



ARNULF RAINER

The World According to Kubelka.

Peter Tscherkassky

For over 20 years I have had the honor and above all the pleasure of being able to count Peter Kubelka among my friends. It is a distinct pleasure because Kubelka is an individual who unites an exceptional depth and array of personal qualities: On the one hand, he is extraordinarily charming, hospitable, generous, profoundly humorous, a grandiose storyteller and entertainer; on the other hand Kubelka is the most critical oppositional spirit imaginable. There seems to be virtually *nothing* accessible to our senses that escapes his wide-awake, considered and contemplative judgment. Without exception, Kubelka approaches things from a critical distance, forming his own opinion according to a highly developed system of values. The praise of others regarding any topic whatsoever seems to make him wary. Kubelka wants to discover things (and their sum: the world) for himself, with unbiased judgment. And since he is not willing to make any concessions whatsoever to the so-called Zeitgeist, many of Kubelka's opinions and evaluations turn out to be deviant: some astonishingly conservative (in the original sense of the word), others radically progressive. In Kubelka, this basic attitude combines with a truly comprehensive (and not surprisingly autodidactically acquired) wealth of knowledge, as well as an impressive ability to consider the most various things and aspects and place them in entirely unexpected constellations. Let us take an arbitrary example from a host of

possibilities: A tavern, for instance, is not a tavern, but a "machine modeled upon the nursing mother – the waiter is her hand that puts her breast to your lips. We are in paradise, spared all worldly toil at a well spread table. It is like an island of the blessed, where everything is edible and the dishes come to us (...) You do not have to do anything to procure nourishment – even the nomad who unerringly found a tree rife with fruit had to make an effort. Being fed in this way returns us to the stage of being at mother's breast, which is in fact the first and only time you receive something without having to do anything. And this earliest paradisaical condition is induced in the tavern – food appears as at mother's breast – not only milk but the entire edible universe, all the worlds mankind has created, such as roast pork with dumplings and sauerkraut, mashed potatoes and meatloaf."¹ But also a person's *own* cooking contains a deeper, fundamental meaning through which he comprehends the cosmos available to him. See for instance the example of the Scottish coastal farmer and his oyster stew, enthroned as the ruler of his kingdom, cooking his "oysters robbed from the ocean" in the mother's milk of the cow he "forces to live with him": "He could just as well eat his oysters on the open sea, and drink his milk when he is back home.

¹ Peter Kubelka, "Interview V: Das Wirtshaus, die Küche," in *Peter Kubelka*, eds. Gabriele Jutz and Peter Tscherkassky (Vienna: PVS Verleger, 1995), p. 187.

But cooking presents options extending beyond mere sustenance,” and so he unites the oyster with milk, and “sprinkles it with exotic pepper. And now comes the big moment: He takes a spoonful of oyster and milk and puts it in his mouth – at the very same moment in time he tastes, synchronously, his universe – he tastes who he is: He is the master of the ocean, and the master of the meadow. And additionally he is master of the ships that travel to the Orient to bring him, a farmer in Scotland, pepper. With this single bite and swallow the farmer enjoys and exalts his existence on earth, he puts it down in writing. He creates his own coat of arms: ‘This is I.’”²

This abridgement might sound like metaphorical banter, but in Kubelka’s exposition there is always a logical conclusion to his far-reaching, well-founded, inductive unfolding of thought, proceeding from the smallest matter (i.e., the oyster) and concluding with the greatest (not infrequently the cosmos). Kubelka zooms in and pulls back again. Herein the genius of the artist (as opposed to the scientist) can be recognized: in his highly creative capacity to shift measures and perspectives bridging entire eras, cultures and academic disciplines.

In short, an evening listening to Kubelka – and Kubelka likes to talk, despite his skepticism in regard to spoken language – is an evening as if spent in an alternate, parallel world. You take part in (or are imparted) a fundamentally *other* point of view, and this is always in the spirit of a world-view in search of the original, the authentic, the fundamental, in short, the *root* of the matter.

I preface with this thumbnail sketch in an attempt to create an image of the *person* Peter Kubelka, because it is precisely these qualities of character that at the end of the 1950s enable the 23-year-old to reinvent and redefine the already well over 60-year-old Lady “Cinema” from the ground up... But first things first.

Born in 1934, Peter Kubelka spent his childhood and youth in the province of Upper Austria, in

Taufkirchen. His mother was a housewife, his father a musician – a recognized violin virtuoso. Kubelka attaches great significance to his ancestral bloodline of farmers, gunsmiths, glass blowers, bakers, millers, doctors, female teachers, etc. For example, he ascribes his “Indian serenity,” as he calls it, to his great-great-grandmother, an Indian-Portuguese mestizo.³ In the world of the kitchen, the women of the family socialized Kubelka: mother, grandmother and great aunt, each an excellent cook. Art came to him via music, namely under the guidance of his father, Ferdinand, a perfectionist intolerant of mistakes. From 1944 to 1947 his son Peter sang in the world-renowned Vienna Boys’ Choir, and at this time aspired to become a musician – until he turned 17 and returned to his first love, “film,” whose acquaintance Kubelka had made as a child, through the visit to his hometown of a traveling cinema. By then he had already realized that in the realm of music, “a person could only be 1/100th as good as Schubert.” The medium of film, however, still seemed to be waiting for its Schubert. With characteristic perseverance and consistency, from that moment on Kubelka pursued his goal of wresting an autonomous art form from this relatively young medium, something corresponding to what he had learned to expect through his musical schooling. After graduating from Wels high school, in 1952 Kubelka moved from Upper Austria to Vienna to study at the Film Academy, which at the time was organized and run as a humble night school. In 1954, he relocated to Rome where he studied directing at Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia. During summer vacation in 1955, the 21-year-old realized his debut film: *Mosaik im Vertrauen*. He engaged his colleague Ferry Radax as cameraman, whose acquaintance he had made at the Film Academy and who later had followed Kubelka to the Centro Sperimentale. Radax, 23 at the time, had already collaborated on

² Peter Kubelka, “Was bedeutet Essen und Kochen für die Menschen,” transcript of a 1978 lecture, reprinted in Jutz and Tscherkassky, pp. 170–185; quote p. 177.

³ As a soldier Kubelka’s great-great-grandfather wound up in the south of Brazil, where he married and founded a zwieback bakery. His son returned to his father’s homeland, became an innkeeper – and thereby also contributed in a significant way to the genetic makeup valued by Kubelka.

several documentaries as a camera assistant, and had also acted in one of the few pre-avant-garde films produced in Austria, Herbert Vesely's *An diesen Abenden* [On These Evenings] (1952). Radax's first independent effort, *Das Floß* [The Raft] (1954), remained a 60-minute fragment.⁴ One year later, Kubelka and Radax went to a remote railroad yard in Linz to realize Kubelka's screenplay in 35 mm. Today, *Mosaik im Vertrauen* (*Mosaic in Confidence*, 1955) is deemed the first Austrian avant-garde film – the very beginning of what this book is about.

Mosaik im Vertrauen has six characters: the railroad stationmaster, Johann Bayer; his young daughter; an Italian vagabond called Putnik (played by a fellow student from Rome); a Teddy Boy type named "Leo" in the end credits; the elegant lady Michaela; and her chauffeur, played by the poet Konrad Bayer.

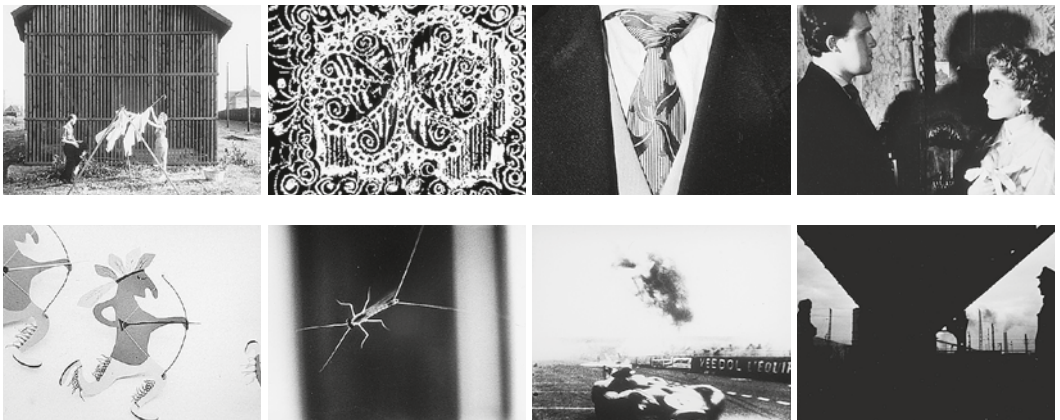
The plot is simple: Putnik spends his days in a railroad yard. From an appropriate distance he pines after the stationmaster's daughter. The stationmaster wants to drive the irksome hobo away. Additionally Putnik is faced with the competition of Leo, who is also courting the stationmaster's

daughter. Eventually, Michaela arrives on the scene, together with her chauffeur in a luxurious car. The latter remain silent observers as events unfold. They never interfere, though their arrival seems to have a negative influence on the course of things.

One night around the campfire, Putnik and the stationmaster grow friendly. They get to talking and railroad man Bayer begins to tell a bit about his life. The men stay together till the light of dawn. The film ends with the departure of the Lady: The disc of the rising sun cuts to Michaela's broad-brimmed hat as she presses it to her head in the wake of the convertible's wind stream. As the end credits roll, the car disappears into the distance.

If only told the plot of the film, no one would likely suspect the seed of an extraordinary avant-garde tradition lying at its core. Yet in the *construction* of this mosaic there already stirs an absolute determination to realize a fundamentally new form – the desire of a young film student fascinated by Italian Neorealism to recreate and redefine the medium of cinema from scratch, which resulted two years later in metrical film, a completely unprecedented cinematic form.

But one step at a time: The mosaic as a picture composed of many parts can serve as an analogy for any "normal" or conventional film. However, in this case it applies specifically to the unique way in



⁴ See Stefan Grisseman's text "Countdown to Zero. Before the Avant-Garde: Austrian Visionary Film 1951–1955" in this book, p. 44 ff.

which the parts of this film are presented, stressing their existence as *individual* elements: The montage does not adhere to conventional editing patterns, it largely refuses established narrative film codes that commonly determine how individual shots are composed to render the appearance of a homogenous narrative flow. Instead, shots appear strangely singular, like isolated statements. The *suture*, as it will later be called in film theory, does not really function here. Simply said, after seeing the film only once without advance information one will hardly be able to comprehend its narrative. Only upon repeated viewings do individual parts fuse into a recognizable whole, into a story. The formal construction of the film, its emphatic stress upon individual components and their meaning in regard to a complexly woven whole, is designed to redefine the relationship of the part to the whole. The entirety of the film no longer consists of a sequence of individual parts, but rather, the film attempts to realize a kind of simultaneity of its components – much like a musical work composed of individual elements that likewise stand in a well-defined, anticipatory and retrospective relation to all the other elements of the composition.

Within the first minute of the film the main elements of the story are introduced. The opening shot presents Putnik's hand drawing an ornament in chalk on the side of a boxcar. Instantaneously, his conflict with the stationmaster becomes audible: "Get up and walk!" yells the voice of the railroad man (an echo of Christ's words to Lazarus that seems to speak to the beginning of the film itself.) The next shot shows Putnik in flight, running between parked boxcars, leaving stationmaster Bayer behind threateningly shaking his fist. The chauffeur of the elegant automobile later to arrive is glimpsed standing on a railway bridge high above the scene, cupping his hands to his eyes like a pair of binoculars, as if watching the two men in the distance. But instead of his view of the men, a "countershot" follows, showing newsreel footage with a superimposed title announcing "La Catastrophe des 24 Heures du Mans – Gaumont Actualités," a report on the 24-hour Le Mans race of 1955 during which 84 spectators were killed in a

catastrophic automobile accident. This found footage is a material witness to the very process introduced by *Mosaik im Vertrauen*, heralding a central characteristic of avant-garde narrative technique: the condensation of content through the metaphorization and metonymization of events. The collision of the race car with the grandstand full of spectators, which is seen later, can be read as a metaphor for the mosaic of the film itself: It intrudes upon the public in a manner that in no way meets with the expectations of its audience...

The start of the car race is edited to coincide with the beginning of the film's story: Several race cars speed into the picture from the right, crosscut with a locomotive barreling in from the left. "Brake, BRAKE!" yells a voice off-screen: Wham! We see a race car collide with the perimeter of the racetrack, accompanied by a pained "Ow!" spoken off-screen: Le Mans and the tiny world of the railroad yard become parallel realities.⁵

Next the object of desire and conflict is revealed: the beautiful daughter of the railroad stationmaster. Putnik helps her gather freshly washed laundry from the clothesline. "Sie sind sehr gut" ("You are very good"), he says; "Meinen Sie?" ("You think so?"), she coyly asks in return. In the background the boards of a barn loom like the bars of a cage; the clothesline hung with white shirts threads through the middle and foreground of the image – a threshold Putnik will fail to cross.

In stark contrast to the pitiable world of the hobo, the story continues with glamour boy Leo's first appearance. A long shot of his nighttime tête-à-tête, with the daughter standing in front of a massive house door, is preceded by a blast of thunder introducing a series of phallic symbols seen in close-up: a man's flashy patterned tie, an enormous cigar and a transistor radio – the latter was quite a rarity at the time and a status symbol. A close-up of Leo's impressive shoes cuts to the dainty high heels of the stationmaster's daughter, then to her face. A skewed shot lends him the superiority of looking down upon her: "You are a

⁵ Kubelka will later use a nearly identical montage of sound and image in *Unsere Afrikareise*: At the instant a zebra is shot, a woman reacts with an "Ow!", seemingly to a mosquito bite.



Peter Kubelka
Mosaik im Vertrauen
1955

devilishly dangerous girl.” A brief found footage shot intercuts of men examining a motorcycle after an accident. “You think so?” she asks coquettishly (the formal “Sie” used with Putnik here gives way to the familiar “du,” in speech exchanged with the dashing gentleman). A stranger hastily pushes himself between the man and woman, disappearing through the doorway – its ornamentation can be interpreted as genital symbols. The opening of the house door seamlessly rhymes with the subsequent shot of a limousine door opening as the elegant leg of a lady emerges: “Madame Michaela,” announces a nasal voice. The scene jumps back to Teddy Boy at the doorway, proclaiming, “You will fall prey to me”; the young woman has meanwhile slipped down to the lower half of the screen, her eyes barely able to peer above its bottom edge.

Such a “fall” might imply what is shown in the next sequence, which takes place in the station-master’s house: Papa Bayer screws a light bulb into a lampshade in the kitchen and speaks to his (neither visible nor audible) wife. “There. Now it burns again.” The lampshade is seen from below; the light bulb shines like an artificial sun illuminating the kitchen table and the following monologue in dialect: “Wås redst denn nix? Waas eh wåst wüst: an Persianermuff und an Ami-Wågen mit an blau’n Auspuff! Fia wås bin i denn vaheirat? Damit i an Kaffee trink? Koid is ma aa.” (“Why don’t ya say nothin’? I git exactly what ya want: a Persian muff an’ American wheels with a blue muffler! Why the hell am I hitched? To get a cup of java? Freezing my ass off, too.”) The filament of the bulb glows icily in an extreme close-up.

Cut back to the front door where the admirer demonstrates the functions of the radio to his Dulcinea. Extremely short cuts follow: the face of the woman, the face of the man, the close-up of a strange insect, behind it the swinging pendulum of a clock, cartoonish drawings of several Indians with oversized noses,⁶ as well as Putnik bent forward and peering out between his legs. Each of these

elements is cut so tightly that they seem to melt into one another. This rapid montage sequence was edited according to the clock’s swinging pendulum, the tempo of which invisibly continues to keep time and not miss a beat “behind” the inserted image components: The concept of the metricalization of filmic sequencing can here be discovered in a nutshell, especially as found three years later in the basic structure of *Schwechater*. The sequence ends with a completely blurry close-up of the woman’s face that can read as the resolution phase of this metaphorically implied sexual encounter.

This shot becomes superimposed with a traveling shot en route to the railyard, ultimately arriving upon the sad gaze of Putnik. His ornament appears again, only now a stylized butterfly can be discerned in its center as if caught in a net, superimposed on the merciless bars of Putnik’s caged reality: the railroad tracks on which Putnik, like a prisoner, is obliquely seen to stagger and sway. The object of his desire is further beyond his reach than ever. For a moment the story seems to come to a standstill.

Then the vigorous honking of a horn announces the limousine that is to deliver “Madame Michaela.” Shot from the hood of the car as it approaches a cordoned barrier to the rail yard, the backlit railroad turnout briefly flashes as it is switched – which seems to trigger the catastrophe of Le Mans: The notorious accident is seen during which an exploding car sped into the spectators and killed over 80 people. With gruesome precision the camera swings in tandem with the engine block as it mows down the masses and the car bursts into flames. Motionless and indifferent “Madame” and her chauffeur peer through their windshield. As a corpse is carried away in Le Mans, the chauffeur gets the hiccups – “Pardon!” – and opens the car door. The shot of Michaela’s elegantly heeled leg swinging out of the limousine is repeated; in the instant of her contact with the street a high rain of sparks flares up in Le Mans; a coquettish swinging of the lady’s hips is accompanied by the words “... fallen prey ..., ... fallen prey ...,” again as spoken by Leo. Briefly our couple is seen standing before the house door. But the race continues, as if nothing has happened.

⁶ The size of a man’s nose is commonly equated with penis size; arrows unambiguously indicate those of Cupid. Additionally, in Italian slang the word “frecce,” arrow, is used for “sperm” (as told by Ferry Radax in an interview with the author).



The subsequent scene leads to the most conciliatory sequence of the film, Putnik's encounter with the stationmaster at the nightly campfire. "Should I chase you away once again?" asks Johann Bayer. But now the men grow more friendly. In a handful of words Bayer seems to convey advice to the lovesick Putnik, alluding to his own unhappy marriage. He speaks about putting a good word in for Putnik with railroad management about a job. Solitary men in race cars round their seemingly senseless laps in the morning twilight dawning at Le Mans, and the sun rises above the horizon at the railyard. Life is a race: you win, or you lose. Michaela looks back across the hood of her convertible; as the car starts up with a jerk she falls back into her seat. The hat she holds on her head against the driving wind assumes the position of the rising sun that had just occupied the screen, disappearing as a progressively diminishing disc into the distance. As these silent spectators depart the scene, 16 minutes after its commencement, we, too, are left behind with the rolling of the end credits.

Narrative films are called "hermetic" if their story is not accessible upon first viewing. In this sense *Mosaik im Vertrauen* is indeed a hermetic

film, and the above rough reconstruction of its story is intended to serve as a kind of navigational aid. But the most exciting aspect of the film lies in the way Kubelka tells his small drama of poverty, wealth and unrequited love – the *construction* of this mosaic that was so fundamentally other to the familiar movie fare of the early 1950s. How can this "otherness" be described?

I would like to distinguish the following aspects of the film: a) the temporal structure, b) the character of the story, c) the narrative strategies, d) the sound, e) the tendency toward abstraction.

a) Temporal structure

A chronologically linear sequence of events is dispelled at the very outset of *Mosaik im Vertrauen*. The foreshadowing and later repetition of individual plot motifs does not compare to flashbacks in dramatic feature films in which such images are almost always legitimated as the memories of a character. The method of *Mosaik* can best be compared to musical techniques of announcing or repeating compositional themes. If on initial viewing the impression arises of an unsolved jigsaw puzzle, disordered pieces lying all over the place, the placement of each element has actually been precisely determined and melds into an overall structure. At the expense of a story with a linear narrative, this method of montage stresses the meaning of the overall construction, a meaning that



does not in effect disappear seamlessly and without a clue behind the story. There is a story, but one has to work at it, by thinking through the relationship of the individual part to the whole. What we see here is an elementary anticipation of Kubelka's first metrical film, *Adebar* (1957). But more on that, later.

b) The character of the story

The film is extremely anti-psychological. All the actors appear as toy figures.⁷ Within this free space won at the expense of psychology, the film points to itself and its own formal construction. (It is reported of the Austrian emigrant Josef von Sternberg that he deliberately searched for "dumb" plots that, as he put it, would not distract too much from the abstract play of light and shadow.) Herewith a direction is taken in Peter Kubelka's filmography that will be perfected in 1958 with *Schwechater*: Form and its beauty triumph over subject.

c) The strategies of storytelling

The most conspicuous is the tendency toward condensation of the narrative through the use of metaphor and metonymy. To cite an example, Leo is solely characterized by the use of such devices: the "powerful" tie, the cigar and his impressive footwear; and the transistor radio connotes the cliché of the male as master of technology. Putnik and his ornament present the antipode: a captured butterfly, poorly scribbled on the wall of a boxcar. Then again the boxcar and train condense the entire hobo motif (except that neither Putnik nor his train ever make any headway).

Metaphors and metonymies can be accounted for in every feature film. Their unique application in *Mosaik im Vertrauen* derives from their tendency to assume the primary narrative voice of the story. This correlates to language usage in poetry: Poetry also neglects rules of grammar and conventional syntax, instead concentrating on the basic element of linguistic expression – the individual word – and inventing its own, new rules for the combination of words. "The poetic (...) is characterized by

a multifaceted weaving of relationships of equivalence (repetitions, parallelisms, etc.) between the elements of syntagmas [i.e., single words], lending it a quality of density that incidentally is also responsible for its ambiguity."⁸ This description reads like an abbreviated characterization of *Mosaik im Vertrauen*. Here, too, metaphors and metonymies, displacement and condensation, suppress a "realistic" narrative style and unfold a filmically poetic discourse.

d) Sound

The composition of the soundtrack also contributes to this condensation of narrative form. Like Kubelka's later films, *Mosaik* already demonstrates the possibilities of sound not merely synchronized to image as "supporting material." The dialogue is reduced to a few sentences that sketchily condense essentials for understanding the story. "Not one word too many!" seems to be the *modus operandi*. On the whole, *Mosaik* unfolds an aural landscape that is never subservient to representational realism, but rather exists as an equal partner to the image in the construction of meaning.

e) The tendency toward abstraction

"Abstraction" here refers to that which foregrounds form at the expense of content. Figurative representation rests on a network of codes and expectations linked to them as developed by a culture. Whether something is accepted as a realistic reproduction depends on how many of these expectations are met. These codes not only include codes associated with the image itself, but also encompass codes beyond the image, such as narrative codes, which in turn are recognized and understood as filmically narrative through filmic codes. There are few established narrative codes to which *Mosaik* still adheres. The narrative strategies of condensation and displacement conveyed by the use of metaphor and metonymy additionally host a seed of abstraction since they only function if understood as "devices" that include double meanings: The image they employ (whether linguistic or visual) points beyond itself

⁷ A fast-motion sequence of energetic arms playing a relished game of table soccer is shown twice – maybe a metaphor for the director and his cameraman manipulating the figures of the story.

⁸ Gabriele Jutz, "Eine Poetik der Zeit. Kurt Kren und der strukturelle Film," in *Ex Underground. Kurt Kren, seine Filme*, ed. Hans Scheugl (Vienna: PVS Verleger, 1996), p. 106.

to a deeper meaning. One has to abstract from the content of the image's surface to penetrate its intended meaning.

In summary: *Mosaik im Vertrauen* is composed in a way that emphasizes the importance of its basic parts, the individual shots. The method of their combination does not obey any standardized, conventional pattern, but instead follows its own rules as conceived by the artist, referring reflexively to the construction of the film as a whole. It seemingly aspires to redefine the relationship of its component parts to the whole. The leitmotif: condensation. To put it in a nutshell, *Mosaik im Vertrauen* leads us directly to the portal of *Adebar*, the first, as Kubelka calls it, "metric" film, and the first truly structural film.

With *Adebar*, Kubelka remains faithful to the theme of his debut film – the encounter of the sexes and their parting: "The need to touch one another and the difficulties of this. There is this one silhouette where the couple stands motionless, the man above, and with him the head and shoulders of the woman, very simple, and then comes this dance movement, the woman glides out of the picture and the man remains standing alone, that is the end phase. This is a completely clear theme that has to do with life."⁹

At the same time, Kubelka now presses on to what he calls the "essence of film." Behind this ontological formulation lies Kubelka's basic hypothesis: Over the course of its history, mankind developed various languages in order to communicate (including spoken language as merely one of many). Naturally art also communicates, namely in the most various media. Every artistic medium has its *own language* with an *irreducible* core: this core is something *solely* featured by this language. And this core *cannot be translated into any other language*.

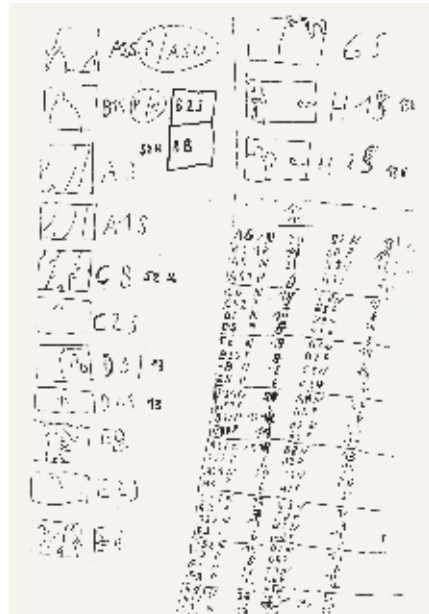
With *Adebar*, Kubelka wants to reveal the core of film, in other words, the characteristics fundamentally and *solely* specific to film, and therefore *not translatable* into other languages.

How is *Adebar* structured?

Eight different shots serve as the basic material of *Adebar*. These show silhouettes of people dancing. The sound derives from a 26-frame phrase of pygmy music that is continually repeated as a loop and also provides the basis for the length of each shot: The duration of a shot either totals 26 frames, or is halved to 13 frames or doubled to 52. All eight shots are utilized both in positive and negative. Six of these shots show movement. Of the seventh shot only the first and last frame exists;¹⁰ the eighth shot displays only a single freeze frame. Kubelka additionally fabricated freeze frames from the first frames of two shots depicting motion, as well as from the very last frames of five of the moving shots. These additional freeze frames also have lengths of 13, 26 and 52 frames.

Adebar consists of 16 sequences; each sequence is composed of four different shots.

¹⁰ Because of the similarity of these two frames it is clear they originate from one continuous shot.



Peter Kubelka
Adebar sketch

⁹ Peter Kubelka, "Interview III: Prosa und Poesie," in Jutz and Tscherkassky, p. 70.

The Structure of *Adebar*

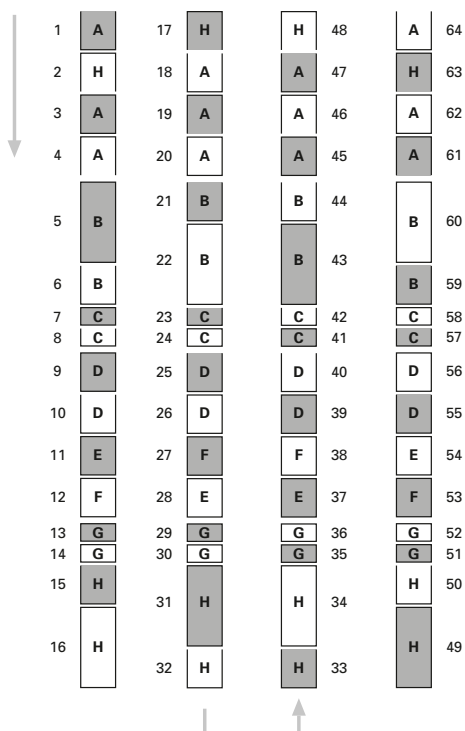
Legend



- A** Shot of dancers in motion
A Freeze frame from the first frame of a shot
A Freeze frame from the last frame of a shot

Description of shot content

A Legs of dancers **B, D** and **E** Medium shot of dancers shot from slightly low angle **C** Close shot of young woman dancing to rock and roll and turns under her own arm **F** (Freeze frame) Two dancers in close proximity on the right, shot from waist up (barely recognizable) **G** (Freeze frame) On the left two dancers, on the right an arm reaching into the image **H** A dancing couple shot from the waist up; in the end the woman dances to the left and out of the picture



The length of each sequence always amounts to a total of 104 frames. To be precise, the combination of 26/26/26/26 frames appears eight times, and the combinations 52/26/13/13, 13/13/26/52, 26/52/13/13 and 13/13/52/26 are each seen twice. As easily calculated, the film has a length of 16 x 104 frames, equaling 1,664 frames in total. This equals a running time of 69.3 seconds. The succession of the 16 sequences is based on their inner structure – i.e., the length of individual shots, positive or negative and image content – and corresponds to the musical composition forms of theme, retrograde, inversion and retrograde inversion.

The second eight sequences mirror the first eight sequences. The axis of this mirroring runs through the exact middle of the film, between the eighth and ninth sequence: Here the film turns in on itself, or, to put it more precisely, the structure of the film turns back on itself, unfolding in mirror image back to the beginning. Thus the first shot of the ninth sequence repeats the last shot of the eighth sequence, and the last shot of the entire film repeats the very first. Shot duration, image content and form (that is, moving or still) are each faithfully mirrored; only positive becomes negative and negative becomes positive.

Without more closely considering the complex architecture of the film,¹¹ I will proceed with a discussion of *Adebar* in terms of a) film as organization of time, b) film as movement and stasis, and c) film as sculpted light.

a) Film as organization of time

In the history of narrative film the content of a shot normally determines its duration (you see a talking head, and when it is done speaking: cut!). *Adebar* became the first film in history based purely on a mathematically rhythmic montage strategy from beginning to end: As in the case of a musical

11 For a precise analysis of Kubelka's metrical films see Stefano Masi, "Peter Kubelka, scultore del tempo" [Italian], in *B&N. Rivista del Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*, 1/1984, Rome, pp. 27–80; French version: "Peter Kubelka, sculpteur du temps," in *Peter Kubelka*, ed. Christian Lebrat (Paris: Paris Expérimental Editions, 1990), pp. 97–155; German version, translated and revised in Jutz and Tscherkassky, pp. 73–122. The latter also contains an analysis by Dominique Noguez, "Der Welt-Mensch" [German], pp. 129–149.



Peter Kubelka
Adebar
1957

composition, a precise and predetermined rhythm provides the basis for the temporal progression and unfolding of the *entire* work. The possibility of employing a temporally rhythmicalized editing strategy, a “metricalization” of montage, as the basis for the construction of an entire film was unknown before *Adebar*. It is a groundbreaking film in terms of its unprecedented artistic reflection upon the intrinsic characteristic of the cinematographic apparatus to divide time with utmost precision.

b) Film as movement and stasis

The base units of this rhythmic metrical structuring are the static individual “photographs” of the filmstrip. In the temporal unfolding of *Adebar*, the (illusion of) movement and its basic unit, the individual static photograph of the film frame – represented as freeze frames – are given equal artistic weight.

c) Film as sculpted light

Kubelka had the shots of the dancers printed on a high contrast film stock so that all details were effaced and only silhouettes remain visible. The proportions of the figures in relation to one another remain the sole trace of a perspectival illusion of space. The film itself is reduced to light and shadow. As mentioned, over the course of the film each shot is seen in both positive and negative form, and, thanks to the mirroring at its central axis, both forms are seen in equal length. This establishes an exact equivalence of light and dark values, not only in terms of total time, but also in terms of space/surface: At the conclusion of the film, every inch of the screen has received the exact same quantity of light and the exact same quantity of darkness. Considered in these terms, *Adebar* in its totality can be imagined as a perfect balance that comes down to one white and one black frame. Once again the tension between motion and stasis becomes discernable, between the space of time and the point in time. With this imagined compression of the inner structure of the film down to the point in time of two individual imaginary frames (black and white), *Adebar*’s structure flares up and vanishes into pure light and darkness (and anticipates *Arnulf Rainer*).

In summary: With *Adebar*, Kubelka first achieved what he had learned in the field of music and what to his mind meets the standard of an autonomous art form. *Adebar* is the first film constituted by a totality resulting from a precisely defined relationship between its component parts in relation to one another and to the whole: The overall construction of *Adebar* is such that each shot and every individual frame correspond and stand in an indissoluble relationship to one another. This overall construction is based on and deduced from fundamental characteristics and specific possibilities unique to the medium of film and the cinematographic apparatus. In other words, the core of the newest language possessed by mankind at the time – namely film – articulated itself in *Adebar*, a core that cannot be translated into any other language already in existence.

One year later, Kubelka demonstrated how this core is *not* generated out of movement as claimed in the platitude “film is movement.” With *Schwechater* (1958) he turned to the questions of a) stasis, b) the equivalence of image and non-image and c) filmic dynamism. Just four shots form the basic material of *Schwechater*. In accordance with the material’s original purpose as an advertisement for a beer of the same name, we see an abstract looking close-up of foaming beer [shot A], a hand in the foreground lifting a glass [B], a group of youthful people at a restaurant table [C], and a couple sitting at a table [D]. These four shots have different lengths. The foaming beer of [A] is a one-minute continuous take, [B] consists of 30 frames, [C] 16 frames, [D] 90 frames. All four shots are used both in negative and positive. Again, high-contrast printing abstracted the images, though not as extremely as *Adebar*.

The entire film displays a continuous shifting between image and non-image: Each image sequence is always followed by the equivalent length of non-images (either black or red film). These sequences have lengths of 1, 2, 4, 8, 16 and 32 frames. This order is precisely maintained throughout the film, alternately increasing and diminishing in length: 1/1/2/2/4/4/8/8/16/16/32/32/16/16/8/8/4/4/2/2/1/1/2/2 and so on, nine times in

total. In fact, *Schwechater* begins and ends with a segment of 16 frames. The total running length of the film consists of 1,440 frames, which equals exactly one minute of projection time (the length of a standard commercial at the time).

Kubelka made as many positive and negative copies of the three short shots [B], [C] and [D], so that each shot totaled the entire running time of the film when strung together. In other words, he had 48 copies printed of the 30-frame long shot [B], ($30 \times 48 = 1,440$); 16 copies of the 90-frame shot [C], ($16 \times 90 = 1,440$); and 90 copies of the 16-frame shot [D], ($90 \times 16 = 1,440$), each printed both as positive and negative. These six one-minute long filmstrips, plus the positive and negative version of the continuous one-minute shot [A], constitute the basis, the bedrock of the film *Schwechater*. Running quasi “underneath” *Schwechater*, the images of six virtual film sequences (plus the positive and negative beer foam from [A]) rise up into the film as if from beneath the surface. A score generated by a highly complex system determines from which of the eight shots the next frame or sequence of frames will be derived: This is then the exact frame that would be found on the filmstrip virtually running in tandem to the film. For instance: If the system of the score determines that frame #31 from the 30-frame long shot [B] is required, then the first frame from shot [B] is used.

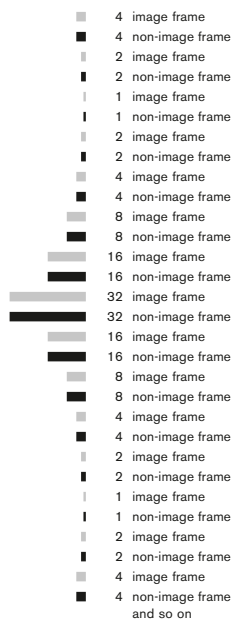
Each sequence of images is a combination of film frames from one or several shots. In fact, the longest, continuous frame sequence derived from one single shot is nine frames long.¹²

Independent of the nine-image sequences continuously expanding and contracting in duration, there are 14 phases with a length of 30 frames tinted red – regardless of whether this red phase coincides with an image segment or a non-image segment. These red phases appear ever more frequently over the course of the film: The first red

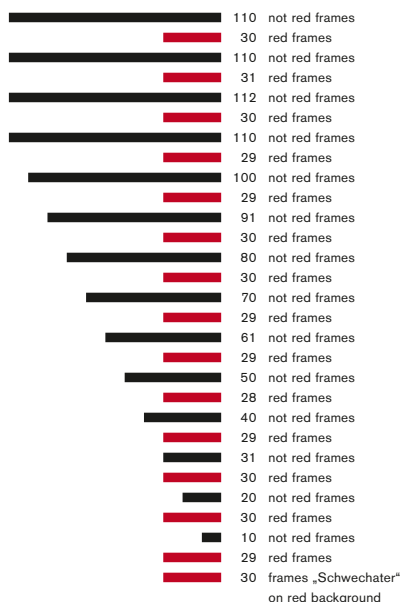


¹² To complicate the matter further, these four threads do not begin at their respective first frames; [B] begins with frame #19. The second image in *Schwechater* is derived from [B] and is accordingly frame #20 from [B], incidentally in positive. See Jutz and Tscherkassky for a precise description and reproduction of the first 216 frames of *Schwechater*, pp. 88–97.

The black wave



The red permeation



phase occurs 110 frames into the film, while between the last and second to last red phase there are only 10 frames that are not tinted red. This means that the film becomes increasingly red. At the end of the film, after the last segment of red frames, there are 30 frames of the Schwechater logo (with red background) to be seen.

Running parallel to every red sequence, a low hum is heard, accompanied by one, two or three high-pitched, signal-like sine tones, or none. A high-pitched sine tone is continuously sustained during the Schwechater logo at the end of the film.

Two waves thus permeate the entire film: a pulsing wave of image/non-image, and an intermittent wave of red that rises up and grows ever more prevalent, acoustically accentuated by the accompaniment of sine waves. The rising crest of this red wave ultimately breaks and flows into the Schwechater logo.

The score that determines which image from which shot is seen, and whether in negative or positive form, adheres to an extremely complex set of rules that, so far, has been examined in literature written about *Schwechater* only in regard to shot [B]. According to this analysis for example, whether a frame from shot [B] is seen in positive or negative follows the rhythmical pattern of a sestina. The sestina is a 12th century Provençal song that adheres to the scheme A-A-B-B-C-D (E-E-F-F-G-H, et cetera).¹³ There are a great number of such rules that determine the appearance of *Schwechater*, though these are subject to a hierarchy. That is, there are stronger rules that overrule weaker ones. Thus within the two waves described, the red-tinted rule is stronger than the “non-image” rule: If the system of the score determines “red,” the “non-image” sequence that would be black changes to red.

Kubelka has often pointed out that he wants to make films that have the power and beauty of natural occurrences. For *Schwechater* he cites the example of the glittering of the sun in a flowing

¹³ Compare also Masi; Kubelka himself destroyed all the notes and scores of his metric films in 1962. Insofar the exact structural plan of *Schwechater* will probably remain unknown. On the poetic form of the sestina see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sestina>.



brook under a canopy of leaves stirred by the wind. The shimmering appearance of this stream is predetermined by a host of overlaid and mutually interpenetrating laws of nature, and it is this mutual interlacing of nature's laws that serves as the model for the appearance of *Schwechater*.¹⁴

Now to the abovementioned central themes:

a) Stasis: "Cinema is not movement. This is the first thing. Cinema is not movement. Cinema is a projection of stills."¹⁵ This aesthetic credo serves as the key to the entire formal construction of *Schwechater*. This film leaves a most profound visual impression of the ephemeral character of the individual frame. The objectively evident passage of time appears to be overruled by the looping repetition of all movements: *Schwechater* visualizes the speeding of time in the instant.

b) Filmic dynamic: Despite this concentration upon the static individual frame, Kubelka helps himself abundantly to the possibilities offered by montage to render filmic dynamism. In addition to the durational contraction and expansion of individual film sequences, it is particularly the mounting crescendo of the red wave, heightened by accompanying signal tones, that builds up suspense over the course of the film, ultimately culminating in the red of the logo as a kind of climax. *Schwechater* can be seen as a continually repeating cross consisting of a diachronic horizontal movement of increasing density permanently intersected by the verticality of instantaneously flashing images.

c) Equivalence of image and "non-image": The capacity of the cinematographic apparatus to photographically record reality in motion and produce the illusion of movement is *one* aspect of its construction. In place of this illusion, *Schwechater* integrates red or black non-image

segments as equivalent to the image. *Schwechater* does not constitute a logical, compositional or aesthetic step between *Adebar* and *Arnulf Rainer* (in terms of aesthetics, the films might rather be viewed as the three points of an equilateral triangle). However, the equivalence of pure light or darkness to image – that is, this aspect of the film to impart equal gravity to the non-image – points directly to Kubelka's next film, *Arnulf Rainer*.

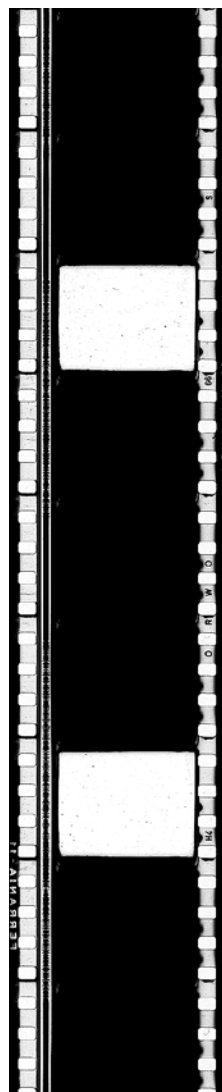
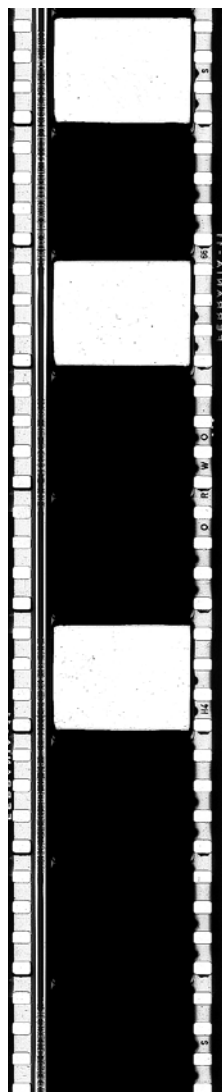
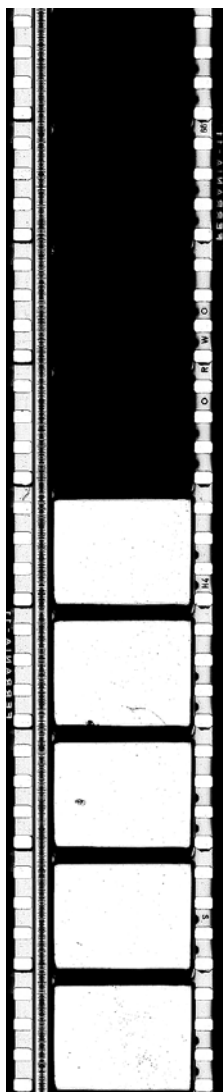
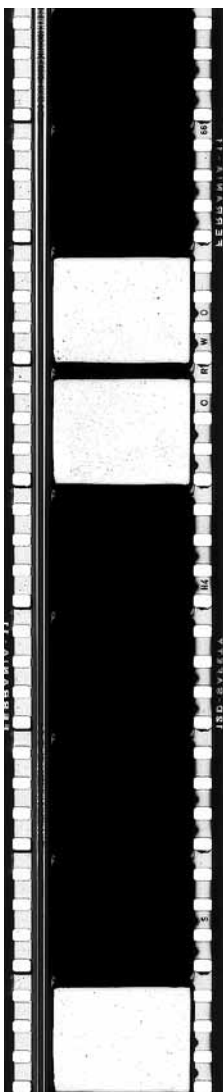
Arnulf Rainer (1960) is the logical result of an aesthetic development based on an increasing disinterest in profilmic reality. This ultimately provoked the relinquishment of the camera in order to reach the purest possible essence of the cinematic apparatus.

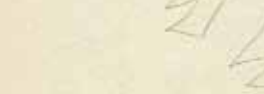
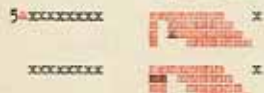
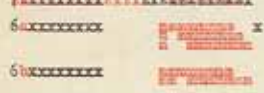
Arnulf Rainer consists of black-and-white film frames, silence and white noise (the entire audible sound spectrum). Kubelka mathematically generated all possible combinations of these elements based on 2, 4, 6, 8 and 12 film frames, as well as several combinations of 24. For example, with two basic image options of either black or white, this comes down to a choice of two-frame sequences consisting of black-black, black-white, white-black, white-white. The same applies to sound options: silent-silent, silent-sound, sound-silent, sound-sound. The shortest possible combination of sound and image consisting of one single frame offers the options white/silent, white/sound, black/silent, black/sound. From the total of possible combinations, Kubelka created a pool of visual and acoustic "themes" based on lengths of 2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 12, 16, 18, 24, 36, 48, 72, 96, 144, 192 and 288 frames. For the shorter frame sequences he used every possible combination. When it came to the longer frame sequences he limited his options (12 frames would have generated 4,096 possible frame combinations, alone resulting in a film 34 minutes in length).

Arnulf Rainer consists of 16 sections, each with a length of 576 frames. This equals the length of a filmic second squared (24 x 24) and constitutes a framing device for the "themes" based on their length: $288 \times 2 = 576$, $192 \times 3 = 576$, $144 \times 4 = 576$, $96 \times 6 = 576$ and so on. Within each individual section Kubelka utilized various themes from his pool of combinations. Within each of the

¹⁴ See Peter Kubelka, "The Theory of Metrical Film," in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1978), p. 154; German version in Jutz and Tscherkassky, pp. 46–67.

¹⁵ In Jonas Mekas, "Interview with Peter Kubelka," in *Film Culture*, no. 44, Spring 1967; reprinted in *Film Culture. An Anthology*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (London: Secker & Warburg, 1971), pp. 285–299; and in *Structural Film Anthology*, ed. Peter Gidal (London: BFI Publishing, 1976), pp. 98–108; quote from p. 103.





$x = 2x$ van 1,2

$x = 4x$ | $= 1-4$

wechsel der Maßstäbe



16 sections, the longest theme is always at the beginning and then steadily proceeds to a shorter theme.

With *Arnulf Rainer*, his third metrical film, Kubelka arrived at the most elemental components of cinematography – namely light, absence of light, sound, silence. These are the four poles from which all of cinema, all of film is suspended. Stretched to their utmost limits, all illusionism is driven out. The last trace of a spatial reproduction is extinguished. And the illusion of movement based on visual similarities of sequential frames (whose minor differences disappear upon projection and thanks to the sluggishness of perception are transformed into an illusion of continuity) is also obliterated. Instead of employing similar frames, this film seeks out the greatest possible *difference*, between silence and blasting sound, white light and pitch darkness. Representation is replaced by presence and absence, by the most sudden change possible between individual instants of the filmstrip, tugged frame by frame through the time machine called the “projector.” Kubelka: “Here in the structure of the film was pictured what I wanted to say, and not in image content.”¹⁶ And: “‘Content’ is not content.”¹⁷ With *Arnulf Rainer*, form and content converged.

During a lecture at New York University in 1974 Kubelka explained, “I wanted to put cinema where it could stand with every musician and every painter. I wanted to be able to count cinema as a

force which could compete with these arts. Also, I wanted to get to the absolute basis of my medium, and to handle it as purely as possible.”¹⁸ Kubelka accomplished exactly this with his metrical films.

All three metric films originated as commissioned work: *Adebar* promised to be a commercial for a dance bar of the same name; *Schwechater* was supposed to advertise a beer; and in the case of *Arnulf Rainer*, a documentation of Rainer’s painting work was requested. The impetus for the next film, *Unsere Afrikareise* (*Our Trip to Africa*, 1966), also resulted from a commission. In 1961, Kubelka accompanied a handful of nouveau riche Austrians on a safari to Sudan. The group wanted documentation of their bloodbath in the bush. Naturally they never suspected they would thereby go down in film history. For the first time in his filmmaking career Kubelka used a portable 16 mm camera, for obvious reasons. He came home from his journey with 1,300 shots and several hours of sound recordings. Considering the energetic force of his metrical films, *Unsere Afrikareise* might appear regressive at first glance, a step backward. But in fact these 12.5 minutes of film have a formal density easily equal to his metric works. *Unsere Afrikareise* is without a doubt one of the most complex and poetically resonant films of sound/image montage in the history of cinema.

The groundwork for *Afrikareise* was prepared over the course of five years (!) dedicated to analyzing and memorizing the source material. In addition to working with rushes, Kubelka glued

¹⁶ Peter Kubelka in his lecture “Filmbau” [Film Construction] at the Audi Max of the Vienna University of Technology, delivered December 5, 2001.

¹⁷ Peter Kubelka in a lecture at Toronto’s Cinematheque, Ontario Canada, March 22, 2002.

¹⁸ Peter Kubelka, “Theory of Metrical Film,” in *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism*, ed. P. Adams Sitney (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 156.



Peter Kubelka
Unsere Afrikareise index card

**Metaphors from
Unsere Afrikareise
elucidated by
Peter Kubelka.**



1 Dancing Arabian woman. Original Arabian music replaced by US American music. When the music reaches a long, sustained leading note, the dancer lays her head back in a gesture of surrender.

2 The ensnared giraffe is **BRUTALLY** yanked to the ground by the hunters. **BRUTALLY** triumphant laughing begins at the same pitch that ends the romantic surrender of the music, synchronously accompanying the falling of the giraffe.

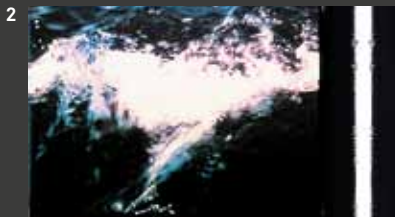
Montage Metaphors:

Image 1 / Sound 1: The American pop song synchronized to the movement of the dancer heightens the **SURRENDER** conveyed by the leaning back of her head.

Image 2 / Sound 2: The giraffe is **YANKED** to the ground, in sync with the cadence of the laughter.

Image 1 / Image 2: The downward flow of movement from above is initiated by the **SLOW LEANING BACK** of the head and continues with the **VIOLENT YANKING TO THE GROUND** of the giraffe.

Sound 1 / Sound 2: The continuous aural event is initiated with the long sustained leading tone of the **MUSIC** that is continued at the same pitch with the **LAUGHTER** of the expedition member.



1 Text (with Arabian accent): "I put it inside." The word "inside" coincides with the appearance of the stretched out body of the silvery fish, risen to the surface of the deep blue ocean.

2 A **GUNSHOT** rings out.

Coinciding with the sounding of the gunshot, the fish is yanked out of the water, generating a white watery **SPRAYING UP** of foam.

3 Flames **BLAZE UP** in the dried out, yellow elephant grass. The bush fire crackles under palm trees.

Montage Metaphors:

The aural event of the "shot" ringing out yanks the fish out of the water and sparks the bush fire.

Image 1 / Image 2: An explosively released image event of upward movement starting from down below begins with the foaming up of the spray and is continued with the flaming up of the fire.

Sound 1 / Sound 2: The silence of the sea turns into the crackling flames of the bush fire. The cool blue of the sea becomes the yellow of the dried grass, white spray turns to burning, fire red.



1 A big moon. Its white landscape is recognizable in the pale blue sky.

Text: "The earth is ter-..."

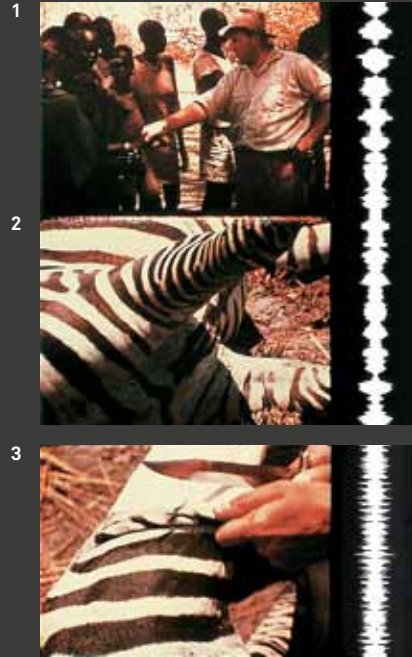
2 Text: "...-ra."

The dying zebra, motionless in the landscape of its striped hide, lies in the burned red dust of the earth.

3 The impact of the gunshot that puts the animal out of misery releases a fountain of dust. At the same time, the exclamation of a female hunter is heard: "Ow!" as triggered by a mosquito bite.

Montage metaphors:

The educated hunters identify the cool, high moon as "terra" (earth). This error yanks our gaze back down to earth with the dying of the zebra. Equally erroneous is the accompaniment of the sounding gunshot, killing the zebra, with an annoyed "Ow." The irreversible tragedy of death is contrasted to this exclamation that applies to the passing of a minor hurt.



1 The white hunter shakes hands with the indigenous people. Thunder sounds in sync with the movement of the hands.

2 In place of the NATIVE'S HAND, the HOOF OF A ZEBRA is shaken. We do not see by whom.

3 A zebra's leg is skinned by white hands using a knife. The shaking movement continues. All shaking gestures continue to be accompanied by the synchronous sound of thunder. The knife's cutting movement release calls of "Hurrah" by the indigenous people.

Montage metaphors:

Image 1 / Sound 1: The exact analogy of the shaking movement and the thunder demonstrates that the shaking of hands causes the thunder sound. The Great Hunter thunders with the "Moors."

Image 1 / Image 2 / Image 3: The handshaking event, consisting of the up and down movement of hands, begins on an upswing with the hunter and the indigenous people and is replaced on the downswing with the zebra leg. In other words, he thunders with man and animal.

[Cut to image 3]: We see the zebra leg at another point, continuing the shaking movement. The cause of the movement is the hand of the hunter with the knife who is skinning the zebra.

the first and last three frames of every single shot – nice and neat – onto index cards: six shots to a card. Each index card related to one of the various themes of the film. This collection of cards constituted his dictionary and became the basis of his filmic vocabulary in abbreviated form. His sound recordings were also protocolled in extensive detail, including the notation of discussions, music and sounds – again providing the basis for memorization. This elaborate process allowed for a comprehensive penetration of the source material and a thorough evaluation of all available content in regard to a number of issues: image content, image composition, color, vectors of movement, atmospheric mood and so on. This in turn enabled a metaphorical weaving of the material, achieving a density that has repeatedly been compared to the writings of James Joyce.

Every aspect of each shot, every snippet of conversation, each fragment of sound, was closely considered in Kubelka's construction of meaning through montage. He employs the idea of "articulation" in considering this kind of montage: "The poet writes a sequence of words: Cow night running rain. As you can see, with each word we add to the series, what we envision changes. Now let us assume that the poet wrote (...): Cow cutlet night. Our imagination is bowled over: There is no longer a cow, all that remains is a little thing, a small piece of meat. The image of the cow has disappeared. How is this possible? (...) It is because the content of the poetic image is determined by articulation: It is not found *in* the words, but rather *between* the words. The words are the same for everybody. But it is our synthesis of the words which makes all the difference in what is said."¹⁹ This statement perfectly elucidates how Kubelka achieves articulation in his films: He connects his images and sounds in unexpected ways, like a poet might construct his sentences – and also images with images, sounds with sounds, through the entire course of the film. He interrupts single shots only to resume them at another point, repeat them and

successively, through articulation, imbues the images with metaphorical meaning.²⁰

Taking all aspects in sum, the 186 shots of *Afrikareise* constitute a lyrical poem about the inhumanity of profoundly arrogant people who, out of the sheer pleasure of slaughter, go marauding through a landscape colonized by them and their kind. It is a film in which colors, forms, movements, gestures and facial expressions coalesce in transformative poetic implications. Even death itself comes to rhyme with tango through Kubelka's deployment of contrapuntal montage: *Unsere Afrikareise* is a singular masterpiece.

In 1967, the year after completing *Afrikareise*, Kubelka began what he calls his "despecialization." We are indebted to this despecialization – after 15 years of unconditional commitment to film – for Peter Kubelka the music maker, cook, assiduous Neolithic artifact collector, teacher and lecturer.²¹ Already in 1958, at Jacques Ledoux's EXPRMNTL festival in Brussels, Kubelka had met his American colleagues Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos and Robert Breer. Five years later, in 1963, he got to know P. Adams Sitney and Jonas Mekas at EXPRMNTL's next edition, which by then had moved on to the resort town of Knokke.

In 1966, shortly before finishing *Unsere Afrika-reise*, Kubelka took a first and fateful visit to America. This trip initiated his lifelong and profound connection to the US. Jonas Mekas had organized a show at the Film-Maker's Cinematheque in New York, which turned out to be a resounding success, attended by the likes of Robert Rauschen-

²⁰ Compare with Dominique Noguez's analysis of shots 56–75, which imply an erotic encounter between a member of the safari group and a local resident (including the realization of the cuckolded partner), in Jutz and Tscherkassky, pp. 141–144. See also Dominique Noguez, *Une renaissance du cinéma. Le cinéma underground américain. Histoire, économie, esthétique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2000).

²¹ Over the years Kubelka has collected thousands of early and late Neolithic tools and idols as well as artifacts from recent, so-called primitive cultures, with which he intends to make the specifically human ways of accessing the world palpable: how the human animal changed the world to prepare it for his own purposes. A tour guided by Kubelka through a selection of his artifacts is a truly revelatory experience. Taking a Neolithic hand axe into one's own hand while he explains its painstaking production thousands of years ago makes the specifically human and wondrous achievement of its invention tangible in the literal sense of the word.

¹⁹ Peter Kubelka in a conversation with Stefano Masi, November 1979, quoted in Jutz and Tscherkassky, p. 111.

berg, Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol. It was at this time that Kubelka made the acquaintance of artist colleagues such as Ken Jacobs, Ernie Gehr, Jack Smith, Harry Smith, Ken Kelman, George Landow and Paul Sharits, some of whom became instant friends, and it was during this stay that he put the finishing touches on *Unsere Afrikareise* as Stan Brakhage's guest in Boulder, Colorado. On October 14, 1966, the film had its world premiere at the Film-Maker's Cinematheque – and met with tremendous success. A few years later, in 1970, he co-founded Anthology Film Archives with Mekas, Sitney, Brakhage and Jerome Hill, and established the first of three "Invisible Cinemas." The United States became a second home to Kubelka, and, as he never tires of pointing out, the country came to his rescue. The possibility of establishing a relatively secure existence as a film artist in Austria seemed hopeless, and after all, by 1966 Kubelka had already fathered five of his six children. It was in the US that he began lecturing on his "non-verbal worldview." To this day, beginning with his first public lecture in 1967 at Harvard University, Kubelka has given lectures at over 50 American universities. In addition, he has appeared at innumerable other venues. Kubelka was the first avant-garde film theoretician ever invited to speak at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, giving a seven-part lecture series in 1977 entitled "The Essence of Cinema." We can only imagine the impact such appearances had then and still have to this day.²² In 1977, Kubelka also premiered *Pause!* at the Museum of Modern Art. Shot on 16 mm color film outdoors with a handheld camera and sync sound, *Pause!* shows Arnulf Rainer in numerous takes, shot from shifting proximities standing in front of old walls, expressively grimacing – worthy of Franz Xaver Messerschmidt²³ – articulating a physical body language that Rainer also used as the basis for his own photographic *Face Farces*. Ultimately

²² The number of lecture invitations has by no means diminished since Kubelka's retirement from teaching; on the contrary, in recent years it has steadily increased.

²³ Franz Xaver Messerschmidt (1736–1783) was a German-Austrian sculptor famous for his "character heads," a collection of busts with extremely contorted facial expressions, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Xaver_Messerschmidt.



Peter Kubelka
Pause!
1977

Rainer found that his photos did not adequately depict his emotional states and therefore painted over them, while with *Pause!*, Kubelka succeeded in rendering an emotional kaleidoscope that is simultaneously disturbing and cathartic.

Kubelka's lectures provided the basis for an intensive concern with the other arts within the context of his "despecialization": "In the wake of demand for lectures in America I started to concern myself with other art forms because I wanted to defend film as an autonomous art and therefore needed the criteria of other arts that are established as autonomous arts. During the course of this activity I became conscious of the tremendous restriction one accepts as a mortal individual being if one lives as a specialist. I believe in the uniqueness of the life of the individual, and value this unique individual life as a tremendous treasure – and only a fragment of it is used if one lives as a specialist."²⁴ So Kubelka began anew to make music (leading to the founding of his own ensemble, *Spatium Musicum*, in 1980), concerned himself

²⁴ Peter Kubelka in a conversation with the author, April 2004.



Peter Kubelka
Dichtung und Wahrheit
1996/2003



intensively with art history, literature and with – cooking. Kubelka had been interested in the preparation of food and its consumption since his childhood. Now he began to interpret the meaning of how foods are prepared and consumed as a fundamental expression of mankind's relationship to the world and reality in his lectures. This led to unadulterated food lectures, attaining an early highpoint in 1972 with a 90-minute live broadcast on public television in New York entitled “Eating the Universe.” And finally, it resulted in the renaming of his master class at Frankfurt's art academy Städelschule, where Kubelka had been appointed professor in 1978, to “Class for Film and Cooking as Artform.” To this day Kubelka is proud that cooking was thereby acknowledged to be an equally valid artform by an art academy.

Kubelka's later film work, the aforementioned *Pause!* (1977) and *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (Poetry

and Truth, 1996/2003), does not exhibit the formal density of his early films. In the case of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, Kubelka himself said that it required courage to release this found footage film (he himself says it is “not found, but gathered film”²⁵). *Dichtung und Wahrheit* is based on rushes from a total of three different advertisements that Kubelka presents largely unaltered, albeit meticulously assembled, as a film without sound. The title refers to the difference in facial expression and gesture of the actors before and during the shooting of the performance, those seconds during which the camera is already rolling but the actors are not yet behaving “as if,” and those seconds when they start poeticizing (“dichten”), after the director calls “Action!” and they slip into their roles. Kubelka is

²⁵ Peter Kubelka in a conversation with the author, September 2003.

hereby not interested in a cheap critique of the aesthetic of advertisements. He instead assumes the distanced position of an archeologist, knowing how to pursue the specific capabilities of film. In the continual repetition of the passage from truth to poetry, Kubelka recognizes that everything in life arises from repetitive patterns that are compressed into rhythms, cycles and myths. These “building blocks of paradise” as Kubelka calls them, tell of the shining hero who checks his outward appearance before freeing the damsel; of motherhood and of the child who is already practicing the role of mother; of the immaculate conception as a motif of numerous mythologies of mankind, in the form of an unconditional giving of the mouth of the woman, in which a chocolate is placed. At the origin of all art stands the ready-made, says Kubelka. As an example he cites the typical Inuit sculptor. On finding an interestingly shaped stone, he carries it with him until he discovers a form in it and through a few spare interventions makes this form visible for others. Kubelka wanted to shape a ready-made in this manner with *Dichtung and Wahrheit* – and at the same time leave enough room for future archaeological and anthropological questions that we cannot yet formulate.

Whether we will have questions in the future regarding his unfinished film, *Denkmal für die Alte Welt* [Memorial for the Old World], remains to be seen. In the early 1970s, Kubelka had started working on this 16 mm film, and its premiere had been announced for January 30, 1977, at MoMA. Yet his “standards were not satisfied by the form it was in,”²⁶ and so Kubelka withdrew the film on short notice, premiering *Pause!* instead. *Denkmal für die Alte Welt* has been repeatedly revised since its cancelled premiere. Whether it will ever find a form that meets with Kubelka’s artistic demands can only be hoped.

In 2012 Kubelka completed a new film, as what he calls a “counterpart” to *Arnulf Rainer*. *Antiphon* is an inversion of his third metrical film, both on a visual as well as an auditory level:

Light becomes darkness, darkness becomes light, sound becomes silence and silence becomes sound. But according to Kubelka, *Antiphon* is intended to come across even more aggressively than *Arnulf Rainer*. It is to be presented as part of a work entitled *Monument Film*, which will encompass a multiple projection experience consisting of both films. Initially, they will be projected individually – *Arnulf Rainer* to be followed by *Antiphon*. They will then be projected side by side, their individual soundtracks alternating between two separate speakers. Finally, both films will be projected at once, so as to entirely overlap, using only one speaker. Theoretically the resulting effect will be a continuous projection of white light and continuous sound. But there will be a slight time delay between the two projections due to the idiosyncratic nature of analog technology, and this will further enable a heightened physical experience of the medium. With this work, Kubelka intends to enable an experience of the essence of film, thus ensuring its survival: Film as *film* and not involving the doomed attempt to convert film to any other motion-picture medium – whether digital or whatever else might arise. These fleeting media are solely the interim result of an economic war, not waged in search of the best technological solution, but purely out of financial interest. In August 2011, Kubelka vehemently expressed to me that he does not want to throw his work into this maelstrom: “None of my films can be transferred to another medium because none of them would make any sense. No other media can convey the message of the works and the thoughts that they trigger. It has to be film or not at all. This is why I will not permit my films to be transferred to video or digital media. If film goes under, then I want to go under with my work, too.” Concluding words, indeed.

Translated by Eve Heller

²⁶ Peter Kubelka, “Interview IV: Die Räume der Musik,” in Jutz and Tscherkassky, p. 161.