Interview___Peter Kubelka

"My new film will be a monument for the analog medium"

by Víctor Paz Morandeira

Experimental filmmaker Peter Kubelka attended (S8) Peripheral Cinema Festival (A Coruña, Spain) last June to give a lecture on his edible metaphors. Responsible for the first chair of film and cooking, he was visionary too in designing the Invisible Cinema Theatre for the Anthology Film Archives, which he founded along with Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage and P. Adams Sitney.

He presented as well all his films to the audience, including his masterpiece *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), consisting of a succession of white and black frames combined with equal bits of sound and silence. A sort of proto-cinema that is at the core of his new work, *Monument for the Old World*, presented this year at the British Film Institute, among other venues.

I would like to begin with an anecdote from your childhood. You have mentioned many times you were amazed by a Dr. Oetcker advert. It seems to me advertising has influenced some of your films in a deep way.

No, I don't think so. I was impressed... Well, I was a very small child, not yet in school, and I heard from other children in the village of Taufkirchen, were I grew up, that there was a film being shown at a local inn. I got there late, I opened the door and it was all dark inside. I could only see the backs of the peasants, and not the screen. That was something I had never experienced before.

Then I made my way towards the screen and it was a fantastic event to me, which I did not quite understand. There was the sound of the projector, because this was a traveling venture. And then, the film on how to make pudding. It was not just publicity.

What impressed me was not the film, but the whole event and, specially, what was happening on the screen. There were some sync events with the sound, some elements dancing with the music... It was real cinema!

But then I forgot this film. It only came to me much later, when I investigated myself. How did it all start? Then, in Linz, where I lived from 7 to 9 years old, I could only see Nazi feature films, melodrames and so on.

I guess there is irony to these films in *Mosaik im Vertrauen* (1955).

Of course. There is a double level in all of my films, except in the metric films. But, yes... There is always irony and distance. But your question was on my relationship to advertising. It was like this because this was the only way of getting a commission. With my first film, I was completely pushed out from film milieu. People did not understand it at all and it was laughed, so I could not raise any money anymore.

Also nowadays, and this is really important, if someone wants to make a free independent film, they go to 16 mm. or 8 mm., but this was not possible in my time. In order to reach the quality I wanted in 35 mm. I had to get commissions which I always changed. So I could say I stole all my films, but I had no choice.

So *Mosaik im Vertrauen* was also commissioned.

By an old friend of mine. He was a priest and wanted to become a catholic film producer for creating social thinking. He raised money from institutions like Red Cross or Caritas and from his fellow priests. So the scrip I had to submit fit into his purposes, but then it was completely changed.

You can still see when you watch the film the ruins of the script behind it.

There are slight elements of fiction, as in *Unsere Afrikareise* (1965).

No, *Afrikareise* is a document where I shot fourteen and a half hours of sounds and one and a half hours of images and then edited them. I shot it as it came. There was no plan or script.

But there is fiction in the editing, specifically in the juxtaposition of images and dialogue.

In *Mosaik* I wrote the dialogues, but in *Afrikareise* I just recorded them. You also have to see the film as a mosaic, build out of these pieces. There was no spoken text from the outside and no script whatsoever, so I don't want to apply the word 'fiction'. You could call it maybe a poem, but why should we take words from literature?

I have always wanted to feel independent and autonomous, and not a combination of various other media, like feature films are. These are combinations of theatre's writing and acting, painting or moving picture, music and literature or spoken text. I realised very early, already with my first film, that this is not cinema, just a mixture of other media.

Actually, you wrote the script for *Mosaik im Vertrauen* with Ferry Radax, who was also the cinematographer. This was the only time you did not work alone.

Yes. It was my departure from the structure of filmmaking which I inherited, with functions such as film director, cameraman, scriptwriter, editor, composer of the music, sound department... I made all my later films completely alone, and these professions don't apply. In a team work, the editor cannot change the script that has been shot before. In *Mosaik*, I liberated myself from that and said to myself: "The script is gone. The film will be made from what lies here".

Later... You see, the name independent cinema did not exist. It was all new. It was only many years later in the US that people wanted to make films as authors, like a painter or a poet: one person. There is this great difference between team work and work of a single author. I have dedicated all my life to stablish a position as a film author against the concept of industrial product, which costs much more money and has to bring it back. Therefore come all these restrictions, as you have to follow the laws of commerce.

Which you did not follow in *Schwechater* (1958) -a well-known beer in Austria, this was intended to be an advert-. All your metric films are shot in B&W, but you added some red to this one. Why?

Well... The commission was to make a colour film. My relationship with Schwechater is complicated. I had been recommended to this company by influential artists and critics in Vienna because they respected me. They would

not pay for a film, but they needed an advert and I accepted. We disagreed very much on how the film should look like. But they had paid me some money, which I used to buy some raw material. I had proposed some films to them, but in the end they forced me to shoot what they had written themselves. It was a crazy story because there were two worlds colliding.

In the end I filmed what they had dictated: girls drinking beer and so on. They thought they had won because what I shot would appear on the screen, but this was not the case. On the screen there is the information that the filmmaker permits to be there, frame by frame. So I made my film as I wanted it. I did not know how it would look before, but I went without making concessions through the whole creative process.

I am amazed by the paper strips you used as a guide for *Arnulf Rainer* (1960). You literally had to imagine the rhythm of the film in your head. How did you proceed?

I had already made before two metric films, which I had also made out of my hands, without the help of projectors or editing tables. So I had learnt to read or imagine what a certain succession of frames would bring on the screen. It's like a composer that knows the instruments and then puts them together, composing in his mind.

It is like writing a musical score.

Yes, of course. But it is not written as a symphony would be written, emotionally. It is a construction help. What I did was choosing elements like: black-white-black-white-black-white... This is the strongest collision between light and darkness. Or: black-black-white-white-black-black... Or: black-white-white-black-white-white...

I chose elements and I imagined them. I had that experience with *Schwechater* of really knowing what a single image is and what it does when you intersperse various forms. So the film was not a blind experiment. It was

something I imagined but that I had never seen until I saw it the first time finished. That really made a very strong impression on me.

I have lived with this film since. I mean, it's now 52 years old.

It doesn't look old, anyway.

It doesn't. You see, when you don't make concessions and you succeed, it will never be old. This theory of art ageing is wrong. It is only bad art that ages. These are bad works that have not been recognised as such and, after some time, you realise it was not really successful.

You consider Marey to be the father of cinema and give much importance to metaphors that come out of the juxtaposition of two frames, but I find more often metaphors between two shots in your films. In *Unsere Afrikareise*...

I have two different terms for this kind of metaphors. I call them articulations. There is an articulation between each frame in *Afrikareise* and then between a group of frames or shot. The first one is the weak one and the one between the shots is stronger. And then there is a frame by frame articulation between image and sound. Two articulations: image-image, image-sound.

Speaking of sound, you decided to sync it with the images in *Pause! (1977)*, the only time you have done this. Why?

I felt it was stronger to keep it in sync, but I separated eye and ear in the stage of making the film. I put the ear in the form of a microphone in Arnulf Rainer's body... Let's say that in *Afrikareise* I had the ear in all different kinds of places and then I united eye and ear to an artificial me.

In *Pause!* I used the microphone while I was shooting to create this artificial head of the viewer, where the viewer would listen to his body and look from a certain distance.

You see, I never considered myself an experimental filmmaker. I don't like the word, because it is dangerous and a putdown. James Joyce is not called experimental, he is just a writer. Kandinski and Piero della Francesca came upon new things and nobody dares to call them experimental. The word has the connotation of trying out something and then arriving at something better. The industry likes this term, because it puts the things down.

I find this term offending. I am the filmmaker, the normal one. Preminger is an industrial filmmaker, paid to make business. They should use this special term for themselves. I am just a filmmaker, like a painter or a poet.

Between *Unsere Afrikareise* and *Pause!* you were going to make another film. Something new on this matter?
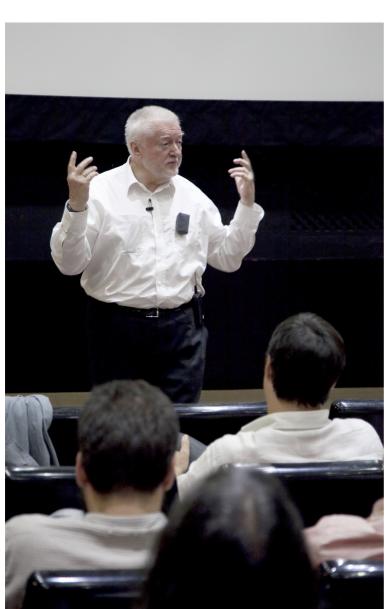
I wanted to make a film called *Monument for the Old World*. I shot material and worked on it and it is not out. That is the whole story. It may come out, but I do not want to time myself out to a declaration. But the new film I am now finishing will be based on *Arnulf Rainer*. It will be a monument for the analog medium film, which is right now being eradicated and destroyed all over the world, without people even knowing it. The industry does it on the sly.

You actually maintain that digital prints will disappear, as they depend on continuous updates.

The digital medium has no longevity. It ages very fast and is a short-lived medium. The progressivists, who support digitalism, will say that numbers last forever and there is no loss when you transfer. But numbers reside in machines! The cannot exist in an abstract way. They are human creations, always materialised: written, spoken, thought...

A digital moving image needs such an amount of numbers that it has to be kept in very complex machines. It is the machines that age very fast, like a Formula1 car. On top of that, you have no international standards, in an industrial war between all participants. This is a real war, with no care for losses from other companies. Once they are destroyed, all their material, which only functions on their machines, is gone. This is a horrible situation.

You think film will stay anyway.

I bet my whole life's work on that fact. I do not permit my films to be transferred to digital. They exist in a form on the internet, but these are not the real films. These are like... Well, I would not like to call them shadows, as films are shadows, but... I don't know...

Let's call them a shadow of a shadow.

Yes (laughs).

In *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (2003), where did you find the adverts and how did you decide which shots to include?

The film was made actually for a lecture which I gave in the Filmmuseum. What I wanted was to have thrown away cut-outs of commercial films. I looked through many outtakes and chose. This is a process not always governed by reason. I just chose what I liked and then created a form which was possible for what I had. I would say the form it took could be considered a monument to the paradise depicted in publicity films.

It is funny and terrible at the same time. I did not shape it or clean it. I left it as it was so, again, this would be a metric or ciclic film. The director of the commercial has had the actors repeat the same actions over and over. In nature, no repetition is equal to the one before. There is always a variation. So these pieces are the same, but not exactly.

But these are fake repetitions, which look ridiculous on the screen.

They try hard to look natural, but don't succeed. In the beginning, I wanted the film to represent *Dichtung* (poetry) and *Wahrheit* (truth) by showing people when they act and when they don't. The non acting was, so to speak, the truth. But then I realised that people always act. There is not such thing as non acting.

It is curious that your fellow countryman Peter Tscherkassky shows this non acting in his last film, *Coming Attractions* (2010), also on publicity films. He uses music, but yours is silent. Why?

It is much stronger this way. Otherwise, these pieces had no music, so I would have to have chosen music for them. Then it would have been a made film and this is not what I wanted.

There are many people who say that about Tscherkassky's film. I don't want to criticize him, but he could do much better if he created the music himself. He always has the music made by a composer and I think this is a big mistake. It is a great pity because in the image he is really strong. I talk to him about this often and try to convince him. We are good friends and I think I have influenced his filmmaking.

Coming back to your new film, please tell me a little bit more about it.

The new film is truly called *Antiform*. And then there is a new work, which is called *Monument for the Old World*. *Antiform* is the negative form, like the yin and yang, of *Arnulf Rainer*. It is equally long and, whenever *Arnulf Rainer* has a

black frame, this one has a transparent frame. And the same with the sound: silence becomes sound. They are positive and negative of each other.

The work will consist of projections and exhibitions on the wall of the three dimensional film, as I have done with *Arnulf Rainer*. This will be the first projection. Then, consecutively, *Antiform*. It will be a new experience, which nobody has ever had. Only cinema can do it. It will excite the memory because you will realise, as the *Antiform* goes on, what it is. The third time they are projected side by side.

Antiform has always existed, already in pygmy music. One sings and the other answers. In Christian tradition is the litany... Antiform is really as old as voice communication. Side by side, whenever there is a black frame on the right side, there is white on the left.

And there is always sound.

As well on one side or the other, with two different speakers. The image will go forth and back and the sound too.

And then, there is a forth projection, and they are projected on top of each other. Theoretically, this would be a continuous white light with sound. In reality, it will not be. It will breath. There will be an intermittence that will show the structure of *Antiform*, as the projectors speeds are never completely equal. Also, the frames in cinema are material, so every frame has a different grain. It will not be just white. This is the cinema light!

I want the differences between digital and film to come out in this *Monument*.

In digital, everything would be grey.

Of course, there is no true black in digital. Also, the films will be shown on the wall, opposite one another and on top of each other just in front of the viewer. This wall should be black, as if not projected, this colour is stronger. I can't wait to see it!

PHOTOGRAPHS: María Meseguer