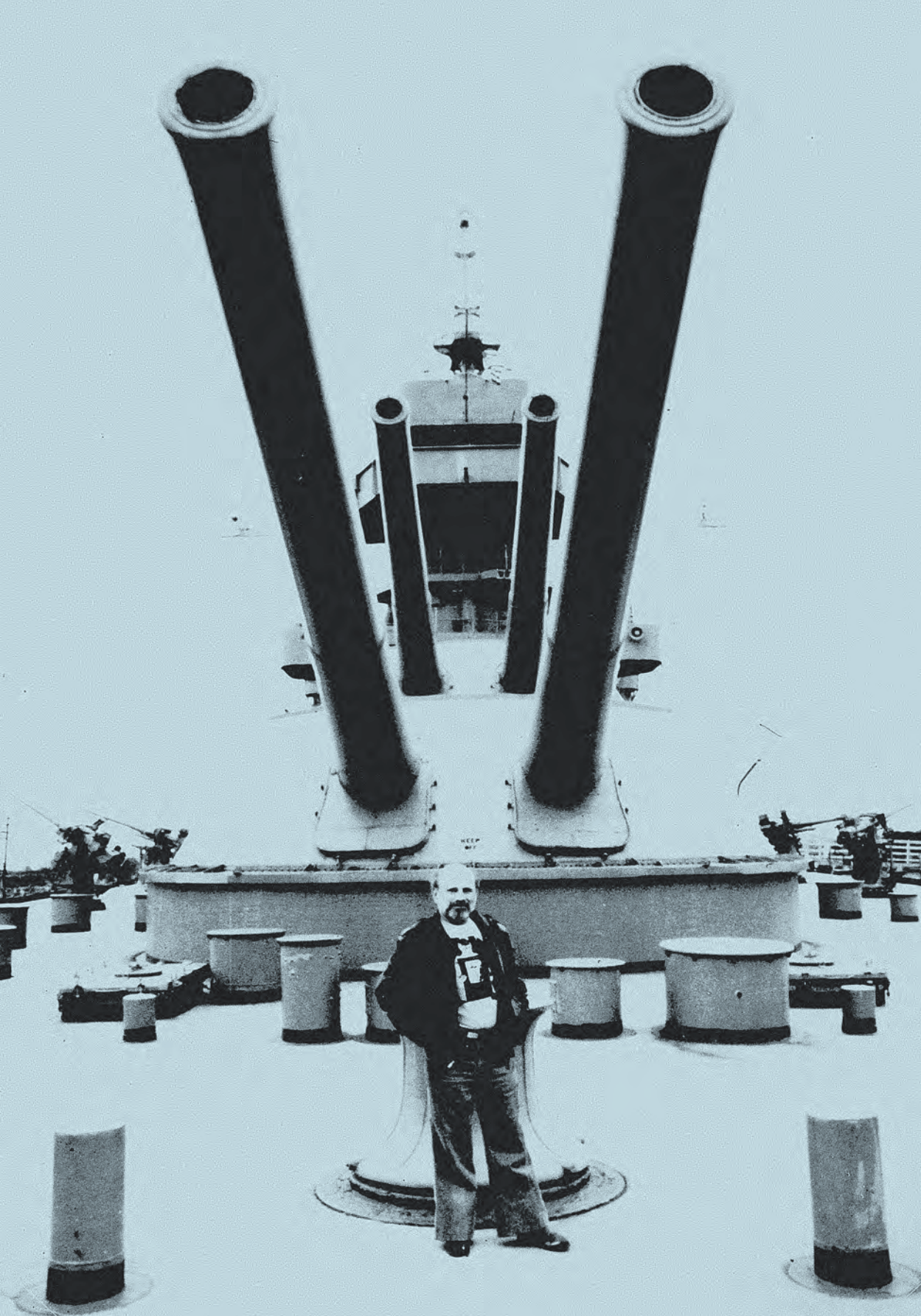


Film Unframed
A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema

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Peter Tscherkassky

“There must be something in the water ...”

“There must be something in the water ...” commented an American festival director a few years ago, with a mixture of puzzlement and wonder. His observation was dropped during a conversation about one of the most vital and multifaceted avant-garde film scenes in the world – that of Austria. This tiny country in the middle of Europe has seen the growth of an art film tradition over the course of the past six decades that can boast a degree of continuity and ongoing productivity seldom realized elsewhere. In the meantime, it is practically commonplace that Austria’s most important contribution to film history was and is largely created in the field of avant-garde production. I fear I will not be able to provide a watertight argument as to why it has come to this. But a few – hopefully plausible – explanations can be attempted.

Austria counts eight million residents, of whom roughly a quarter live in Vienna. This disproportionately giant-headed capital is the heirloom of a splendid time when Austria was an empire covering a surface area outstripped only by Russia. After the First World War, this empire crumbled into numerous nation states – today, twelve occupy the territory of its former dominion. Austria itself became a truncated state – a dwarf, with a sizable estate alongside its oversized metropolis, consisting of a truly remarkable cultural abundance. And we are talking about a cultural legacy that had largely been incubated in Vienna. The modern portion of this heritage – to avoid reaching as far back as maestro Mozart – arose in the last decades before the fall of the monarchy, approximately during the years from 1880 till the outbreak of war in 1914 – in other words, the historical

phase for which the term “fin de siècle” has been coined. Among the main actors of this period, a handful of representative figures may be named: the painters Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka and the internationally still under-acknowledged Richard Gerstl; the authors Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Karl Kraus, Rainer Maria Rilke, Georg Trakl and Franz Kafka; the composers Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Alban Berg, Josef Matthias Hauer (who prior to and independently of Schoenberg developed a 12-tone technique); the architects and designers Otto Wagner, Adolf Loos, Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser; philosophers such as Ernst Mach and Ludwig Wittgenstein; and of course the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. They all led their lives and created their work fully aware that one era was coming to a close while a new, yet intangible age was on the rise. They searched for ways to express the advent of this epoch, for new forms capable of articulating fundamentally new content. For this reason, it will come as no surprise that the aforementioned artists and philosophically scientific innovators of the fin de siècle were united by an intensively analytical relationship to the world and to their own material of expression. This development naturally continued after the war – the work of Robert Musil and Stefan Zweig comes to mind, as well as the logical positivism of the Wiener Kreis (Vienna Circle) including such philosophers as Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap and Kurt Goedel. But it met with an abrupt end in 1934, when class struggle culminated in bloody conflict, the Right shut parliament down and the young Republic was transformed into an authoritarian, clerical-fascist corporate state. During the subsequent era of Austro-fascism and the relapse

into barbarism under the dictatorship of National Socialism from 1938 till 1945, modern vision was packed away into a box labeled “degenerate.”

After liberation by the Allies, it became the task of cultural workers to salvage this heritage from the rubble of war. Artists traumatized by the recent past opposed the pathos and emotional drivel of Nazi-sanctified effusions of art with a renewed will to self-interrogation and an analytic approach to forms of language and expression. It had just been made terribly clear how easily “content” could be used to manipulate and control emotions, the consequences experienced in catastrophic terms. Artistic ambition driven by “content” was principally met with distrust. As during the fin de siècle, the call for *new* possibilities of form and *new* designs gained dominance over emotionalism and pathos. All of the historically relevant art produced in post-war Austria – serial music, the abstract painting of the Informel, concrete poetry, etc. – can be traced back to this fundamental attitude of a critical intelligence.

We have not yet reached the field of cinema, but we are looking at the immediate environment in which its roots are to be found. All the pioneers of Austrian avant-garde film cultivated a deep connection to the established arts: to music, the visual arts and literature. And they all shared a social environment of provincialism and meanness that could hardly have been more claustrophobic. Military defeat and the destruction of the Nazi regime had not dispelled the reactionary fog in many minds, despite “denazification.” In the bog of this post-war mentality, art thrived that had to rebel. Under these conditions, the radicalism of concrete poetry and the literary performances produced by the Wiener Gruppe (Vienna Group) was not only possible, it was necessary. The emergence of Viennese Actionism was also at its core an expression of resistance. And whoever works his way through the *Heimat* movies and historical romances of the day can see they were conceived to help forget complicity in the horrors of Nazi dictatorship, constructing an Austrian identity with pillars of singing forests, eternal Habsburg glory and diverse references to the ideology of the

corporate state. This cinematic environment further contributes to an understanding of what was soon to follow in the field of cinema.

However, a stale atmosphere alone does not give rise to oppositional art. It also required personalities such as those of Peter Kubelka, Kurt Kren and Valie Export, with their longing for radically new and innovative forms of moving images. A film industry had not developed in this small country comparable to the potent production systems found in France, Italy, Germany and Great Britain. The European auteur cinema that began to emerge in these countries as of 1945 and absorb creative minds required money and an infrastructure that simply did not exist in Austria. Here, the one path that remained open led into the field of art and territories of the cultural underground. But what ensued was a kind of reinvention of cinema and a preparation of the ground for all subsequent generations – each in its turn inventing its own paths. Which brings us back to what this book is about... So, to put it in a nutshell: it took the cultural heritage of a world empire, intensively analytical and self-reflexive art forms and intellectual disciplines, a reactionary social environment conducive to rebellion, the absence of a film industry and a handful of geniuses disposed to create autonomous art forms. And perhaps there is something in the water.

This book is the first of its kind to present a condensed history of Austrian avant-garde cinema in English. Introductory essays illuminate the prehistory of this tradition, as well as various directions in different phases of development, within which entirely individualistic aesthetic forms unfolded. The main portion of the book consists of 18 chapters presenting the oeuvre of individual artists. Separate chapters are dedicated to cinematic forerunners of the avant-garde and to Austria’s autarchic manifestations of expanded cinema developed by a number of filmmakers in the turbulent years of the 1960s. But artists today also live in exciting times: contemporary motion picture makers are able to lead parallel lives engaged in analog film art and new digitally generated worlds. Meanwhile, by replacing analog

projection equipment with digital systems, the movie industry is producing a *fait accompli* without any form of public debate, forcing the art of analog film into a niche existence after more than a century of prominence. The only remaining question is how large and comfortably furnished this niche will be. Within the context of such changes in overall conditions, a longer essay illuminates the multi-faceted manifestations of motion-picture art in Austria today. A concluding essay oriented to more fundamental questions describes the relationship between radical film art and modern art in general. While covering such a broad spectrum, one of our main objectives is also to inspire further research. This purpose is addressed by a comprehensive appendix. It contains biographies, filmographies and bibliographical information on all the filmmakers and artists found in this book, whether in chapters dedicated to individual artists or in one of the essays providing an overview.

Naturally, in addition to our esteemed authors many people have contributed to the making of *Film Unframed*. Of these the first to be thanked is Brigitta Burger-Utzer of sixpackfilm for almost singlehandedly executing the herculean task of creating the aforementioned appendix. As a kind of “advisory board” of book-publishing experts, I would like to thank Alexander Horwath, director of the Austrian Film Museum; Brigitte Mayr, managing director of Synema – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien; Michael Omasta, head film critic at Vienna’s city newspaper *Falter*; and again Brigitta Burger-Utzer – all well-proven publishers who helped with their advice. We have Charles Ulbl to thank for the – in our humble opinion – beautiful layout of the book, a seasoned and exceptionally engaged graphic designer. I have had the pleasure of working with Charles for over twenty years, during which time he has not only become an expert of Austrian avant-garde cinema, but a real friend as well. Our thanks also to the translators: Fabrice Leroy and Adrian Martin provided wonderful translations from the French, while Eve Heller and Steve Wilder did excellent and nuanced translations of writings by stylistically diverse German authors. Our additional thanks to Steve

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Last but not least, I would like to thank the filmmakers of this country. It is a pleasure to be an active part of the multifaceted landscape of the motion-picture art they create, ever challenged anew to give my best as a filmmaker.