

A rich, unpredictable look at European avant-garde filmmaking

And a drama that uses flashback to deal with an overwhelming topic

By David Sterritt

Most movies lean on standard stories and familiar formulas. An '80s hit like "Staying Alive" has roots in a '30s hit like "42nd Street." X-ray a "Star Wars" epic and you find it's simply an updated western. Even new trends from abroad often owe debts to crowd-pleasing American thrillers and melodramas.

And most of us moviegoers don't mind this a bit. In fact, we like the old conventions. Timeworn they may be, but their very predictability can be comfortable and reassuring.

Are they enough, though? With our steady diet of the tried and true, do we deprive ourselves of a key aesthetic pleasure? Do we miss the sense of adventure, exploration, and challenge that comes when we move beyond accustomed patterns and everyday experiences?

Enter the American Federation of Arts to the rescue. Since 1909 it has been working "to broaden the knowledge and appreciation of the arts," largely by organizing art and film exhibitions that travel to museums, universities, libraries, and other cultural centers in the United States and elsewhere.

Anyone looking for an adventure in moviegoing could find no better launching pad than the latest AFA show, **The Other Side: European Avant-Garde Cinema 1960-1980**. With a menu of 49 films from 10 countries, gathered in a cinematic scavenger hunt across many lands, it's a potpourri of styles, ideas, and perspectives. The only constant is a determination to blaze new paths of perception, finding fresh ways to encounter the landscapes — physical and mental — of our lives.

In keeping with the unpredictability of the program, the films vary in quality as well as approach. Sampling several hours worth last week, I found entries that bored me, fell short of their own goals, or headed in directions as trite and trivial as Hollywood's worst. The AFA also warns that cer-

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tain selections contain nudity or other material that may shock or offend some spectators.

Generally, though, I found it a strong and stimulating batch of movies, with many fresh ideas and engaging images. It's a rare opportunity to review and assess trends in noncommercial European cinema during a period of great ferment and activity.

Regina Cornwell, who curated the show, calls the time from 1960 through 1979 "Europe's longest period of sustained avant-garde filmmaking." Developments included a radical new slant on storytelling forms, a strong interest in social and political action, and a fierce independence from movements in other arts.

All these traits contrasted with American tendencies during the same years, giving Europe a filmmaking flavor all its own. Yet they were not recipes for continued vigor. Like other observers, Dr. Cornwell feels noncommercial European film has failed to sustain itself into the '80s. Instead it has lapsed into an exhausted and marginal condition that continues today.

Thus the "Other Side" show not only celebrates two decades of film activity. It also focuses attention on concerns, attitudes, and approaches that have been lost or overlooked, and could prove valuable again if freshly and energetically reexamined.

What are the movies actually like? I'll hazard a few broad statements, though exceptions are the rule in this kaleidoscopic show. Most are shorter than regular "feature"

length. While some tell stories, many have no narrative at all, dealing directly with properties of light, space, movement, and sound.

And a number of works, from a number of countries, rely on artful repetition — presenting images or scenes more than once, often with small but telling variations. This technique stresses the elements of time and rhythm, and gives the action a choreographic feeling. It also ties in with current music and dance trends that value decorative, "primitive" qualities over dramatic, "romantic" ones.

Getting down to cases, here are some of my favorites, and reasons why I admire them.

"Dallas Texas — After the Goldrush," by Klaus Wyborny (West Germany, 1970-71). Have you ever wanted to reach into a movie and linger with some exquisite image, instead of rushing on with the story? That's what happens here. The plot is vague, as if most of the footage



were lost or thrown away. What's left is a string of quiet shots (a valley, a cabin, a deserted car) like fragments from a half-forgotten dream. Seen several times, on different types of film, the movie becomes a memory-dance: gentle, deeply felt, perhaps nostalgic, but never sentimental.

"Stream Line," by Chris Welsby (Great Britain, 1976). The camera travels over a mountain brook, reveling in the patterns of rushing currents and water-swept rocks. To make this elegant film, the director suspended his camera in a motorized carriage running on steel cables: high technology at the service of gloriously "natural" art.

"Same Player Shoots Again," by Wim Wenders (West Germany, 1968). Nearly all we see is a gunman half-running, half-staggering down an empty street. Where is he going? Maybe running away from some Hollywood melodrama, toward the radically new treatment of high emotion found in this boldly minimal film.

"Behind Your Walls," by Frans Zwartjes (The Netherlands, 1971). A woman waits for something. The camera wanders through her room, dwelling on odd shapes and textures. The images are dense and claustrophobic, evoking some strange emotional state neither we nor the movie can quite pin down. Unsettling, ungraspable, unique.

"TV," by Kurt Kren (Austria, 1967). In the background, youngsters seen through a window. Closer to us, a man's profile. Just a few shots, shown over and over until they assume a lulling rhythm. Small, simple, and ingratiating.

"La Petite Fille," by Pascal Auger (France, 1980). As a little girl plays on a beach, her movements are repeated in forward and reverse shots, turning them into a kind of sandy tango. The extreme condensation of repeated actions has an energizing effect, and sure enough, the filmmaker asks that rock music accompany this otherwise silent picture.

"Tosca," by Dominique Noguez (France, 1978). It's the big scene where Tosca kills Scarpia, but all we see is the dinner table, with occasional glimpses of a hand or torso passing nearby. It's a new perspective on Puccini and a witty statement on how movies manipulate our responses by what they choose to show or hide.

"Self Shooting," by Lutz Mommartz (West Germany, 1967). The filmmaker films himself running, jumping, cavorting, and tossing his camera into the air. An exuberant parody; narcissism will never be the same.

"Straight Line/Stevens-Duke," by Tomislav Gotovac (Yugoslavia, 1964). The camera sits in a streetcar, and we travel down the streets of Belgrade while Duke Ellington's music croons on the soundtrack. A lulling and lilting movie, with a soaring spirit that carries it light years beyond its seemingly meager subject matter.

I offer these descriptions and evaluations as a brief guide for viewers who may wonder what to look for, or how to respond, when faced with such unconventional fare. Films like this are to Hollywood what poems are to best-selling novels. They rarely bother with the usual stories, characters, and dialogues. Viewed on their own terms, however, they offer moods, images, patterns, and especially ideas that are too rarely found — at least in such concentrated form — on the standard movie scene.

"The Other Side" will have its premiere next month at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas. It will also begin engagements this fall at the Laguna Gloria Art Museum in Austin, Texas, and the University of Hartford in Connecticut. The itinerary continues early next year at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; the cinema of Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y.; and the University of California at Los Angeles. The show will then continue touring for at least three years, with Honolulu and Seattle among the cities where it will appear.

Flashback film on Naziism

In her new book "Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust," critic Annette Insdorf notes that a "cinema of flashbacks" has proved to be one of the most effective approaches

to such overwhelming subjects as Nazi brutality and the Jewish suffering it caused.

This technique works because a film that switches between the present and the past can use editing rhythms and juxtapositions to create varied emotional effects. And "memory scenes," with their open subjectivity, can be an honest and consistent means of portraying events so devastating they defy "realistic" reconstruction.

La Passante, a new drama from France, argues well for this method. It dwells equally in the present and past tenses, cutting between them to illustrate not only events of the Holocaust itself, but their influence on a character's life decades later.

Unfortunately, the movie's impact is lessened by melodramatic and even sentimental overtones and a reliance on familiar romantic formulas. Still, it contains strong scenes and useful insights and cogently expresses — to borrow a phrase from Dr. Insdorf — "the degree to which the relatively calm present is informed by the turbulent Holocaust."

The main character is a wealthy Jew who runs an organization devoted to fighting oppression and helping political prisoners. Paying a professional call on a South American



Romy Schneider

'Passante' dwells equally in present and past tenses

diplomat, the hero recognizes him as a former Nazi who exploited and ultimately destroyed his foster parents years before. Despite his hatred of political violence, he kills this rediscovered enemy. There follows a string of courtroom scenes and flashbacks that reveal his childhood and the Nazi-bred horrors that shaped it.

As directed by Jacques Rouffio, the film is restrained in its treatment of Nazi terrorism. There is more emotional than physical violence, and even when some mayhem is actually shown, it looks faked — a flaw in the movie, but ironically one that contributes to its understated tone. The scenes of love and affection are pitched at a relatively higher key, preparing us for the climax, when jealousy and sexual tensions join fascist thuggery to culminate the plot.

The overall effect is both reasoned and romantic, determined to avoid exploitation, yet hoping to win our hearts as well as our minds on behalf of the characters.

It's a good balance to aim for, and if Rouffio doesn't quite achieve it, the reasons lie partly in his very eagerness to please: "Le Passante" might have worked better if it were less smooth and soft-spoken, more gritty and intense in both ideas and technique. Like a minor character in the film, who's suspicious of the hero because of his wealth and high position, one gets a bit suspicious of the movie because of its easy images and polished performers. We know it's sincere, but we may wonder how profound its passions are.

"La Passante" (that means "the wayfarer") is the 60th — and last — film of the late Romy Schneider, who sparked the entire project and gives versatile, strongly felt performances in two parts, as the hero's present-day lover and long-ago guardian. Michel Piccoli matches her warmth and energy in the other leading role. "La Passante du Sans Souci" is the full French title of the picture.

A Thursday column