

SUBOTIKA

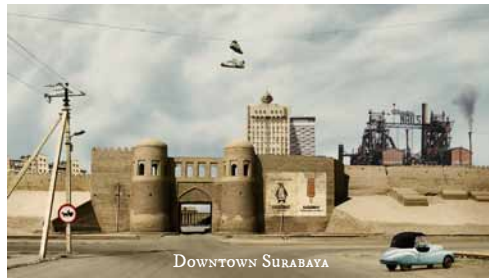
LAND OF WONDERS

A SHORT FILM BY PETER VOLKART

Short Film, Fiction, Switzerland, 2015
German o.v. (english subtitles), colour, DCP, Dolby Digital, 13 min

Subotika, a little-known island on the other side of the globe. Endeavouring to step up tourism in the Republic, the foreign minister commissions an advertising film. A film production about an enchanting country with extraordinary sights, grand visions and a couple of minor problems.

Subotika, eine kaum bekannte Insel auf der anderen Hälfte der Erdkugel. Um den Fremdenverkehr der Republik anzukurbeln, gibt der Aussenminister einen Reklamefilm in Auftrag. Ein Filmwerk über ein zauberhaftes Land mit aussergewöhnlichen Sehenswürdigkeiten, grossartigen Visionen und ein paar geringfügigen Problemen.



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SUBOTIKA – LAND OF WONDERS





Excerpt from SWISS SHORTS publication 2015

Peter Volkart – Mr. Volkart's cabinets of wonders
by Florian Keller

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In the capital city of Surabaya, hotel meals are delivered directly to the room via pneumatic post. A little farther north, in the small town of Petrograd, the surrounding region is so rich in mineral resources that hair oil and shoe polish is pumped directly out of the ground. And at the



The town of Novosuburbia in “Terra incognita”

Lunaport aerospace base, steam-driven rockets are waiting for their first mission into space. Welcome to the outlandish island of Subotika, the most recent destination in the repertoire of the Swiss world explorer Peter Volkart. What the 57-year-old has created in his award-winning films is fantastic in every respect: they are journeys of the mind that transport us to imaginary realms. This man from the small country of Switzerland fabricates in his short stories entire worlds sweeping so far they rarely fit on a map.

In most cases, his characters are explorers, at times even explorers against their will. For instance, the inventor of the “Magnetodrom” in quest of the legendary anti-gravity (“Terra incognita”, 2006). Or the eccentric artist from

the Swiss provinces who, on a failed self-experiment, catapults himself to the moon, where he henceforth grows vegetables and works on his sculptures made of lunar basalt, far removed from the public eye and state support for culture (“Yea yea, nay nay”, 2010). Or the travel-



Kurt Bachofen, first artist on the moon in “Yea yea, nay nay”

ling salesman peddling glass eyes who manages to get the last vacant room in a run-down hotel. Unbeknownst to him, the inner workings of the apparatuses in this establishment are covert, for dwelling inside the clock and television are tiny beings that keep them running, like in a miniature totalitarian state (“Room 606”, 2012).

This is typical for Volkart, this surreptitious surrealist of Swiss filmmaking: “Room 606” is a convoluted masterpiece made up of parallel universes. It feeds on an old childhood fantasy – the notion that dwarf-like beings crouched inside the radio are making the music and reciting the news. Volkart utilises the small scale of the short film to navigate through a cosmos

that unflinchingly pushes the boundaries of what we learned to call reason and reality. In the case of his latest film “Subotika” (2015), Volkart goes back to his own fictitious geography: an island called Subotika had already appeared in “Terra incognita.” The fact that he has now



Jonathan Fisch, the travelling salesman in “Room 606”

bestowed an entire cinematic journey upon this island is due to a Bulgarian tourism film from 1979 he accidentally stumbled across on the Internet. The seemingly random sequence of touristic impressions underscored with tacky easy listening music inspired him to create a remake, as he puts it. And sure enough, Volkart’s remake is more like a fantastically skewed, yet tender persiflage on tourism advertising which in fact completely defeats the purpose – but in an absolutely sublime manner.

Thus we accompany Elfriede and Herbert, newlyweds on their honeymoon here in this country improbably suitable for romantic forays. Although the narrator in voiceover stoically maintains the contrary, he himself does not



“Room 606”: Small-scale model of an escape raft.

Peter Volkart – Mr. Volkart's cabinets of wonders

seem to really believe the hackneyed tourism marketing slogans he continually discharges. Furthermore, the black crater in the Subotikan mountains with, reportedly, a tunnel leading straight through the earth directly to Paris.

the friendly clerk in a fantasy government agency that would still need to be invented. But Volkart is not simply an ingenious fantast. He is a collector who is talked into some of his stories, so to speak, by the objects he gathers. In his

the deck, but actually have no business being there, at least according to our mundane logic. Could one say that Peter Volkart is a tinkerer? "There is a more elegant word for it," he corrects, kindly. "I prefer bricoleur." And it is



Impressions of Volkart's studio, located on the outskirts of Zurich

This, too, is to be taken symbolically: Subotika, the flip side of the city of love; a dismal, yet somehow enchanted spot on the other side of the world. Like in all of his films, Peter Volkart conceived the enchanting gloom surrounding Subotika in magnificently faded colours. In doing so, he kindles nostalgia for a world in a post-Soviet look, appearing anything but paradisiacal. His films are a bit like the exquisite animated canapés that Igor, the Subotikan chef, serves in his bistro: everything looks as if it were preserved in aspic.

A confirmed nostalgic? Volkart answers with a smile and pretends he has not heard the question. Wearing his flat cap, he looks a little like

films he fabulates entire worlds from findings that only exist in his head. In the past, he frequented flea markets to buy old photographs and film reels from private archives and then ascribe his own stories in the montage; nowadays it's a lot more convenient via Internet.

It comes as no surprise then that to a large extent "Subotika" is also made up of stock footage of landscapes which he composed on the computer, creating these fantastic tableaux vivants in which hidden charms can still be discovered even upon third and fourth viewing. As in the case of Plutonia, the cruise liner run aground in "Subotika" with a reservoir tower and a dilapidated tenement rising up from

indeed closer to the esprit of the surrealists, tangible in all of his films. This esprit can also be felt in his studio at the edge of Zurich, comprised of an editing room and a spacious atelier. As a visitor, it feels at times as if one might have slipped through a wormhole and entered a wonder cabinet. Under the elegantly ornate nameplate from Igor's bistro, a prop from "Subotika", one also finds a small aquarium, jutting out from the wall. In it floats an eyeless, whale-like chimera, and if you get too close, it lets a few air bubbles loose.

But how does Peter Volkart find the balance between commissioned works and his own short films? Very simple: "I work on the com-



Tasty aspic canapé. A local delicacy served at Igor's in Petrograd, Subotika



Peter Volkart – Mr. Volkart's cabinets of wonders



Left top:
Surabay, glorious capital city of Subotika
Left bottom:
Herbert and Elfriede on their honeymoon cruise
Right top:
Visit Subotika – where every day is a great day
Right bottom:
Map of Subotika



missions in the morning, and on my films in the afternoon." He learned the craft of filmmaking long ago in New York: in the early eighties he studied art at the School of Visual Arts, in addition to attending film courses at the New York University. After that, he found his way much later from object art to film – also thanks to digitalisation. For however nostalgically fitted out his films may be, Volkart raves about the abundance of digital tools on the computer affording him complete freedom in image processing. "But in the atelier," he says, pointing over there, "the wood shavings still fly."

The films by Peter Volkart therefore celebrate a wondrous marriage of digital technology and analogue craft as well. And apropos of nothing, he also refutes two persistent prejudices about makers of short films: he is no longer that young, nor does he dream of a feature-length work. He is beginning to feel a little strange when applying for grants: "A lot of people still consider short films a student's medium." Such being the case, his latest film was also a godsend for him, because he was able to finance "Subotika", a coproduction with Swiss television, almost solely with prize money and incentive payments: "If I had had to submit a grant application for the remake of an old Bulgarian tourism film, it would never have gone through!"

Florian Keller (born 1976) is a film critic and culture editor at WOZ – Die Wochenzeitung, a Swiss weekly based in Zurich. He is the author of "Andy Kaufman: Wrestling with the American Dream" (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

Photos by Peter Volkart

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Biographical information

PETER VOLKART has studied visual arts and filmmaking in Zurich and New York. He has made independent short films as well as documentaries for television. He has created trailers and commercial shorts and has been collaborating on numerous feature film projects as art director and editor. Since 2002 he runs a graphic design studio in Zurich specializing in motion graphics, special effects and all kinds of mixed media productions. Besides working commercially Peter Volkart has had various exhibitions in art galleries and art museums in Switzerland and abroad.

Filmography (selection)

Terra Incognita (Fiction, Shortfilm, 35mm, 18 min, Switzerland 2006)

Winner Swiss Film Prize 2006 «Best Short Film»



He was in the headlines for a brief period in the late 1920s: Igor Leschenko, the young physicist from Hermannstadt, whose bizarre experiments cast doubt upon the law of gravity. The debacle at the pataphysicist convention leads to a secret expedition to the point of zero gravity. Rare film documents of a hazardous journey beyond Zentropa through the Karfunkel archipelago. Will Leschenko ever find the Nanopol island?

Terra Incognita participated at over 80 international Festivals and received more than 15 Prizes. (i.e. FIPA D'OR - Best Short Film, Festival international des FILMS du monde - Montréal, Swiss Film Prize 2006)

Monsieur Sélavy - The Way it is (Fiction, Shortfilm, 35mm, 10 min, Switzerland 2008)

Nominated for Swiss Film Prize 2009 «Best Short Film»



On the move with Monsieur Sélavy. A film diary about the vicissitudes of existence and how to encounter them with dignity. A journey in which space and time coordinates become a bit tangled ...

Monsieur Sélavy participated at over 45 international Festivals.

ja ja, nein nein - yea yea, nay nay (Docu-Fiction, Shortfilm, HD, 19min, Switzerland 2010, in collaboration with Ulrich Schaffner)

Winner of the 40th anniversary project competition. A film commissioned by the Aargau Endowment for the Arts 2009



Should the government get involved in promoting and funding the arts? In the Sixties this question was avidly discussed in the small, sedate Swiss Canton of Aargau. ja ja, nein nein (yea yea, nay nay) – A film about a visionary patron of the arts, a performance artist who mysteriously disappears and a unique arts funding scheme.

ja ja, nein nein official selection Clermont Ferrand 2010, Huesca 2010, Zinebi Bilbao 2010, Interfilm Berlin 2010, Expression en Corte, Mexico 2010 (among others)

Zimmer 606 - Room 606 (Fiction, Shortfilm, 35mm, 15 min, Switzerland 2012)

Winner Méliès d'Or, Best European Fantastic Short Film 2012



The travelling salesman Jonathan Fisch peddles glass eyes. His journey takes him to the edge of the province, where he checks in to a run-down hotel. The attic room no. 606 has its pitfalls. Something rather peculiar is happening beyond the wall. Jonathan Fisch can expect a very turbulent night. A night that begins one evening in late Autumn and doesn't end until Spring.

Zimmer 606 participated at over 45 international Festivals.

Winner - Best Swiss Short Film Neuchâtel Int. Fantastic Film Festival 2012
Winner - Méliès d'Or, Best European Fantastic Short Film 2012
Nomination - Best Script, 6th Grand OFF World Independent Film Awards 2012
Winner - Best Film Hong Kong international Film Festival 2013
Winner - Fano International Film Festival 2013