

UTOPIAS OF FILM (SOME FRAGMENTS)

Film notes by Christoph Huber & Alexander Horwath

PROGRAM 1

The Clock, or: 90 minutes of Free Time – *Short Film Program*

Jorge Lorenzo Flores Garza **1/48"** (2008) Color, 1 frame [1 min], sound. 35mm (1:1,37).

Gaumont **Meissner Porzellan! Lebende Skulpturen der Diodattis im Berliner**

Wintergarten (1912-14?) B/w, 1'30" [16 fps], silent. 35mm (1:1,33). *Fragment*

Josef von Sternberg **The Case of Lena Smith** (1929) B/w, 5 min [22 fps], silent.

35mm (1:1,33). *Fragment*

Norbert Pfaffenbichler **Mosaik Mécanique** (2008) B/w, 9 min, sound. 35mm Scope.

Anonymous **HA.WEI. 14. März 38** [archival title] (1938) B/w, 13 min, silent. 16mm.

Humphrey Jennings **Spare Time** (1939) B/w, 15 min, English. 35mm (1:1,37).

Jeff Scher **Yours** (1997) Color, 4 min, sound. 35mm (1:1,37).

Robert Breer **Recreation** (1956/57) Color, 2 min, French [text & voice: Noel Burch]. 16mm.

Peter Kubelka **Schwechater** (1958) Color, 1 min, sound. 35mm (1:1,37)

Apichatpong Weerasethakul **Anthem** (2006) color, 5 min, Thai w/ Engl subt. 35mm (1:1,85).

Rob Minkoff **Roller Coaster Rabbit** (1990) Color, 8 min, English. 35mm (1:1,85).

Robert Frank **The Present** (1996) Color, 24 min, English. 35mm (1:1,37).

This program of shorts is a somewhat surreal-populist attempt at telling a story of the 20th century. In a more serious vein, it relates to three different notions of cinematic temporality: it talks about leisure or ‚free time‘ (a realm of life usually regarded as the province of movie-going); it addresses the ‚time of film‘ (a passing era that also produced new concepts of history and memory, both of which are now becoming more tenuous by the nanosecond); and it celebrates our imprisonment in ‚film time‘ when experiencing a theatrical projection (the distinct duration of a film, its irrevocable passing at a specific pace of X frames-per-second). Film is a clockwork. – This notion was given wide publicity recently by the most talked-about *non-film* of all time, Christian Marclays *The Clock*. As opposed to the latter, the works in this program have some relation to life: they end. Before doing so, they exude madness, mystery and joy at a rate of 16, or 18, or 24 times per second.

PROGRAM 2

Großstadt-Zigeuner (1932)

A film by László Moholy-Nagy. B/w, 16 minutes, silent. 35mm.

Morgen beginnt das Leben (1933)

Director: Werner Hochbaum; Writer: Carl Behr; Cinematography: Herbert Körner; Music: Hansom Milde-Meißner; Actors: Erich Haußmann, Hilde von Stolz, Harry Frank, Walter von Lennep, Edith Scholwer. B/w, 76 minutes, German. 35mm.

Nomadic movement beneath the city lights: Two neglected filmmakers grant us powerful, evocative glimpses from the margins of urban life – Berlin, right around the time of the National-Socialist takeover. László Moholy-Nagy, well-known as a painter, photographer and Bauhaus professor, made a handful of rarely screened, innovative films like *Großstadt-*

Zigeuner, a silent portrait of gypsies in Berlin—men playing cards, girls combing each other's hair, ecstatic musicians and their audience... A sensuous slice of teeming life, whose rhythmical montage of unusual details and agile camerawork testify to Moholy-Nagy's modern sensibility. Werner Hochbaum, one of the great unsung poets of German-language cinema in the 1930s, goes even further with his remarkable study of a desperate man. Despite the titular assertion—*Life Begins Tomorrow*—Hochbaum highlights the fear of the future and inner turmoil during an unstable era with his story of a café violinist released from jail after serving five years for manslaughter, having killed a man who molested his wife. But on the date of his release his overworked spouse oversleeps: Alone, he roams the city and spends a disconcerting day haunted by memories and suspicion, led astray by misunderstandings, disputes and dangerous accidents until he finally meets his beloved in the evening. Hochbaum's portrait of instability is both psychological and social, his impressive visuals are intensified by a highly original use of sound: As one of the most outstanding early achievements with this technology and as a potent snapshot of its time, *Morgen beginnt das Leben* qualifies as the unknown twin of Fritz Lang's famous urban thriller *M*.

PROGRAM 3

Germany Calling (1941)

A film by Charles Ridley. B/w, 2 minutes, sound (no dialogue). 35mm.

The Face Behind the Mask (1941)

Director: Robert Florey; Writers: Paul Jarrico, Allen Vincent; Cinematography: Franz Planer; Actors: Peter Lorre, Evelyn Keyes, Don Beddoe, George E. Stone, John Tyrrell. B/w, 68 min, English. 35mm.

Both made in 1941, these are two of the most unusual and resonant masterpieces of World War II cinema. *Germany Calling* may be the perfect case of cinematic counter-propaganda—it certainly is one of the most hilarious (although Goebbels allegedly was not amused). The goosestep of Nazi soldiers (taken from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*) is being re-edited into a ridiculous dance of wind-up dolls to the popular British tune "The Lambeth Walk". Few films, on the other hand, can match the tragic undertow of the seemingly marginal B-Picture *The Face Behind the Mask*, directed by Paris-born Robert Florey with a surprising soberness that only intensifies its metaphysical melodrama. The film comes uncomfortably close to the fate of its genial leading man Peter Lorre, a veteran of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre who suffered from Hollywood typecasting as a 'heavy' and horror bogeyman. By implication, it is an allegory of an entire community of film exiles who had escaped from Hitler's clutches to the Californian dream factory only to find themselves in a warped nightmare where they would wear the masks of their enemies and appear as Nazi villains on-screen. Lorre plays Janos, a Hungarian watchmaker full of hope and naiveté upon his arrival in America. But when his face is horribly disfigured in a hotel fire, everybody turns away from him—except a group of gangsters with an interest in exploiting Janos' skills illegally. Donning a mask to walk the streets unnoticed, Janos falls in love with a blind girl and wants to begin a new life with her. But his partners in crime have not forgotten him. Lorre's heartfelt portrayal—his signature role apart from *M* and his only directorial work *Der Verlorene*—conjures an overwhelming sadness in the face of the plot's inevitability, culminating in the driest of all great, desperate movie endings: "P.S.: Here's your five dollars back."

PROGRAM 4

Tonnerre: Conner, Marker – *Short Film Program*

Bruce Conner **A Movie** (1958) b/w, 12 min, sound. 16mm.
 Bruce Conner **Report** (1963-67) b/w, 13 min, sound. 16mm.
 Chris Marker **La Jetée** (1962) b/w, 28 min, French. 35mm (1:1,66)
 Bruce Conner **Crossroads** Part 1 (1976) b/w, 13 min sound. 35mm (1:1,37).
 Bruce Conner **Take the 5:10 To Dreamland** (1977) color, 6 min, sound. 16mm.

Ecstatic experimental entertainment: As these inspired examples by the late Bruce Conner (1933-2008) and Chris Marker (1921-2012) demonstrate, a non-linear approach to film can yield results that are not only essentially compatible with commercial cinema, but actually redefine that cinema's possibilities by taking it to the limits—and beyond. No film proves this more strikingly, down to its ironic all-purpose title, than Conner's pioneering debut *A Movie*, arranging found-footage into an ever-escalating orgy of catastrophic excess—from rocket launches to car crashes *en masse*. At the same time, an eerie and deeply melancholic aura settles over the proceedings. In completely different registers, Conner achieves equally rich, paradoxical results by contemplating the television coverage of JFK's assassination (*Report*), the first underwater nuclear test at the Bikini Atoll, studied from different perspectives and resulting in a strangely beautiful and becalming mandala (*Crossroads*), and oneiric flashes from the past (*Take the 5:10 to Dreamland*). In between, Chris Marker's magisterial time-travel fantasy *La Jetée* takes the paradoxes inherent in its subject to its logical (and staggeringly poetic) conclusion, by, amongst other things, fashioning one of the most moving experiences to be had in all of cinema (almost) exclusively from *stills*. This program can be viewed as the post-apocalyptic A- or B-side to the other collection of shorts in the series ("The Clock"). Raising thunder and lightning from the philosophical and temporal forces of cinema, Conner and Marker look back at 20th century humanity as if from another planet or from another civilization.

PROGRAM 5

Rentrée des classes (1956)

A film by Jacques Rozier. B/w, 24 min, French. 35mm.

Un giorno in Barbagia (1958)

A film by Vittorio De Seta. Color, 11 min, Italian. 35mm.

La Libertad (2001)

Director, Writer: Lisandro Alonso, Cinematography: Cobi Migliora, Music: Juan Montecchia, Actors: Misael Saavedra, Humberto Estrada, Rafael Estrada, Omar Didino, Javier Didino. Color, 73 minutes, Spanish. 35mm.

Reaping metaphysical rewards from exact observation, these three films walk the borders of "documentary" in order to arrive at mysteries that are stranger and more complex than any conceit of "fiction". *Rentrée des classes*, an enrapturing early short by Nouvelle Vague outsider Jacques Rozier, follows the misadventures of a dreamy boy on the first school day in a sleepy provincial town: Playing truant, he opts for a magical stroll through paradisiacal nature accompanied by the Queen of the Night. Vittorio De Seta's short documentaries are cinematic wonders in color and simplicity: *Un giorno in Barbagia* follows a day in a deserted

village populated only by animals, children and women—the men are gone most of the year, taking care of their flocks. Finally, the first and perhaps greatest film by Lisandro Alonso: a milestone of the new millennium, completely obliterating all questions about the line separating the “real” from the “staged”. A day in the life of a woodcutter in the Argentinian jungle, condensed to its essence in fluid takes which retain the mysteries of an archaic daily routine, while stripping it of any exoticism. Stoically, the protagonist marches through the woods, marking some trees, felling and cutting others. At one time, he drives to a store with the man who picks up the trees, exchanges a few words, and buys cigarettes. Otherwise he mostly rests in his tent, slaughters and eats an armadillo (which he has caught with his bare hands), then execrates: a cycle of life. The techno music over the credits invites us to speculate if there is really that much difference to our “well-known” urban existence. What is, where is, how is freedom?

PROGRAM 6

Zastava Il'iča (Mne dvadcat' let) (1963)

Director: Marlen Chuciev; Writers: Chuciev, Gennadij Špalikov; Cinematography: Margarita Pilichina; Music: Nikolaj Sidel'nikov; Actors: Valentin Popov, Nikolaj Gubenko, Stanislav Ljubšin, Marianna Vertinskaja. B/w, 200 min, Russian. 35mm. **Restored Original Version.**

I Am Twenty is the greatest cinematic monument of the “Thaw” era in Soviet Russia, but it also represents its dying embers. By 1963, the reign of Khrushchev and the short period of liberalization were nearing their end—the USSR would soon return to frostier political lines, and the censoring of Chuciev’s film was an early sign of things to come. *I Am Twenty* was released with key scenes eliminated. In 1989, it was restored to its original glory under the title *Zastava Il'iča* (the name of a Moscow district). Now fully recognizable as one of cinema’s towering achievements not just of its decade, it can be viewed as the appropriate paean to a generation left behind, but not lost. At the center of this sprawling, yet endlessly mesmerizing study of an era, a movement, a city, and its inhabitants, is Sergej, returning to the capital from military duty and trying to reconnect. This difficult process is further complicated by memories of his father, who had died in the Great Patriotic War before reaching Sergej’s current age. A father- and rudderless generation struggles to articulate itself: Sergej may initially pursue a beautiful girl spotted on a tram, but he is soon gripped by ennui, as his undemanding new post at a power plant anchors a meaningless, repetitive life. His relationships also come under strain, since his former friends now have their own existential crises—and ideas. Clearly an Eastern-Bloc contemporary of the French New Wave, Chuciev’s epic explores its world with an empathic and precise eye (and ear), employing lovely tracking shots from afar (on the outside) and prowling through vividly sketched interiors. Key artists from the era populate these scenes, from parties accompanied by jazz (with a cameo by Andrej Tarkovskij, unforgettably extolling the importance of the turnip) to a stunning sequence of a literary reading event featuring the *crème de la crème* of modern Soviet poets.

PROGRAM 7

Wanda (1970)

Director, Writer: Barbara Loden; Cinematography: Nicholas T. Proferes; Actors: Barbara Loden, Michael Higgins, Dorothy Shupeness, Peter Shupeness, Charles Dosinan. Color, 105 minutes, English. 35mm.

One of the lasting examples of true outsider art: the only feature made by Elia Kazan's wife Barbara Loden (she died prematurely, from cancer, in 1980 at the age of 48), *Wanda* is an achievement greater than the entire filmographies of many famous directors, including perhaps, her husband's. And yet, its greatness springs from an entirely antithetical approach to what is commonly and easily lauded as great (and is often quickly forgotten). *Wanda* is the quietly alarming and resolutely uningratiating portrait of an aimless and painfully insignificant life—and it is impossible to shake off. The titular anti-heroine is an uneducated woman from a desolate coal-mining area in Pennsylvania. She refuses to do her household chores and is thus divorced by her husband. She accepts this almost absent-mindedly and also gives up custody of her two kids. Fired from her job a couple of days later, Wanda drifts through sleazy joints, until she is picked up in a bar by a petty thief. The ensuing road movie intermezzo hints at solace in companionship. In fact, however, it provides only changing sceneries for the dispassionate, but profoundly and unobtrusively sad description of an existence molded by an unvarying lack of happiness. Forced to assist her new boyfriend in his hapless attempt at a bank robbery, Wanda escapes unscathed to continue her lonely, pointless journey from nowhere to nowhere: “a lost soul, but not a dead one”, as Don De Lillo has described her. Refusing to treat her characters as victims and employing an unadorned *mise-en-scène* (locations and background actors are overwhelmingly real), Loden's stunning juxtaposition of near-documentary surfaces and hidden spirituality anticipates the celebrated Dardenne-brothers mode of cinema today: a film about the exploited, in opposition to a cinema of exploitation.

PROGRAM 8

31/75 Asyl (1975)

A film by Kurt Kren. Color, 9 min, silent. 16mm.

37/78 Tree Again (1978)

A film by Kurt Kren. Color, 4 min, silent. 16mm.

Langsamer Sommer (1974-76)

Director: John Cook in collaboration with Susanne Schett; Writing and Cinematography: John Cook, Helmut Boselmann, Michael Pilz, Susanne Schett; Music: Mathias Rüegg; Actors: John Cook, Helmut Boselmann, Eva Grimm, Michael Pilz. B/w, 86 min, German. 35mm (Blowup).

The films of Kurt Kren and John Cook belong to entirely different registers in cinema, yet the two artists stand equally tall in the pantheon of independent European filmmaking. Their personal modesty and the fact that they worked mostly in Austria, far from the global centers of postwar film culture, certainly contributed to their relative marginalization in film history. Kurt Kren was a master of so-called ‘experimental’ film (a less threatening word for what can also be seen as the *essential* tradition in cinema). Two of his key works are nature studies. For *31/75 Asyl*, Kren filmed the same meadow view in Germany over 21 consecutive days, using the same film rolls, but a different mask each time, so that the holes left in it would ultimately align in a panoramic view of separate moments in time, creating “impossible” effects (e.g. rain and sunshine in different parts of the frame) with minimal means. For *37/78 Tree Again*, Kren shot single frames of a tree in Vermont (using infrared film well past its expiration date) every day for about two months, canceling out chronology by always rewinding according to a prearranged plan. The result is intoxicating: in

split seconds, seasons change and leaves are flashing in different colors, animals and clouds rush by, light and weather mutates constantly. In capturing the decay and renewal around this single tree, Kren communicates the perpetual flux of the entire world. Meanwhile, Canadian immigrant John Cook established himself as Austria's finest long-form director of the era. *Langsamer Sommer (Slow Summer)* was his breakthrough: a low-budget work of absolute freedom, this intimate and playfully complex film *privé* has been compared to Jean Eustache but remains *sui generis*—a flowing, unpretentiously complex “diary movie” puzzle about the strange (love) lives of Cook and company, his friendships and petty feuds with other artists (everybody plays “themselves”), the magic of warm beer and languorous summer afternoons, and especially about the way light falls on those who move through the streets of Vienna in the early 1970s.

PROGRAM 9

Pasadena Freeway Stills (1974)

A film by Gary Beydler. Color, 6 min, silent. 16mm.

News From Home (1977)

Director, Writer: Chantal Akerman; Cinematography: Babette Mangolte. Color, 88 minutes. French. 16mm.

Gary Beydler's *Pasadena Freeway Stills* is a staggeringly simple yet wondrous demonstration of the illusion of movement that lies at the heart of cinema: the film's moving images are apparently created from still images of a piece of the Pasadena Freeway. Then it is on to the streets of *Taxi Driver*, contemplated with the distant sensibility of a European artist: *News from Home* is a prime example of how the old world reinvented the 'road movie' genre during the 1970s. The Euro fantasy of re-discovering the promised land of America via its moving (and movie) landscapes is most iconically represented by the work of Wim Wenders. More reflexive by nature, Chantal Akerman follows that same urge (the rush and elegance of movement!), but she also exposes the cracks in the transatlantic dream facade: New York turns into something of a ghost town here. Even when people start to fill the frame in later passages of the film, solitude and alienation remain as the dominant feelings. At various intervals, and occasionally overshadowed by the city's noise and traffic sounds, Akerman's voice reads from the letters her mother is sending from Bruxelles to “her dearest little girl”— conjuring another world at home, full of banal details. While never replying in words, Akerman's images seem like a stoic response. (At one point, her mother comments on the project: “It's very well-written, but you know my taste. I find it sad and gloomy.”) Like moving postcards, the shots turn from the “objective” towards a grand romantic gesture, finishing with a miraculous ten-minute take of fog-shrouded Manhattan from a departing barge, an enchanted and haunted island intermittently swallowed up by the mist.

PROGRAM 10

Reisender Krieger (1981)

Director, Writer: Christian Schocher; Cinematography: Clemens Klopfenstein, Music: Scharlatan Quintett; Actors: Willy Ziegler, Barbla Bischoff, Marianne Huber, Heinz Lüdi, Max Ramp. B/w, 141 min, Swiss-German. 35mm (Blowup). **Director's Cut** (2008)

A movie about moving (and moving on), *Reisender Krieger* is the tale of a mythic character in a very real environment: the ambiguous pun of the title can be translated as both *Traveling Salesman Krieger* and *Traveling Warrior*. Mr. Krieger is on a cross-country trip for the Swiss cosmetics company Blue Eye (later to be referenced by German director Christian Petzold who, in his first feature *Pilotinnen*, sent his two heroines on a tour for the same cosmetics brand). Krieger meets people on the road, partly because of his job, at other times motivated by private interests. His monumental journey is a modern version of the Odyssey, transposed to the everyday world of his native Switzerland. Director Christian Schocher deliberately imbued his protagonist with the aura of a lonely warrior: “Krieger is a samurai wandering the country, hiring himself out to strange Lords (Blue Eye) and fighting for them unconditionally without ever questioning the meaning of the fight.” In each and every sense, this is a masterpiece from the margins, made by a self-taught cinephile and movie theatre owner in quasi-documentary fashion—direct sound, improvised dialogue, no artificial lighting whatsoever for Clemens Klopfenstein’s hand-held camera. The most boldly cinematic work ever to be financed by German (ZDF) television money, *Reisender Krieger* combines the mundane in a most iridescent manner with almost legendary fiction, discovering an in-between realm, in which the presumed opposition of recording and narrating threatens to evaporate. Krieger’s and our only way out of this twilight zone is the way we got in: by constantly moving (on).