, Kubelka took a leave-of-absence to live in New York for a couple of years as a film archivist at the United Nations. He became a central figure of the American avant-garde cinema and a frequent and enthusiastic lecturer.

In 1967, when I organized the third *International Exposition of the New American Cinema* – the second had been shown in Buenos Aires in 1965 – the Österreichisches Filmmuseum was the third stop in a chain of month-long screenings, including films by Brakhage, Mekas, Snow, Markopoulos, Anger, Warhol, Emshwiller, Breer, Conner, Harry Smith, Jacobs, and others. Konlechner was a lavishly generous host. Kubelka was still living in New York at that time, but he seized the occasion of his sister's wedding to join us for a week in Vienna.

I was very impressed by the quality of films, the perfection of projection, and the intelligence of the audiences at the Albertina screenings of the New American Cinema. So it was with great eagerness that I accepted an invitation to give a series of five lectures a decade

later (1978) called »The Uniqueness of the Cinematic.« By then I had published one book and earned my living as a university professor. I spoke on Buñuel, Dreyer, Bergman, Brakhage, and Dovzhenko (as far as I can recall). Those lectures became the basis for my book *Modernist Montage*. Although I spoke in English, I found the audience keener and more intense than any I encountered in Europe and unsurpassed subsequently.

The Filmmuseum invited me back in 1985 for four lectures (»Shot and Countershot«). The audience was as welcoming and as intense as it had been seven years before, but Kubelka himself was dismissive of the films and filmmakers

I was discussing: Bergman, Pasolini, Straub, Hitchcock...

I returned to Vienna many times after that, continually enjoying the hospitality of the Filmmuseum. On several occasions my visits entailed essential research. For instance, it was the only place on earth one could count on seeing films by Robert Beavers before 1993 – and it still remains the major treasury of his work.

Now, nearly fifty years after seeing *Človek s kinoaparátom* for the first time, under the auspices of the Filmmuseum's founders, I look forward to the opportunity of addressing that superb Vienna audience once again – and celebrating the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of its co-creator.