

NO PLACE IS HOME

SYLVIA SCHEDELBAUER'S CINEMA OF UNEASE

by Thomas Logoreci

“Even that lemon is a cultural misunderstanding,” states experimental filmmaker Sylvia Schedelbauer as I bring over a Hefeweizen at a 16th Street bar where she has agreed to meet for an interview. It’s the kind of observation one doesn’t often hear about a section of sliced fruit, so naturally my curiosity is piqued.

Schedelbauer explains that in Germany a wheat beer is seldom taken with citrus. It weakens the taste and its addition is something only found in America: thus the lemon as cultural misunderstanding.

With three shorts whose recurring themes center on identity, subjectivity, and geographic disconnection, Schedelbauer peppers her conversation with words and phrases that seem to come from the pages of a thesis paper. The filmmaker describes the glut of available digital equipment for emerging artists as, “...the anarchy of media production” that has come “after an implosion of experimental film marginalization.” She says all this in a casual, even tone that takes the listener (or interviewer) by surprise.

Yet the difference between a grad student angling for a grant and Schedelbauer is that the narrative of her life seems to be the very definition of cultural misunderstanding.

ALTERNATE VERSIONS

The 30-something Schedelbauer was born of a German businessman father and a Japanese mother who, at 17, possibly escaped from an arranged marriage and moved to Tokyo. “Possibly” being the operative word, since her parents have told her several variations of their own personal history. “They tell me a different story every time,” Schedelbauer says. She is not entirely sure if her parents’ working-class roots are at the heart of this, but she still has little idea of how her mother and father even met in the first place. “They really won’t talk about any details of the past.”

Shuttled between Germany and Japan, the young Schedelbauer experienced an intense sense of rejection and alienation from both cultures. Her unease was such that when she entered the Tokyo German school she attended for most of her young life, she did not speak at all for the first two years. “I was really fucked up,” is how Schedelbauer characterizes her early years. “When I talk about identity, I often just say that my father is Ger-

man, my mother is Japanese, so that makes me half-German, half-Japanese, just to simplify things. But of course, nothing is simple, not for me at least.”

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

After returning to Germany as an adult, Schedelbauer pursued a fine art degree at the University of Arts, Berlin. Studying with abstract photographer Katharina Sieverding, Schedelbauer developed an interest in cinema as a means to express the circumstances of her life.

The starting point for this journey was a hidden collection of photos discovered in the closet of her parents’ home. The resulting 19-minute essay, *Memories* (2004), is a linear assemblage of these pictures underlined by the filmmaker’s voice as she carefully questions the images and their meaning. Beginning with black and white shots of her grandfather in the German army in Russia during World War II and extending to Polaroids of Schedelbauer as a child in Japan, *Memories* is both a chronicle of the 20th-century and a singularly

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personal vision.

After *Memories* had been exhibited at the Oberhausen shorts fest, Schedelbauer arranged a private screening for her parents. Though nervous, she was not too surprised that watching their lives unfold before them failed to elicit any revelations about the past. While her father rattled on about names and dates, her mother only said, “It was hard, wasn’t it?” Whether she was referring to her life or the film, Schedelbauer isn’t sure.

While studying in Berlin, she caught a screening of San Francisco experimental filmmaker Craig Baldwin’s influential cut-and-paste *Tribulation 99* (1992). A short time later, Schedelbauer met Baldwin at a workshop he taught in Germany. For several years he had been laboring to complete his epic assemblage *Mock Up on Mu*. Schedelbauer offered to come out to the Bay Area to help him and his long-time editing collaborator, Bill Daniel, finish a cut of the picture, and intern at the Mission Street digs of ATA (Artists’ Television Access).



Sylvia Schedelbauer elegantly weaves found footage in her disquieting *False Friends*.



Filmmaker Sylvia Schedelbauer on her way to ATA.

NOTHING IS PERMANENT

Schedelbauer describes *Mock Up on Mu* as “an exaggerated satirical parody of media and genre spy movies.” She adds, “Working with Craig is intense. He knows what he wants but he sometimes takes a lot of detours to get there.” Between post-production duties on Baldwin’s film and several return trips to Germany, she has still managed to complete two more experimental shorts of her own.

Remote Intimacy (2007) sets the artist’s unique perspective on cultural identity against a poetic collage of archival materi-

al, much of it culled from the trove of found footage in ATA’s basement. Her more recent *False Friends* (2007) shifts between several elements—an educational film about prisons and a black and white Swedish fiction feature—to create a shuddering, cumulative sense of dread.

Close friend, filmmaker, and collaborator James T. Hong says, “I think her work, in a very personal way, deals with the vulnerability of memory, the fragility of dreams, and the longing for a proper place and a proper past in between contesting ideologies, worlds, and nations.”

Baldwin and Schedelbauer hope to complete post-production work on *Mock Up on Mu* by mid-year. In the meantime, Schedelbauer is collaborating on a short reimagining of Helke Sander’s 1977 feminist classic *Redupers—The All-Round Reduced Personality* with Maya Schweizer and Christine Woditschka. And still another film, a possible closure of the triptych begun by *Memories* and *Remote Intimacy*, is in the planning stages.

Wrapping our conversation, I walk back with Schedelbauer toward ATA’s Mission Street location, a neighborhood of book-

stores and coffee houses she rarely leaves. “I traveled excessively when I was a child. My dad used to take us on all his business trips. I think my quest is not to see new places, new cities because I’m so uprooted anyway.” Without roots, really? “Yeah, I’m just uprooted. I feel free floating.” Even in San Francisco? “I am starting to feel a little like it’s home though nothing’s permanent. I used to feel I was at a disadvantage. Now I see it as more of a chance.”

Schedelbauer’s *Remote Intimacy* will screen as part of San Francisco Cinematheque’s program *The Dream Reveals the Waking Day* (Sunday, April 6; sfcinematheque.org). Schedelbauer is also curating ATA’s upcoming Other Cinema season on China featuring James T. Hong and Yin-Ju Chen, as well as a series on German/French makers including Clemens von Wedemeyer, Maya Schweizer, and others (Saturday, April 12; othercinema.com). ■ The short *A Day’s Work*, written by and starring **Thomas Logoreci**, will screen this March at South by Southwest in Austin, Texas. A recent collaboration with Jay Rosenblatt, *Beginning Filmmaking*, will show at Hot Docs in Toronto, Canada, this April.

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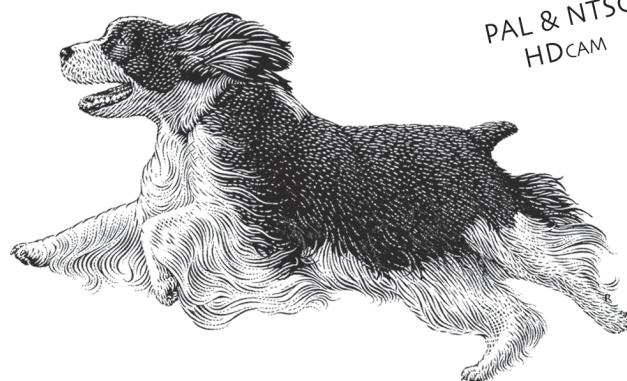
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