

Coming Attractions

# STRIP TEASE

Peter Tscherkassky and The Exquisite Corpus

BY DANIEL KASMAN

Sex seems the inevitable returning controversy *du jour* at the Festival de Cannes, every couple years another auteur revealing some supposedly new transgression set to scandalize an international press corps wholly ignorant that, outside their bubble, there exists a body of truly vulgar and pornographic work and surrounding discourse that reveal such audacities as *The Brown Bunny* (2003) or *La vie d'Adèle* (2013) and their incensed critics as positively genteel. If you follow the main word of mouth out of Cannes this year, you would be forgiven for thinking that Gaspar Noé's *Love*, a 3D relationship drama structured around un-simulated sex scenes between his actors, was the sex film of the festival. But you'd be wrong. Away from the red carpet, over at the Quinzaine, Austrian celluloid mix-master Peter Tscherkassky debuted *The Exquisite Corpus*, a new short film dedicated to the oneiric ecstasies of softcore cinema that put to shame just about every film at the festival with any pretense of the horny or erotic.

For a festival event with an anemic if not allergic attitude towards the kind of cinema colloquially but inaccurately described as "avant-garde" or "experimental"—a cinema, it should be pointed out, that has found welcome and audi-

ence-friendly spaces in such large-scale festivals as Toronto, Berlin, and Rotterdam, as well as such other notable events as the Viennale and the New York Film Festival—to even be able to see a film by Tscherkassky in proximity to Cannes' Official Selection seems a real provocation. (The Quinzaine, as befits its theoretically oppositional stance, has been kind to Tscherkassky over the years, showing his CinemaScope trilogy in 2002 and *Instructions for a Light and Sound Machine* in 2005, though one wonders if it is the cinephilic nature of the director's work that's let him in the back door, so to speak.) If only such a film as *The Exquisite Corpus* had been shown in front of *Love*—or the half-dozen other big names in Cannes centring on the difficulties of human contact, including Todd Haynes' *Carol*, Yorgos Lanthimos' *The Lobster*, Philippe Garrel's *L'ombre des femmes*, and Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Assassin*—for when projected as it was at the end of the festival Tscherkassky's film felt like it got tantalizingly close, close enough to touch, if not to lick, the electric charge of the erotic buried behind all these other films' elegant decorum and dignified restraint.

A dream narrative of a sleeping beauty—a nudist found unconscious on a beach—intertwining different films, different bodies, caresses, screams of shock and cries of ardour, *The Exquisite Corpus* works to collapse the line between the filmed body, Tscherkassky's nudes in search of each other and of satisfaction, and the film body, the celluloid that has captured these bodies, the celluloid Tscherkassky meticulously manipulates in his darkroom. Such darkroom magic teases and exposes the film itself, the edges of the celluloid, frames layered on one another, images masked and unmasked, perforations and flung celluloid strips playing their own game of seduction and consummation somehow at once on top of and within the choice (s)excerpts. The body filmic: an inescapable obsession of the filmmaker most known for *Outer Space*, where the material of the 1981 horror film *The Entity* seems to literally be attacking its heroine. What better subject could he choose then (s) films? This is where Tscherkassky's love for celluloid is wedded to his source films' love for flesh, where the pathways to climax—narrative and sexual—are built from the same component parts of mystery, attraction, rhythm, repetition, variation, new sensations, and ecstasy. Let's just say *The Exquisite Corpus* is a deeply satisfying film, something we all needed after 12 days of tasteful teasing on the Riviera.

**Cinema Scope:** Why did you choose softcore films as a subject?

**Peter Tscherkassky:** It's about showing the body: my approach was to show the naked body of cinema. So it made sense to use films whose main goal was to show the human body. There's a certain progression within the film's chapters: it's always a movement from the depicted images, the originally depicted images of the things that are photographed, towards the body of the film itself. This is in my opinion most evident in the sequence at the end where the little boat is floating towards the island and the filmstrips start tilting across the screen. You can barely see what's going on within these film frames—you can still see it's some-

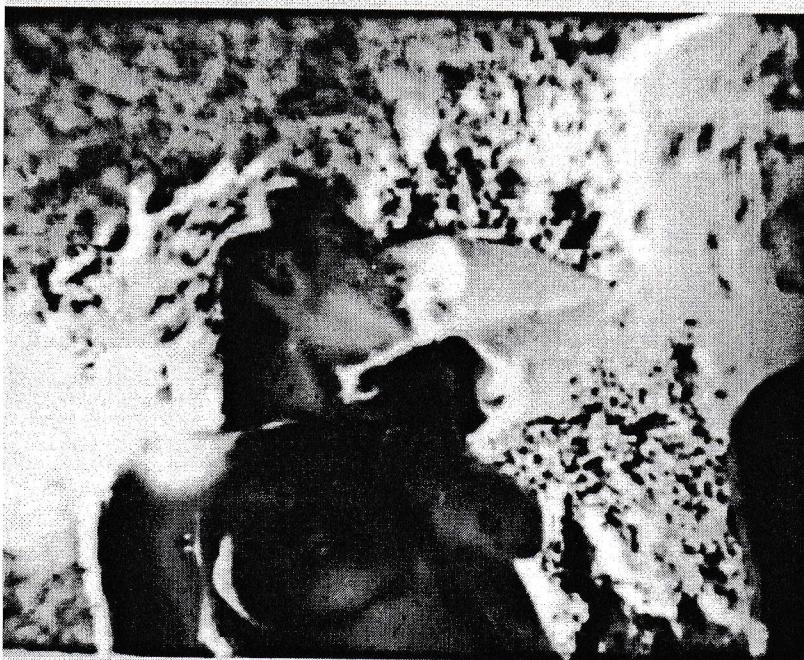
thing that is highly erotic, if not pornographic, but the *main* thing is the filmstrips. You can see how film works, the separation of the individual film frames that you normally do not see. In the cinema we see an illusion of movement, but you do not see the single frame—metaphorically speaking, of course, because we in fact do see it. This a recurring subject and a recurring motif in my darkroom films, to make the individual frame visible.

**Scope:** This connection between the human body, the photographed body, and the material body of celluloid, would you say this is something you've finally been interested in?

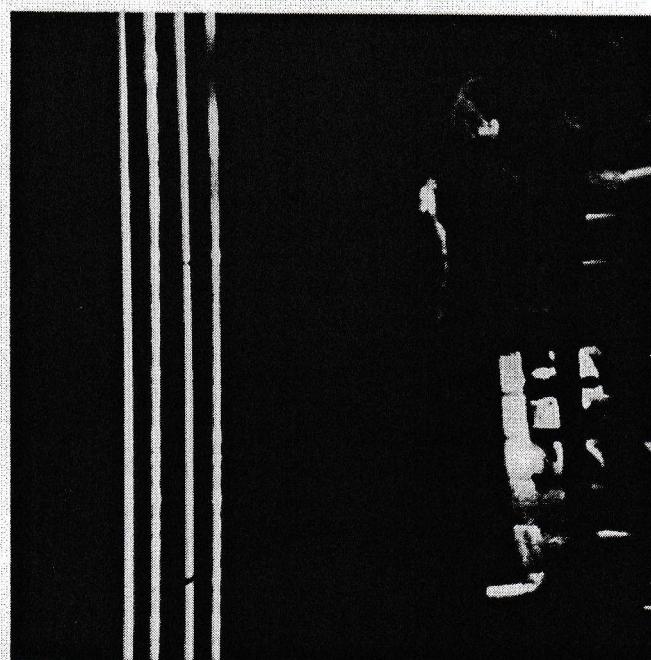
**Tscherkassky:** Yes. My early Super 8 films like *Freeze Frame* (1983) or *Urlaubsfilm* (1983) instantly come to mind when we start talking about the body of the cinema or film as film. *Freeze Frame* is the first film in which I used multiple exposures, by using several projectors projecting at the same time onto a single screen, and re-filming this projection. Gradually it gets to the point where you nearly can't see what's going on at all; it's very hard to decipher. I cut away the perforation holes on the film and as soon as the film inside the projector reached the point where the perforations were missing, the film stopped, and I slowly pulled the film manually through the projector so you could see how the film is constituted by single frames, while you watch them melt. You see the body of the film. What happens if you "freeze" the frame? It's not a matter of gaining control by stopping the film. On the contrary, it melts: you lose control. In the case of *Urlaubsfilm*, which means "holiday film," I took a minute of film from a holiday movie I shot myself with my girlfriend, and I re-filmed it. And I re-filmed what I re-filmed a second time, and a third time—I think up to 20 generations. What happens is the image gets blurry, the red intensifies, and it gets abstract. So there's this movie you see with my beautiful girlfriend—half-naked, by the way, like the naked bodies of *The Exquisite Corpus*—and there's a movement, a continuous movement, towards total abstraction. A throbbing picture that has a life of its own. So these films are from 1983 and what do we have now, 2015? Thirty years, holy shit! So even then I was already deeply concerned with the "body of film."

**Scope:** How did you determine the films to include in *The Exquisite Corpus*? They span from the '60s to the '80s. Did you research the genre?

**Tscherkassky:** They were supplied by friends. One gave me some pornographic material, and from another I got the nudist film that I ended up using for the opening sequence and footage you see throughout the film with the searching for the sleeping girl. And I had a print from Tony Richardson's *Tom Jones* (1963), where the lady is eating the oysters. I never go to archives. Basically, I'm a lazy person. People ask me, "Would you like to have...?" Friends sometimes send me links when an interesting 35mm print shows up on eBay. Prints have gotten quite expensive. It used to be like this when I got *The Entity* for \$50, the transportation from the United States to Austria was more expensive than the print itself. Nowadays, you have to expect to pay something like 200 euros for a single good print. The days when you just bought it because it was so cheap are over. People



*The Exquisite Corpus*



*Dream Work*

send me things from time to time, mainly film prints that are about to be destroyed for whatever reason. Slip it out the back door to Vienna!

The next film I'm going to make is called *Train Again*, which refers to *Tree Again* (1978), by Kurt Kren. His title refers to his own film, *Trees in Autumn* (1960), and mine refers to my film *L'Arrivée* (1997/98). The distance in terms of the years between *L'Arrivée* and *Train Again* is quite similar to the time between *Trees in Autumn* and *Tree Again*. This is just a reference, but I always have references, like Maya Deren in *The Exquisite Corpus*. The film will be based on rushes for a commercial for the Austrian Federal Railways company. You see several panning shots of trains in the distance coming closer, a panning shot follows the approaching train until the train gets very close and very blurry, and then the train leaves the frame. There will also be a fox hunt with horses intermixed. It's going to be an orgy of movement, basically. Let's see what happens. I never really have a fixed image of what the film is going to look like. It's always about *time*. Time to study the footage and then learn it by heart, so it seeps into your memory and there it sits and waits for the ideas to come. The second aspect is the production time itself, when you sit in the darkroom, exposing your individual frames—frame by frame by frame—and that takes a lot of time, time during which the film itself grows. Time to memorize, to remember something completely differently than how you thought about it three years ago. That's the beauty of my way, my style of filmmaking.

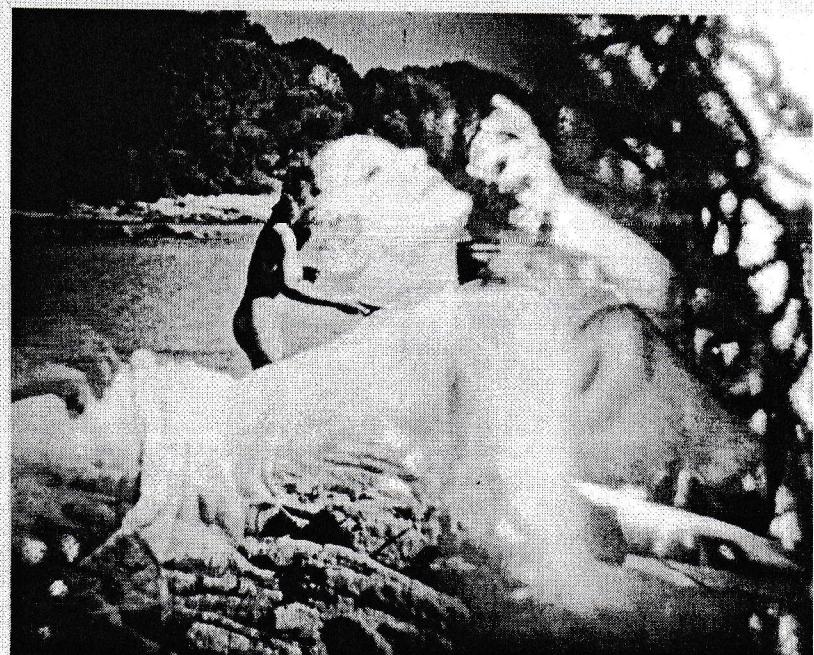
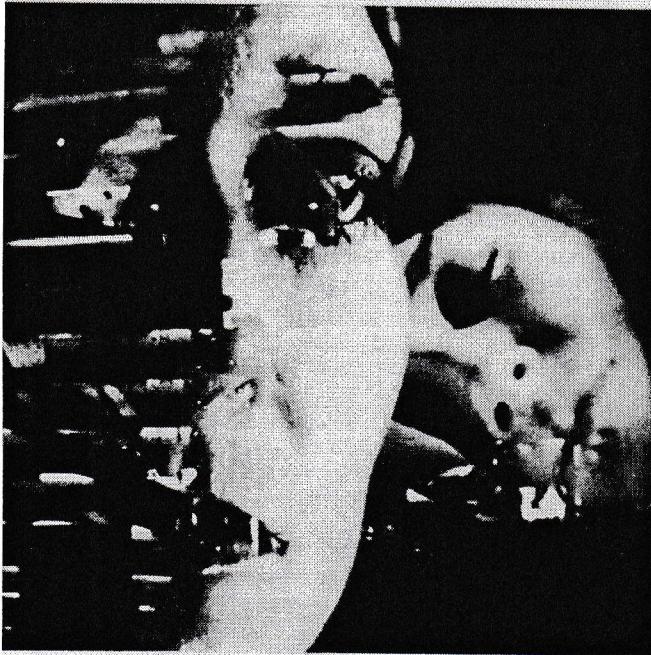
**Scope:** So your process wasn't to hunt down clips you wanted to use, but rather to ingest images you already had and to live with those images?

**Tscherkassky:** Yeah. You watch the footage, and you watch it over and over again. It tells a story but you have to forget the story. If you watch a narrative film 20 times the

story starts to scramble, it vanishes. You start to see tiny details you hadn't seen before. Then you get to a point where the material starts talking to you. Of course, it has to be attractive in the first place. When it starts talking to you, the ideas come. For *Coming Attractions* (2010), I knew I wanted to work with commercial rushes. I had six hours, so I needed a kind of filter. I don't know when it happened, but suddenly I made a connection with the "cinema of attractions," Tom Gunning's theory of early cinema where actors are talking directly to the camera, having complicity with the audience, showing off what the camera machinery can do, tricks and special effects; it occurred to me that this happens in commercials, too. Okay, so now I have my filter: let's use only those rushes I can somehow connect to early film. So it was the material that suggested what to do with it. Same with *Train Again*, the commercial was so badly filmed that I decided I had to do something with it! Many cameramen for the advertising industry are simply not skilled or talented enough to work in the commercial film industry. So shots are out of focus or movement is not continuous, stuff like that. That interests me. The exciting thing is: what else will I think of? What other ideas will I get?

**Scope:** When you are looking at a particular extract of film footage are you trying different techniques until one works as you wish?

**Tscherkassky:** No, I rarely redo something, and that's because what I do usually works—and that's because it's the other way around. I look at some footage and I see what could or should be done. This is so labour-intensive and time-consuming that the idea of throwing anything away is very hard, that's why I can only do the fine cut at the very end. By then I have forgotten how many hours of my life I spent on those two or five seconds I decide to throw out! So in the beginning, after examining the footage very closely



*The Exquisite Corpus*

I have a pretty clear image of what to do to it, how to work with it. Otherwise, I wouldn't start working.

**Scope:** Would you say you have a stock of certain techniques that you use? Are there elements in this film that you are trying that you haven't done previously?

**Tscherkassky:** It's both. I have a certain repertoire, but I always try to find new techniques for the next film. I started off using a laser pointer to expose the image, but now I've reached a point where I don't use it at all, just different flashlights. In the case of *The Exquisite Corpus*, I used special masks for the first time, tiny little masks made out of handmade paper into which I tore tiny little holes. For example, for several sequences I used four different masks on each individual frame. And I used four different filmstrips as well: filmstrip number one, mask number one. Then I exchanged filmstrip number one with filmstrip number two and mask number two, and then strip number three and four with mask number three and four. That was it, one metre at a time. I used this strategy pretty much through the entire second half of the film. You can best see this in the watersequence close to the end, where you have the ocean in four different parts of the screen, also throughout the orgy and in other places. In *Instructions for a Light and Sound Machine*, I used different masks to create new frame lines within the frame, trying to set up certain rhythms, visual rhythms. It's difficult to explain, basically I'd have to demonstrate it to you since it's so intricate; and even if I were talking in my mother language, German, I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be sufficient. It's difficult to explain what I do.

**Scope:** I certainly see so much material labour on the screen. In fact, one of the startling things about *The Exquisite Corpus* is that the prelude that leads up to the sleeping beauty's dream, in contrast to what follows, makes normal movie production seem so simple in comparison.

**Tscherkassky:** Yeah. It's one of my goals to try to appear like a tailor who makes suits but a more ragged style, more messy, like Vivienne Westwood.

**Scope:** Did you intend *The Exquisite Corpus* to itself be erotic, to emulate or accentuate the erotic qualities of the sources?

**Tscherkassky:** Yes, absolutely. There's a famous Roland Barthes quotation that the erotic takes place where the woven textile has ripped. You look inside of something that is not meant to be seen. I wanted to move from straight porn and transform it into something that might fit this Barthes quotation. Making pornographic imagery erotic instead of simply sexually arousing.

**Scope:** When you are making a film like this, are you looking down upon your material, or are you working from inside it? In other words, do you see *The Exquisite Corpus* as a study or an immersion?

**Tscherkassky:** Or creating anew. Normally, I would say I'm not interested in the original film or footage, especially stories or genre, at all. I'm doing my own thing. This is most clear in *Instructions for a Light and Sound Machine*, which is a western and my film hopefully does not seem like a western...well, that's not actually true, there are shootouts. But the shootout sequence is so clearly connected to shooting film and shooting individual frames that the "shooting cowboys" aren't much more than a totally transparent metaphor for what I mean, what I really mean. I am doing my own thing, breaking up the source material into tiny little parts which I consider my vocabulary; and now I have my vocabulary, let's find out what I can do with those words, single individual words, which are takes or fragments within the takes.

**Scope:** How do you work to structure something like *The Exquisite Corpus*? Earlier you mentioned "chapters"...

**Tscherkassky:** Among other things, I change the techniques I use from chapter to chapter. I use a certain technique, like cutting up the filmstrips for a certain amount of time, say, two minutes, and then it's enough. I get bored, it's time for a change. As soon as that happens, I immediately change the footage I'm working with. Plus, it should make sense within the narrative trajectory. All of my films are somehow narrative. Small little narratives—*something* is going on, which really helps. It helps in terms of my production and it helps the audience watching the film, there's a certain progression. *The Exquisite Corpus* starts off with the search for the sleeping beauty and then we slip into her dream. You see a lady walking up and down a stairway, then the frame line rises into the picture, and now it's as if we're moving deeper into the space between the frames, going one level deeper, to see what's happening between the images. And then we see legs being caressed, hands petting a woman's thighs and stroking between her legs. This leads to the next chapter, footage of a dancing woman stripping: we see her body on four different manually sliced filmstrips, and then she disappears between these strips of film. It's a "strip tease" in more ways than one.

**Scope:** Can you talk about your collaboration with Dirk Schaefer, who did the wonderful soundtrack?

**Tscherkassky:** He lives in Berlin and in the case of this film, I was in Hyde Park, New York. When the film was completely finished, I made a transfer and sent it to him on an USB stick. He starts working, and sends bits and pieces through WeTransfer. I watch it and then we Skype. Sometimes I make suggestions or I have wishes, "Couldn't we insert a bit of *Meshes of the Afternoon*..." He's such a genius when it comes to soundtracks. He's done incredible work for Matthias Müller, too. He once got the main award at Oberhausen—just for his soundtrack, not the film, just the soundtrack! That says a lot.

**Scope:** Does he watch the whole film you send him and start from a blank slate, or do you give him a general sense of the sound texture you're looking for?

**Tscherkassky:** I would never say anything before I've heard the opinion of this professional. Peter Kubelka once said, "Ah, you're throwing away your place in history by working with composers! A film has two stripes: the image stripe and the sound stripe, and that's what the filmmaker has to focus on, he is the one who does it." But I'm not interested in being a dilettante who fumbles around with the soundtrack or try to create some kind of basic soundtrack as in the case of *Schwechater* (1958) or *Adebar* (1957), soundtracks which I love but they only perfectly fit those films. No, I love to work with professionals. I told Dirk while working on *The Exquisite Corpus* in the darkroom that I'd listened a lot to lounge music and especially exotica, Martin Denny and Les Baxter. He really took that up. I sent him *The Sacred Idol*, by Les Baxter, so Dirk could use it for the orgy sequence. He's totally open to suggestions, and totally open to wishes.

**Scope:** I saw a temptation in the film to be purely focused on women. What were you after in including certain iconography, sex acts, and so on in the film?

**Tscherkassky:** Balance, I was looking for some kind of balance. It was important for me to show women having pleasure. And oral sex was important, which involves both sexes. Because tasting is the sense we experience up close. The sense of sight covers the greatest distance; hearing grasps what is closer. What we smell gets us even closer. But what we really take in, touch, and taste is the "exquisite corpus"! Well, Eve [Heller, Tscherkassky's wife] told me, "Don't you forget about men! I want to have my fun too, not just watch women."

**Scope:** Did you find that in working and re-working this erotic material it somehow loses its photographic charge?

**Tscherkassky:** Yes, and no. When I'm hand-printing I can't see the footage, basically. I know where the parts are that I want to copy and I know where to put my mask to get that part which I want to copy. But I couldn't say, "Now I'm copying a breast," or "Now I'm copying a vagina." But if you look at the footage on the light table which I have to do before I start copying, to test the masks, it's...pretty erotic! It doesn't get abstract in that sense. The footage itself, most of it wasn't very erotic, to be honest. These were very early pornographic films, all of them told a story, which is unusual nowadays, and you could really see that spirit of enlightenment behind the films. They really came close up to the pussy: "And now we want to see, and now we finally, finally get to see what a pussy looks like!" This kind of innocence isn't seen nowadays. Meanwhile we all know what it looks like. In 1971, many people did not know or did not have the chance to really get close up. And that isn't very erotic but it made for some wonderful footage I could make use of.

**Scope:** Certainly, because it carries a certain sensation of discovery, or newness.

**Tscherkassky:** Yes, and in my case it was: body, body, body.

**Scope:** All of your films sound very planned and thought-through, but I was wondering in the darkroom how much accident or chance plays into your work.

**Tscherkassky:** Since it refers to the Surrealist technique of the exquisite corpse, I was kind of open to chance. The different films I used stood in for the different participants who would take part in an exquisite-corps game, but of course it's a heavily regulated game of chance that we experience in my film. But basically, I'm open to chance. There are always things that happen that I do not predict or can't see coming. Especially using masks, which shift and move around between the parts I want to cover up, and vice versa, which were covered up but I had intended to expose. There's always chance going on, that's the human touch and utterly unlike what a computer would do in attempting to create a film like this.

But in terms of overall structure and the material I choose to use, there is no chance at all. This is thoroughly planned out. Normally I try to control as much as possible. Due to the nature of my procedures, things would otherwise break apart and become chaotic, because there is so much room for chance anyway, you know? Those component forces, chance coming in and trying to take over, and me trying to control things as much as possible—this mixture constitutes the human touch that is the charm of my films.