Vienna Is No More? Film History, Psycho-Geography, and the Great City of Dreams

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Sometime during the fateful year of 1968, when a relatively young German film critic named Frieda Grafe was engaged in an extended correspondence with the eminent Hollywood director Josef von Sternberg, they reached a critical point in their exchange at which Sternberg, having left Austria for good as a young boy, almost seems to have lost his patience. "Vienna is no more," he insisted rather emphatically. "What you seek there, you will not find."[1] Grafe would continue to search nonetheless, and she would write some of the finest pieces of criticism on the subject. But her views concerning the "reservoir of dreams," as she called the onetime Habsburg capital, didn't necessarily contradict those held by Sternberg. "Austrian film history is a phantasm," she wrote decades later, "because it is not tied to a fixed place; its cinema is a kind of film without a specific space."[2]

That very paradox—the persistent conjuring of an imaginary world, on the one hand, and the stubborn truth that there is a city known to the world as Vienna on the other—appears to have been the chief point of departure for the "Vienna Unveiled" show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) co-organized by Joshua Siegel, curator in MoMA's film department, and Alexander Horwath, director of the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna. With close to seventy titles, including shorts, newsreels, documentary and fictional features from the silent era to the present, along with experimental and commercial productions from both sides of the Atlantic, the series ran for nearly two full months this past spring. It gave New Yorkers a chance to help celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Austrian Film Museum, to discover quite a few rarities and to reacquaint themselves with a number of widely acclaimed classics.[3]

Given the vast number of films, the programmers sought to bundle them in groupings more or less defined by time period, origin of production, genre, style, or sensibility. For instance, the show highlighted on its opening evening two rediscovered films from Austria's silent era, Hans Karl Breslauer's *Die Stadt ohne Juden* (The City Without Jews, 1924), a striking *anti*-antisemitic film presented as an Expressionist parable—when Vienna's Jews are forced to flee, all manner of cultural life, not to mention banking, is brought to its knees—and Leo Stoll's *Sami kratz sich* (Sammy Scratches Himself, 1919), a delightful farce performed by the Jewish cabaret group Budapest Orpheum Society, both of which have been the beneficiary of major preservation efforts by the Filmarchiv Austria and were accompanied in these New York screenings by a live performance of original music.

In their collaboration, Horwath and Siegel attempted to emphasize the more ephemeral forms (amateur films, anonymous and non-anonymous fragments, avant-garde productions) alongside the established, well-known "Wiener Filme," such as Willy Forst's *Maskerade* (1934) and Walter Reisch's *Episode* (1936), both made in pre-*Anschluß* Austria, and Billy Wilder's frothy musical *The Emperor Waltz* (1948). Especially in the case of Wilder's film, the cultural clichés of a Hollywood-confected Austria run wild—featuring Bing Crosby yodeling and folk dancing in lederhosen (the Canadian Rockies serving as an ersatz backdrop for the Tyrolean Alps), and German-born character actor Sig Ruman, known for his Teutonic shtick, as a heavily accented canine psychoanalyst. ("In the daytime they make violins," says Crosby as the uppity American traveling salesman Virgil Smith, with a Wilder wink-wink and a nudge, "in the evening, they fiddle.")

In certain cases, such as Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), his final film, set among the excesses of contemporary New York but using Viennese dramatist Arthur Schnitzler's *Traumnovelle* (Dream Story, 1926) as its narrative basis, it is more a matter of "psycho-geography," as Horwath likes to call it, than the concrete topography of Vienna. The mental landscape—the city's ethos as it once articulated itself and has continued to be remembered in film, literature, music, and other forms of cultural expression—offered not just Kubrick, but many other non-Austrian filmmakers a space in which to explore fundamental themes, especially regarding sexuality in the modern urban sphere, that still remain timely, even provocative in our current age.

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***Stadt Ohne Juden* (City Without Jews). 1924. Austria. Directed by Hans Karl Breslauer.** Image courtesy The Austrian Film Museum

***P.R.A.T.E.R.* 1963-66. Austria. Directed by Ernst Schmidt Jr.** Courtesy sixpackfilm

"You can really trace the history of cinema through the history of moving images of Vienna," co-curator Siegel recently told me. The ambitious, wide-ranging sweep of the series proved this point over and over, starting with the early attraction of 1906, *Eine Fahrt durch Wien* (A Journey through Vienna), a Lumière-style *actualité* film shot from the window of a railway tram, produced by the Pathé Frères, and proceeding through a number of key junctures in the evolution of motion pictures, from the pioneering silents and postwar landmarks of the avant-garde, up to the most recent work in experimental and commercial cinema. The recently restored silent *Der Mandarin* (The Mandarin, 1918), in a preservation jointly undertaken by George Eastman House and the Austrian Film Museum, affords precious glimpses of the initial wave of narrative feature films dealing with hypnosis, madness, and sexual pathology in the wake of the Great War—a couple of years ahead of Robert Wiene's world-renowned *Das Cabinet des Caligari*. (Within this same general context, the series also presented a few of the American silent classics by Erich von Stroheim and Ernst Lubitsch, recreating imperial Vienna in the studios of Hollywood).

Of particular note was a spectacular 1931 newsreel short, *Charly* [sic] *Chaplin in Wien*, only four minutes in length, in which audiences were given the chance to see the Tramp on tour to promote *City Lights*, released that same year. Like a stage-diving rock star, Chaplin soars above the throngs of Viennese fans, when suddenly he stares at the viewfinder, seemingly unprompted, and for the first time ever, speaks on camera. "Guten Tag," he says somewhat impishly, as if he were just as surprised as the audience to hear himself talking, and then repeats the same utterance once more, in case people didn't notice.

In *P.R.A.T.E.R.* (1963-66), an Actionist short photographed at Vienna's famous amusement park, home of the giant Ferris wheel (the *Riesenrad*), and made by Ernst Schmidt, one of the key figures in the avant-garde scene, "Vienna Unveiled" charts the move away from strict documentary toward a more meta-cinematic style. The subject is something that the contemporary German experimental filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger would build upon—less of overt homage than an iconoclastic restaging—over four decades later in her *Prater* (2007). A rare, under-recognized Austrian entry to film noir, *Abenteuer in Wien* (Stolen Identity, 1952), directed by Emil Edwin Reinert as the first Austrian-American co-production since the 1920s, turns Vienna into an atmospheric site every bit as stylish and evocative as better-known Hollywood noir classics, with the same general cast of liars, double-crossers, and cheats that populate that universe. Reinert's film, moreover, serves as a pivotal example of the putatively Viennese art of the imposter: the German title, literally translates as "Adventure in Vienna,"

conveying the excitement of the thriller, while the English-language release title, *Stolen Identity*, could almost serve as a postwar epitaph for Vienna. Indeed, it's tempting to read the swapping of identities that takes place in the film, with the lead posing as an American, as an allegory of the city's transformation under Allied occupation immediately after the war.

Other critical moments in cinema history, and in Austrian political history more specifically, are addressed by a number of films in the series. *Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Führer* (1938), is an official propaganda short in which the many sequences of goose-stepping Nazis in jackboots almost seem to have been spliced together from short ends of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will, 1935). The Soviet documentary *Vena* (1945), directed by Jakov Posel'skij, chronicles the first weeks in which the Red Army liberated the city, juxtaposing static shots of such treasured cultural sites as Mozart's former house with traveling shots of the piles of rubble, tumbling swastika-laden monuments, left in the aftermath of the Allied air campaign, and ultimately showing Viennese citizens waltzing on city squares to celebrate the fall of National Socialism. Johannes Rosenberger and Michael Palm's *Heldenplatz, 12. März 1988* is a short, intense agitprop intervention—a man in uniform, filmed at close range, belting out a 3-minute patriotic ballad at the city's so-called "Heroes' Square"—aimed at cutting through the hypocrisy of the Kurt Waldheim presidency. It also underscores the widespread fear that symptoms of "Waldheimer's disease"—the illness that lets you forget you were a Nazi—had begun to infect the Second Republic. Yes, Sternberg's Vienna was surely no more, but members of the oppositional Left did all that they could to make sure Waldheim's Vienna did not stand in its place.

One of the series' undeniable highlights was the appearance of acclaimed Austrian experimental filmmaker and performance artist VALIE EXPORT, who introduced her dazzling first feature-length work *Unsichtbare Gegner* (Invisible Adversaries, 1977), a satirical and truly hallucinatory take on Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955), along with a pair of experimental shorts by her compatriots, Kurt Kren's *5/62 Fenstergucker, Abfall, etc.* (5/62 Window Watchers, Rubbish, etc., 1962) and Hans Scheugl's *Hernals* (1967).[4] Nearly four decades after its premiere, EXPORT's film, in which she also stars, retains much of its freshness. Its deeply personal, sly surreal quality—replete with oneiric double exposures, stop motion, elliptical editing, voice distortions, and contrapuntal sound—works to unmask the lingering forces of repression, and society's dull complacency, still operative in the postwar era. Like her comrades in Vienna's Actionist movement, EXPORT applies pressure to the half-hearted efforts of de-Nazification, lambasting as she does the unbroken transition from the Nazi film industry to commercial film of the 1950s, 60s and 70s.[5] Just as the signatories of the New German Cinema's legendary 1962 Oberhausen Manifesto declared that "Papa's Kino" is dead, EXPORT, with her own brand of erotic-comic performance art, lobs a few more Molotov cocktails at the patriarchal establishment with all the force, and indeed the stunning formal challenges, of such later films as Alexander Kluge's *Die Patriotin* (The Female Patriot, 1979).

The programmers made a conscious decision to showcase Austrian and non-Austrian filmmakers alike. A terrific example of this is their inclusion of the Canadian-born, Viennese-based filmmaker John Cook—a key figure in Vienna's independent film scene of the 1970s—with his first major film, *Schwitzkasten* (Clinch, 1978), based on an Austrian novel by the leftist author Helmut Zenker. Set in a distinctly working-class milieu, the film chronicles the existential woes of a Viennese garden laborer named Hermann (Hermann Juranek), who finds himself increasingly numb to the world. Its languid pacing, utterly spare, claustrophobic mise-en-scène, and unvarnished production values give the film a rough-hewn, minimalist quality, yet without the surreal overlay found in EXPORT. The portrait of 1970s Vienna rendered in Cook's film is thoroughly unglamorous, even jaundiced, offering few escapes from the dull, oppressive tedium of everyday life.

While the Vienna of the Habsburg era was commonly regarded as an amalgamation of ethnicities, languages, and religions, only in the few past decades has the city come to see itself as a cosmopolitan center once more. The growing pains that it has encountered in the process—articulated in various forms of exclusion, oppression, and reluctant acceptance—are depicted in several of the selected films. Contemporary Austrian auteur Ulrich Seidl's *Good News: Von Kolporteuren, toten Hunden und anderen Wienern* (Good News: Newspaper Salesmen, Dead Dogs and Other People from Vienna, 1990) casts a glaring light on the exploited foreigners, largely from Muslim countries, who are charged with the task of peddling the *Kronenzeiting*, Austria's trashy tabloid somewhat akin in political stance and sensationalism to the *New York Post*, on Vienna's streets.

For Seidl, as for fellow filmmaker Lisl Ponger, film tacitly includes the matter of consciousness-raising, making Austrians aware of this otherwise unrecognized segment of society. Ponger's short essay film *Phantom fremdes Wien* (Phantom Foreign Vienna, 2005) takes viewers into the intimate spaces in

***Unsichtbare Gegner* (Invisible Adversaries). 1977. Austria. Directed by VALIE EXPORT.** Image courtesy sixpackfilm

which non-Austrians (Indians, Africans, Southeast Asians) observe their family rituals and celebrations in the city. Finally, in *Nordrand* (1999), a first feature written and directed by the 29-year-old Barbara Albert, Vienna is shown as a common destination for refugees from the Balkan civil war, a place where people like Tamara (Edita Malovcic), a Serbian immigrant, and Jasmin (Nina Proll), a Viennese outcast from the projects, are equally vulnerable; they experience a kind of social undertow similar to that conveyed in *Schwitzkasten*, but they also experience moments of solidarity, suggesting hints of an underlying humanity that transcends the abject conditions in which they exist.

In considerable contrast, from the other side of the Atlantic, the series also presented an array of non-Austrian features that envision the grand city, occasionally with aching nostalgia, as the consummate site of romance, musical splendor, and cultural sophistication. Once widely seen, Max Ophüls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), based on an eponymous short novella by Stefan Zweig and set in the Imperial capital, captures this aspect more powerfully than most. Piano virtuoso Stefan Brand (Louis Jourdan) reveals himself to be a great poseur, a playboy, and suave deliverer of honey-coated lines and midnight champagne. Flashbacks lifted from Zweig's epistolary text detail how he courts and then shamelessly neglects, indeed forgets, his lost lover Lisa Berndle (Joan Fontaine) of the film's title. In what is perhaps its most remarkable scene, shot with notable subtlety by Viennese-born émigré cameraman Franz Planer (who lensed Edgar G. Ulmer's kindred melodrama, *Her Sister's Secret*, a couple of years earlier), the two lovers sit in an amusement park railway car at the Prater. Once there, they're able to indulge in fantasy travel, with Stefan calling out "Switzerland" and the backdrop, suddenly moving, emulating the powers of studio rear projection and the dreamscape of cinema in general. Ophüls, who had spent part of the 1920s working in the theater in Vienna and whose films occupy a prominent place in the MoMA series, showed a true penchant for recreating the atmosphere of the fin de siècle: his adaptations of

***Letter from an Unknown Woman*. 1948. USA. Directed by Max Ophüls**

Schnitzler, *Liebelei* (1933) and *La Ronde* (1950), made respectively in Germany and France, luxuriate in the psychological and romantic excesses of the period.

"The decadence of the Habsburg monarchy," observes Thomas Elsaesser in an oft-cited piece on German filmmakers in exile, "was in some ways the pervasive sense of impersonation, of pretending to be in possession of values and status that relied for credibility not on substance but on convincing performance, on persuading others to take an appearance for the reality."[6] Many of the films, especially those made outside of Austria and often by émigré directors like Ophuls, convey that same talent for depicting a phantom version, a mythical empire, projecting the sights and sounds from inside the Hollywood studios. In this vein, the series included: Jacques Feyder's *Daybreak* (1931), another playful Schnitzler adaptation undertaken by MGM and starring Roman Novarro; Ernst Lubitsch's refined take on a Strauss operetta in *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931), made for Paramount in their Astoria studios; and Alfred Hitchcock's *Waltzes from Vienna* (1934), made in Britain, another spin on Strauss, in similarly bouyant, comedic form, featuring the legendary *Blue Danube*.

It is quite natural that music plays such a key role in how the city has been remembered, and continues to be remembered, over time. By the eve of the Great War, a full century ago, a popular song entitled "Wien, du Stadt meiner Träume" ("Vienna, You are the City of My Dreams"), written by Rudolf Sieczynski, was making the rounds in the Imperial capital and becoming a worldwide hit. (Kubrick would later use it, as an ambient background, to set the tone for his *Eyes Wide Shut*.) Here's the song's catchy refrain:

> Vienna, Vienna, none but you,
> Can be the city of my dreams come true
> Here, where the dear old houses loom,
> Where I for lovely young girls swoon.[7]

From the standard waltzes that recur with staggering frequency in the "Wiener Filme" made at home and broad to Anton Karas's haunting theme music played on the zither in Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), and riffed upon at a pivotal moment in Nicholas Roeg's *Bad Timing: A Sensual Obsession* (1980), the musical sounds of the city reverberate throughout the series. The city's love of spectacle and performance cannot be totally repressed, not even during the Third Reich, as an extraordinary short *Bei Achmed Beh* (1944), filmed anonymously inside a burlesque club during the final year of the war, makes plain. Nor can Hollywood's love of music be kept from reentering into Austrian cinema, as Axel Corti's *Welcome in Vienna* (1986), the final installment of his *Wohin und zurück* (Whither and Back) three-part television series, shows when Claudia (Claudia Messner), the daughter of a Nazi official, sings "As Time Goes By" in a G.I. saloon.

There's a memorable line from *Eyes Wide Shut*, cited by Horwath in his published account of the show in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, which was originally borrowed by Kubrick from Schnitzler: "No dream is ever just a dream."[8] The Vienna of which Sternberg spoke in 1968 may no longer exist, but in its place are new dreams and new perspectives of the city. The magic has not vanished altogether, as Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* (1995), the first in his trilogy of films featuring Celine (Julie Delpy) and Jesse (Ethan Hawke), so poignantly conveys. Meeting aboard a train from Budapest bound for Paris, in an echo of the fantasy travel of Stefan and Lisa in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, they hastily disembark together in Vienna, and enter into a dream world in which they have seemingly stopped time. As they roam about the city, they take in all the sights that close to a century of cinema have captured before them. In the context of "Vienna Unveiled," they become a part of the larger story of Vienna's afterlife. Despite the ultimate need to bid farewell, the allure of the city and the wonderful chance encounters—riding a street car, shopping for records, strolling through the parks and squares, sitting in an empty church, playing pinball at a nightclub, peering into a window and hearing a classical piano sonata—that take place there will be forever preserved.

All in all, the co-curators succeed in presenting a massive selection of films, the largest show ever devoted to the subject, thus reaffirming the significance of Vienna both on screen and off. Of course, if one searched long and hard, one could surely come up with alternative titles and directors that could have been included; I was curious, for instance, why none of avant-garde director Peter Kubelka's work was featured. Although it would have been impossible to add, given the timing of the show, Wes Anderson's *Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014) is nothing if not a nostalgic, loving, and almost perversely fastidious recreation of a phantom Habsburg Empire; or, perhaps, to recall once more what Grafe observed of Austrian cinema, it is a movie that transcends a specific space. Taking his main cues from Viennese novelist Stefan Zweig—especially his novel *Ungeduld des Herzens* (Beware of Pity, 1939)—to whom he dedicates the film, but also uncannily close to *Abenteuer in Wien* (Stolen Identity), Anderson taps into that era's cultural spirit and its undying love for subterfuge and make-believe. In Zweig's source novel, the story takes shape around a Jewish little *pisher* from the outer reaches of the Austro-Hungarian Empire named Lämmel Kanitz, who becomes the castle-owning Baron von Kekesfalva. It is indeed a classic fantasy, a dream really, of assimilation and success on the eve of tragedy, one that gets replayed with notable verve and wit in Anderson's film. Thus *Grand Budapest Hotel* supplies an unexpected coda to "Vienna Unveiled" with the serendipity of its release, for in many respects it unveils not only a primal urge suited for diagnosis by Dr. Freud but a central core of the psycho-geography that is Viennese cinema.

Notes

1. Correspondence between Frieda Grafe and Josef von Sternberg, cited in English translation in Alexander Horwath, "Working with Spirits—Traces of Sternberg: A Lost Film About the 'City of My Dreams,'" trans. Peter Waugh, *Josef von Sternberg: The Case of Lena Smith*, eds. Alexander Horwath and Michael Omasta (Vienna: SYNEMA, 2007), 42.
2. Frieda Grafe, "Wiener Beiträge zu einer wahren Geschichte des Kinos," in *Aufbruch ins Ungewisse: Österreichische Filmschaffende in der Emigration vor 1945*, eds. Christian Cargnelli and Michael Omasta (Vienna: Wespennest, 1993), 227.
3. Coinciding with the MoMA show, a citywide music festival, "Vienna: City of Dreams," was sponsored by Carnegie Hall.
4. Born in Linz in 1940, under her given name Waltraud Lehner, the feminist filmmaker VALIE EXPORT (written in capital letters) took on her *nom de guerre* in 1967, asserting her wish to shed all ties to the dominant patriarchal order: to her father, her husband, and the Austrian state.
5. VALIE EXPORT first became famous in the late 1960s for her performance pieces: *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik* (Action Pants: Genital Panic) in which she strutted around a movie theater wearing a pair of crotchless trousers, and *Tapp- und Tast-Kino* (Tap and Touch Cinema) in which she walked around the streets with a cardboard-box cinema that featured her breasts in place of puppets for passersby to touch.
6. Thomas Elsaesser, "Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Exile: A Counterfeit Trade? German Filmmakers in Hollywood," *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed., Hamid Naficy (New York: Routledge, 1999), 112.
7. Cited in Frederic Morton, *Thunder at Twilight: Vienna 1913/14* (New York: Da Capo, 2001), 185-186.
8. Alexander Horwath, "Wien entschleiert," *Die Zeit*, 16 April 2014.