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ACFNY SUPPORTED | FILM SCREENING

VIENNALE MORE VALUE FILM AWARD WINNER: "EDEN'S EDGE"

SATURDAY AUG 22, - SUNDAY AUG 23

EDEN'S EDGE

by Gerhard Tremel & Leo Calice

2014, 61 min, digital

Erste Bank's MoreVALUE Film Award is awarded annually to an Austrian filmmaker or film production and realized in co-operation of the Austrian Cultural Forum New York together with the Viennale and Deutsches Haus at NYU.

For the fourth time each annual edition of the Viennale (Vienna International Film Festival) has featured the granting of the MoreVALUE Film Award to one or more Austrian filmmakers whose films are included within the festival. Designed to showcase the best of Austrian cinema, the Award was founded by Erste Bank, the Viennale's main sponsor, and is awarded according to the findings of an independent jury. The Award brings a cash prize as well as a one-month residency as a visiting film scholar hosted and organized by the Deutsches Haus at NYU. The screenings are co-organized by the Deutsches Haus at NYU and the Austrian Cultural Forum New York.

SYNOPSIS

This nine-part film is the creation of the Office for Narrative Landscape Design, a group of artists, filmmakers, architects, and landscape designers. O.N.L.S.D., according to its mission statement, "investigates the narrative nature of landscapes. In the process, new questions arise about how we see and use landscapes within stories of everyday life, work, science, politics, fiction, movies, dreams, or the news." Consisting of nine short chapters, each depicting American desert landscapes shot from a seemingly impossible, birds-eye vantage, EDEN'S EDGE focuses on various men and women who exist on the margins of society.

"We see bird eye-views of minimalistic scenes, meticulously arranged in gray desert sands, usually furnished with but a few props. Within this context, seemingly lost and barely insect-size inhabitants move about, recluses, mavericks and freaks in the best sense of the word. They all have retreated to the desert, to reinvent their lives on the margins of an increasingly unbearable society: the schizo-shaman who has constructed a totem circle out of stones; a female artist who fled the city and created a repository for the traumas of combat veterans; the paranoid druggie who inscribes a giant spiral along classical lines of land art. As they ploddingly drag themselves through the sunstruck backdrop, we hear their voices persistently tell of their fates - in sum, a densely woven patchwork of unconventional modes of existence. [...] Rarely have the borders of the idyllic been so concisely fathomed, rarely have the places of retreat remaining for non-conformists been pinpointed so precisely." -Christian Höller

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Interview with Leo Calice and Gerhard Tremel, August 2015, New York

You have spent a substantial amount of time on the West Coast of the United States. How has this long-term stay and the production work on Eden's Edge influenced the way in which you produce your films and your art?

Our preparatory research for the movie production claimed that the perception and use of landscapes are widely determined by the stories enacted in them. So we tested this by immersing in a landscape that was already quite prominent for its iconic stories about the Wild West, the new frontier or the land of opportunity. Within the powerful influence of the Western world these myths have long become part of global industries of film, advertising, tourism, and tightly connected to ideas of freedom and wilderness. So we wanted to do what cultural geographers call ground proofing and take a closer look at the actual lives of people who live there to eventually paint a portrait of the landscape based on their stories. Luckily this plan could be realized well because people in the desert were very communicative and cultivated storytelling as a desired currency to not only give an account of their past but to actually also as a means to build their future and environment.

How about the East Coast and New York? How do you perceive this metropolis and what are the main differences between New York, California, and finally Vienna?

It's a bit early to say anything yet about New York because we just arrived a week ago. But we are overwhelmed by its density and congestion of space and dynamics. This is particularly felt after a few weeks spent in the desert. But we actually met quite a few artists in the desert that are well established in New York and seem to need these contrasting environments for their work, which is also very much the case for us. Vienna, for instance, was best fit to conceptualize and develop our narrative approach including test runs with students from the University of Applied Arts while a team of researchers explored American and European traditions of landscape interpretations as preparation for the desert experience in Wonder Valley: a small region just east of 29 Palms in the Mojave Desert where space is vast, rent is cheap, people have time and support from LA's film industry is close. Interestingly, however, the actual desert film-portrait was shot in Vienna due to curious circumstances we will gladly talk about at the screening.

Eden's Edge arose out of the collaboration of a multi-disciplinary team, which includes artists, anthropologists, psychologists, architects, writers and landscape artists. Why was this interdisciplinary approach important to the realization of Eden's Edge, and could you elaborate on what each member of the team contributed to the making of these wonderful shorts?

The film production was actually part of a larger research program in cooperation with The University for Applied Arts and the Austrian Science Fund to explore the increasing influence of popular culture's industries on how we as individuals and a society actually see and use our environments by using story-based media such as film, advertising, tourism etc. to design our human landscape relations. Our goal was therefore to appropriate their story-based approach with a screenwriter and explore it for disciplines like architecture, landscape design or spatial practices of the arts. This required research on how narratives actually produce space, how they take effect on our spatial relations (psychology) and how this can be used to design environments for our everyday life practices (anthropology, landscape design, art). Our research design, however did not single any discipline out with its specific focus but relied on their specific research contributions to produce our nine movie-based landscape interpretations.

Could you please talk about the desert, and why this paradoxical and iconic place was the ideal setting to explore the narrative nature of landscapes? Did other prominent landscapes come to mind as potential locations for this film, prior to shooting? Which Austrian location might potentially lend itself to such an exploration?

There were several reasons to choose the desert. First of all it is a landscape icon within Hollywood's film industry that has become exemplary for the increasing influence of the medium film on the design of human landscape-relations. And then the desert also has a long standing tradition as a hotbed for counter-culture-communities exploring the critical potentials of the narrative approaches to uncover hierarchies in the governance of the land, undo

mythologies and hegemonic language or to question dominant power relations. Of course we could have featured an Austrian landscape as well. The Alpine hillsides from the "Sound of Music", for instance, would have been a possible choice. But we never seriously considered a location we knew too well because we needed to observe how our transition into another culture actually loosens existing landscape relations and allows new ones to form. Only by choosing unfamiliar conditions could we establish and explore this perspective in our research design. Accounts on this perspective are also documented in our accompanying project publication magazine "landscape" www.edens-edge.org/products/landscape3.html and in the last movie sequence of our film called "Crosswinds"

Eden's Edge focuses on nine monologues of distinctive individuals that actually inhabit the desert landscape. How did you discover these stories and find the individual narrators? In the creation of each of the chapters, how did the narrative affect your conceptualization of the depicted landscape and vice versa?

At first we wanted to keep personal encounters separate from our story collecting process so we organized a story casting and published our casting events in a local newspaper and handed out flyers. About 30 desert residents answered promptly and allowed us to record their life stories in interviews for further processing. Later, however, we also included stories from people we had met and added them to our collection as well. The final selection was mainly based on our interest in how the desert took on unique meanings within specific stories. These were often invisible in the actual desert. So we envisioned and designed sites for them. Conceptually these storyscapes always served the most important goals in the lives of the storytellers and related their individual autobiographies to larger cultural or historical stories that their goals were contextualized in. Technically we developed the sites in a script for the movie's walk and talk scenes. So the script actually turned into a landscape designer's tool and our practice into the Office for Narrative Landscape Design (O.N.L.S.D) <http://www.edens-edge.org/>

This piece was originally planned as an art installation, and has been shown as such (e.g. at the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna, Kunsthaus Graz or Kunstmuseum Bonn). When did you decide it might also lend itself to the cinema screen, and how have reactions of the viewers differed depending on the medium on which they viewed Eden's Edge?

The art installation consists of vertical projections of the films from the ceiling to a sand screen placed slightly elevated over the floor. Ideally we planned to create a grid of 9 sand screens - one for each of the short films. This recreates the landscapes from the bird's eye view they were shot in. The standardized film format suggests the possibility of an indefinite extension of films to eventually create the first narrative demography of the desert population. Besides this conceptual idea the installation creates insecurity about the nature of the landscape image as it is created by the sand surface of the screen while being overlapped by the landscape projection. The experience of the installation is clearly centered around the construction of these hybrid realities while the movie audience usually takes the presented realities for granted and focuses more on the stories told and how the landscapes slowly take on meaning as the stories unfold. In the installation this experience is also accessible but less probable because exhibition visitors like to move around the sand screens and step in and out of stories (using earphones) by which they re-edit where the stories begin and end. Maybe the wish to be exposed to the stories more intensely made some of our first exhibition visitors in the Los Angeles' MAK gallery suggest this to be shown on screen as well. We liked the idea so we sent our movie to Austria's art film distributor sixpackfilm and they took it to the screen from there.

Would you like to tell us what project you are currently working on? You've worked in mediums, other than film. Ideally, what would you like to pursue next?

While our work so far was centered around the exploration of screen writing as a designer's tool it became clear that the specific topography of life stories are highly complex and paradoxical as well. They include multiple layers of meaning in which, for instance, autobiographies participate in larger cultural, historical or political contexts and are often undermined by subtexts that don't necessarily follow linear traces and may hide their most conflicting motives or topics. Technically speaking screen writing for spatial interpretations can be directed more clearly towards work with these less apparent layers. Addressing them, however, includes strategic questions of design. So in our next production we would like to align our approach more extensively with hotbeds of sociocultural discourses that are also most interesting to us. So we are currently using our time and travels to develop this context for our next production.

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>>> FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TICKETS VISIT: <http://www.movingimage.us/visit/calendar/2015/08/22/detail/edens-edge>

