AS IT WAS – AS IT IS

A History of the Viennale from 1960 to the Present

It was a "leaden time": on one of the geopolitical borders of the Cold War, a superficially denazified Austria was attempting to reinvent itself as a cultural superpower, an "intellectual continent" in the words of the historian Friedrich Heer. The so-called "long 1950s" continued far into the next decade and were dominated by the cultural and educational policies of the first post-war education minister, Felix Hurdes of the conservative Austrian People's Party. The policies reflected right-wing Catholic "culturalism" and were almost seamlessly connected to the period before the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938. In the official state cultural doctrine of the post-war era it was especially important that the foremost institutions, the Burgtheater and the State Opera, be actively involved in the creation of sense and meaning, and a certain wallowing in Habsburg mythology was also a fitting accompaniment to a cultural understanding that sought refuge from the immediate past in sublime timelessness.

Cinema, on the other hand, was considered an inferior artistic phenomenon, a leisure activity for the lower classes and a reflection of the typically American culture of chewing-gum that a middle-class elite preferred not to find sticking to the soles of their shoes. Domestic Austrian film production consisted mostly of theatrical comedies, rural farces, tourism films, Vienna musical comedies and the revue films of producer Franz Antel, and they stretched in a never-ending line towards the horizon. Hardly anything was done, however, to promote the production of art films, apart from the isolated initiatives of the French or Soviet occupiers, the series of proletarian films, the religious film weeks and, finally, the "good-film campaign" *Aktion der gute Film*, which the Ministry of Education launched in 1956 after the occupiers had gone home. Film ratings were believed to be a superweapon for separating the wheat from the chaff and raising the deplorable level of mainstream taste.

Sigmund Kennedy (right)

City Councillor for Cultural Affairs Gertrude Fröhlich-Sandner, Federal President Franz Jonas and Mayor of Vienna Bruno Marek

Austrian film journalists at the time believed that cinematic culture had reached a historical low ebb, and they sought ways and means to reverse the flow. A group formed around the journalist Sigmund Kennedy, who was to become the Viennale's first director. (For more about his checkered life, see his portrait). It included Fritz Walden from the daily *Arbeiter-Zeitung* and the film director and critic Edwin Zbonek. In 1960 they took advantage of a cooperative project between the Association of Austrian Film Journalists and the cinema Künstlerhaus Kino to launch a project with the rather awkward title *International Festival of the Most Interesting Films of the Year 1959*. It was an *arte-povera* event in the literal sense of the term, with a shoestring budget and no subsidies. The program consisted of eight feature films and ten shorts from a total of 17 countries.

In this early period it was possible to unite disparate positions under the roof of a shared enthusiasm for film. While Kennedy was a moralizing media educator to whom film provided important teaching material, Zbonek, who was later to become festival director, was a fanatic adherent of artistic cinema. He advocated showing films in their original language, for example, which was hardly a matter of course at the time. The fact that Vienna's film festival was viewed as moderately successful is also a reflection of the Viennale's extremely positive relationship with the media. In

her dissertation on the history of the festival, Rita Hochwimmer sums it up: "The media for which Zbonek, Kennedy and Walden wrote provided wide coverage of the film festival, with most of the reporting done by Fritz Walden, Edwin Zbonek and Sigmund Kennedy."

A Festival of Gaiety

The festival, which is said to have been given the name Viennale by Vienna's mayor at the time, Franz Jonas (1951-65), thus got off to a good start in 1960. Nevertheless, budgetary restraints prevented the festival from being staged the following year. In 1962 the City of Vienna took pity on the struggling enterprise and provided a subsidy of 50,000 Austrian schillings, allowing the Viennale to rise again from its ashes and, only a short time later, become officially established as an association.

Urania cinema (1960s)

The goals and intentions were modest: no attempt was made to stage a film competition. Instead the festival was to present works that had won prizes elsewhere, a goal it did not initially meet every year. In addition, the festival saw itself as a vague interface between East and West, reflecting Austria's position as a neutral country at the edge of the Iron Curtain. In any case films from communist countries were more readily available for festival purposes. Thus the Viennale placed itself at the center of an ideological debate, becoming the target of a sometimes hysterical anticommunism. "The East, never missing an opportunity for propaganda, is supplying everything it can. Czechoslovakia is sending two feature films, and Hungary, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia are providing shorts," wrote the Vienna daily *Kurier* in 1962.

Karl Farkas and Bruno Marek

The City of Vienna had meanwhile become the festival's senior partner. Otto Wladika, who inherited the post of director in 1967 following the death of Sigmund Kennedy, had already been involved in programming as a film-culture expert. He was not interested in waging a protracted battle against the conservative milieu and media and thus gave the Viennale a new focus. Between 1963 and 1967 the event was staged under a title that seems rather strange today: *Festival of Gaiety*. By concentrating on comedies, the organizers sought to refute any allegation that they were involved in procommunist agitation. Films from Eastern Europe continued to be shown but tended to be scheduled on less prominent parts of the program. Official Vienna made no attempt to

Alberto Sordi

Urania 1967

justify the emphasis on laughter. While the biggest international film festivals emphasized glamour and artistic cinema, Vienna's then-mayor, Bruno Marek (1965-70), considered the mirth and laughter of the audience the most important ingredients. Why? "Because it is laughter that brings nations together." This was a rather lame intellectual concept given the Cuba crisis, the escalating Vietnam War and the political ice age that was to lead to the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet army and to student unrest. In principal, it was an extension into the next decade of the escapism of the 1950s, a fact that did not go unnoticed by critics in the media. Most wrote about the festival in a tone of scorn and derision. An example can be found in the Vienna daily *Die Presse* of March 3, 1963. Referring to Austria's veteran producer of light comedies, Franz Antel, the paper wrote: "Certain doubts must be entertained about the Egyptian farce WIFE NUMBER 13, which seems only to demonstrate that there are Antels everywhere." There was no lack of prominent guests, however, even in the period of great gaiety: international icons such as Silvana Mangano and Alberto Sordi honored the modest festival with their presence.

Journey into the Unknown

The laughter ceased in 1968. The spirit of the time, with its civil disobedience and student unrest, brought pressure to bear on the Viennale, although only for a "heated quarter of an hour," according to a book title by the historian Fritz Keller.

Otto Wladika began staging the Viennale under a different motto each year, e.g., *Filme, die uns nicht erreichten (1968, Unscreened in Vienna),* and, despite the constraints imposed on him, he tried to take political considerations into account. In accordance with a doctrine promoted by the Austrian federal chancel-

Otto Wladika (center), Viennale office Urania

lor at the time, Bruno Kreisky, a new core target group of the festival was to be "youth," and their interests were considered in drawing up the program, without, however, completely abandoning the fundamental concept of unpinning Austria's cultural image. A cinematic civil servant, Wladika propagated the idea of a liberal confrontation with "our time" but made sure that his Viennale was not infiltrated by radical political ideas. In particular, he maintained a distance between himself and film aficionados, whom he considered to be leftwing. He made sure that the "Viennale according to Wladika" did not become a staging ground for a pending world revolution.

Groucho Marx (center) followed by Peter Konlechner, Nestroy cinema

Thus the festival navigated its way through the years of student protest in a classical Austrian fashion, never having an opportunity to find artistic consolidation for the long term. Film critics, who had been keeping their knives well-honed ever since the days of the *Festival of Gaiety,* sometimes found the selection of films to be questionable and detected deviations from the underlying comedic trend that did not seem justified by the content.

But where there is danger, some means of rescue will usually arrive, and it came in the form of the retrospectives staged by the Austrian Film Museum. First held in 1966, they became an important part of the festival. The Film Museum had been founded by Peter Konlechner and Peter Kubelka two years earlier, and their first project for the festival was met with great enthusiasm: a retrospective of works by the Marx Brothers that brought Groucho Marx to Vienna for the occasion. In the early years of the Viennale, the Film Museum retrospectives often outshone the main program, meeting the demand for cinematic quality that the festival by itself was frequently unable to fulfill.

FOTO: FOTO VOTAVA

Forum cinema

A comprehensive Howard Hawks retrospective failed to change the situation. It did not please the elitist-intellectual crowd and thus completely failed to justify the categorical imperative of poetic-political sensitization by offering cinematic masterpieces. In a period of socio-political and aesthetic upheaval, the Viennale became even more than before a film-policy forum.

Foyer of the Gartenbau cinema 1977

Meetings were staged to discuss film subsidies, a subject of endless debate then as now, and the various interest groups talked themselves into a rage. For the first time the existence of the festival itself was called into question, and demands were heard for the establishment of the kind of communal cinema found in Frankfurt am Main. The Communist Party newspaper *Volksstimme,* for example, had this to say: "For those who have the time and money to go to the cinema two or three times a day, the City of Vienna has decided to offer a week of important films once a year. The rest of the time they will take the comfortable approach of letting cinema go to the dogs."

In 1971 the Viennale, which had been on a nomadic journey from one cinema to another over the years, moved to the Forum Kino, which with its 1146 seats was the largest cinema in the city (it has long since closed). Two years later, Edwin Zbonek, who had been involved with the Viennale since the planning stage, became its director, a position he held far into the 1980s, although he later worked in tandem with Helmuth Dimko. With Zbonek's appointment a phase of consolidation began. The Viennale, which meanwhile had been recognized by the Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films (FIAPF), was growing from year to year. Rising subsidies provided more creative leeway in drawing up programs, which became larger and more international, and audience figures rose. In 1974, the integration of a film program for children and young people as a festival within the festival was an immediate success.


Edwin Zbonek (right)

During this period the Gartenbaukino became the Viennale's central cinema. A remarkable event that took place during the Zbonek era was an appearance by the Austrian-born director Otto Preminger. In opening the 1978 festival, he unveiled a plan of measures designed to put Vienna at the heart of European film production. He called for a committee to be founded; its members were to be sent to America to present Vienna as an inexpensive and hospitable film location. Preminger said he was willing to work as a consultant free of charge.

Under Edwin Zbonek the number of cinemas involved in the Viennale grew, and in 1979 parts of the program were repeated in the Vienna suburbs in an attempt to interest new audience segments in "films of artistic value." The initiative was well-meant but short-lived.

Viennale Reloaded

Federico Fellini and Mayor Helmut Zilk, 1988

In 1986 Helmuth Dimko became solely responsible for the Viennale. Like the directors before him, Dimko was a cinematographic jack of all trades: a critic for the Austrian dailies *Kurier* and *Krone* and, together with Peter Hajek, the creator of the TV magazine program *Apropos Film,* which for a long time was considered the most exciting and innovative cinema program in the German-speaking world. In contrast to Kennedy, Wladika and Zbonek, Dimko was not caught up in the legends and traumas connected with the founding of the festival. The heroic battle for the recognition of film as an artistic form of expression had long since been won elsewhere, and the message had meanwhile arrived in Austria as well. Unburdened by the dogmas of an ideological approach to cinema, Dimko could do what he wanted, and he took advantage of the opportunity. During his period as director the festival continued to show the great classic films, as seen in his retrospectives on René Clair and Federico Fellini, but there were also many examples of playful and provocative screenings such as the show *The Worst Films of All Time,* which brought, for example, the films of Ed Wood to the Viennale. François Truffaut, who was invited to send two films to that year's festival, made cautious inquiries about whether they were to be shown under the same heading.

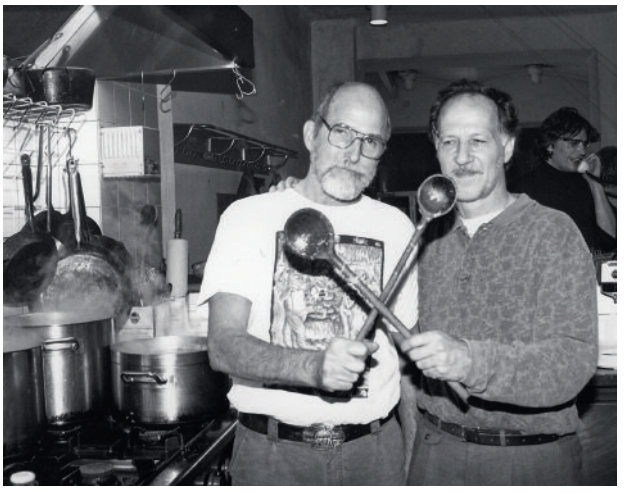
The year 1989 marked both the glory and failure of the Dimko era. A large number of main events were staged at the Volkstheater, and the program was more dense and diverse than ever: *New Spanish Cinema* in the Urania, *The French Gangster Film* at Studio Molière, Jacques Demy and Jean Vigo in the Stadtkino, Wim Wenders at Movie and much more. The adaptation of the Volkstheater stage for cinematic purposes, however, proved to be far more expensive than expected. It broke the Viennale's budget, and the festival for the following year had to be cancelled. This, however, did not alter the fact that as festival director Dimko gave the Viennale new impetus, adding a series of elements and program ideas that are still having their effects today.

The City of Vienna had meanwhile learned to love the Viennale in a period in which film festivals were becoming a cultural location factor. The city was prepared to reach for its purse.

The Cinema as a Place of Magic

Apollo cinema 1992

On the initiative of Vienna's city councilor for cultural affairs, Ursula Pasterk, the first and thus far only attempt was made to appoint an important filmmaker to be the director of the festival. This was Werner Herzog, who was joined by Reinhard Pyrker, one of the main proponents of New Austrian Film who previously had made the Wels Film Festival a showroom and discussion forum for the genre. Perhaps the concept for this shared directorship was to unite the international and domestic film scenes in a



Les Blank and Werner Herzog

meaningful manner. The combination of an "international figurehead" with a domestic artistic director was not met with total enthusiasm. IG Autoren (the umbrella group for Austrian writers) thought it to be a dubious structure, one "in keeping primarily with PR requirements but providing no definition with regard to content. The glamour of a momentary announcement is intended to distract attention from the desolate state of the film industry throughout Europe and gloss over the current filmmaking paralysis." Herzog was not distracted by such criticism. Instead, he hired the French high-wire artist Philippe Petit, who walked high above the rooftops of Vienna between the new festival center in the Apollo Kino and the World-War-II antiaircraft tower in Esterházypark. His *Viennawalk* got the festival off to a brilliant start. Under the motto "cinema as a magic place" Herzog drew up a program in which he sought to present exciting, current films that were in harmony with his personal passions.

Ornella Muti and Reinhard Pyrker

The new duo in the director's office saw their funding grow from "a hunger budget of four million schillings to a meager budget of ten million," as the Austria Press Agency put it. This nevertheless enabled the duo to anchor the Viennale even more firmly in the public consciousness. Herzog certainly displayed no lack of personal commitment: he organized and moderated discussions and staged "film hours" in which he lectured on cinematic concepts. Nevertheless the glamorous intermezzo came to an end only two years later. Given his other artistic commitments and numerous film projects, he could no longer see himself fulfilling the role of Viennale director in the way he had imagined. Reinhard Pyrker was prepared to continue to direct the festival but clashed with the City of Vienna over questions of content and was unable to realize his intentions. He is the really tragic figure in the Viennale's history: long before commissions and associations became professional lobbyists for Austrian film, he had worked alone as a pioneering champion for domestic cinema, encountering at times all sorts of intrigues and resistances. Pyrker's commitment extended to the boundaries of the possible. Sometimes undiplomatic, he was always fully committed to what he was doing. Working with Werner Herzog, who was a bit unpredictable but at the same time charismatic, it was difficult for Pyrker to establish a higher profile. By the time Herzog's departure appeared to open the way for him to realize his own concepts, others had already set the Viennale on a different course.

The New Wave

Thus the Viennale reinvented itself once again. The two-man directorship was replaced by a second one consisting of Wolfgang Ainberger, an editor for Austrian state television, and Alexander Horwath, a film critic for the daily *Der Standard* and Ainberger's junior by 20 years. An old hand plus a young rebel: Vienna's cultural department must have thought that would be a productive

mixture. Ainberger had made a name for himself as the creator and editor responsible for the cultural television program *Kunststücke* and was now also given responsibility for Vienna's new office for film subsidies. Horwath was considered a proponent of the kind of film journalism that was critical of pop culture, one that fundamentally examined the societal and cultural effects of film instead of adhering to an old, established canon. The internal division of labor provided for Ainberger to plan the main festival while Horwath was to create a fireworks of specials, tributes and unusual events, many of them outside the normal dates of the Viennale. In the early years that resulted in an exciting mixture, but internal friction quickly created a considerable amount of heat. Ainberger proved to be a competent program planner whose motto was "think big": for the 1993 Viennale he covered one entire façade of the Vienna Hilton with a giant tarpaulin on which the artist Gottfried Helnwein had painted a portrait of Arnold Schwarzenegger. It was a considerable PR success but had unpleasant consequences for the festival budget. Alexander Horwath staged a tribute to the *giallo* and slasher king Dario Argento, signaling the openness of the festival to new and exciting trends in the years to come.

Alexander Horwath and Wolfgang Ainberger

Initially, Ainberger and Horwath worked constructively together, but soon personal differences and dissonances with regard to content emerged, leading in the end to their separation. Ainberger left his post as director before the end of his contract, in part in order to focus on his work for the Vienna Film Fund. Horwath became sole director of the festival, where he remained until 1996. Because of his relative youth, he was the first Viennale director who had not experienced firsthand the musty atmosphere of the post-war period, the self-imposed provincialism of the 1950s and the brutal political conflicts of the decade that followed. Thus Horwath was able to approach the job in a fresh and undogmatic manner. During his directorship there were programs such as *Breathless! Pop Music Film 1956–1995 and Cool.Pop.Politics. – Hollywood 1960-1968*. The midnight series *Twilight Zone* presented horror, sus-


Michelangelo Antonioni and Billy Wilder

Martin Scorsese

pense and crime, and films such as TETSUO by Shin'ya Tsukamoto sparked heated debate. In retrospect Horwath's directorship turned out to be a long overdue break with certain values. As a result, a type of genre and utilitarian cinema began to be presented and discussed at the festival along with prizewinning, canonized art films. Horwath did not want to forego the latter: old masters such as Michelangelo Antonioni and John Cassavetes continued to have their place at the trendy freshened up Viennale. Especially to his credit was the retrospective *Aufbruch ins Ungewisse – A Journey into the Unknown*. It recognized for the first time the work and fate of Austrian filmmakers in exile. The highlight of Horwath's directorship was likely the visit by Martin Scorsese, whose body of works probably represented the aesthetic program of the new Viennale in its purest form.

Play it dirty, play it class

Eric Pleskow and Hans Hurch

In 1995 Horwath announced that he was stepping down after five years as director. Thus the powers that be in Vienna's cultural and educational life were faced with the prospect of quickly finding another director, and they found him in the form of Hans Hurch. The former critic for the weekly *Falter* had occasionally curated retrospectives and was artistic director of the initiative *hundertjahrekino (A Century of Cinema).* For years he had been an established name in Vienna cultural life. In polemical appearances at the Wels Film Festival he had earned the reputation of being an exacting and sometimes merciless critic of Austrian film. At the same time he was considered an apologist for a radical and minoritarian cinema, prompting critics to react as follows to Hurch's appointment as director of the Viennale: "The next thing you know we'll be watching Jean-Marie Straub at the Gartenbaukino."

Things, however, never got that bad: while Hurch indeed regularly scheduled the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet at the festival's central cinema, he largely anchored his programs to the basic tried-and-tested structure of the festival. Following a pop-cultural opening phase, his appointment brought about a marked politicization of the festival. Some ten years older than his predecessor, Hurch slowly but lastingly shifted the accent. Experimental and documentary cinema as well as short films were increasingly added to the program. In some years there were almost as many documentaries as examples of classical narrative cinema. As time went by, Hurch successively abandoned the numerous Viennale specials staged throughout the year, concentrating instead on the festival itself. With a certain thirst for discovery he dedicated personal retrospectives to innovative but lesser-

known filmmakers for the first time and also recalled important political figures of cinema. Faithful to the Jean Cocteau motto, "What the public criticizes in you, cultivate. It is you," Hurch continued to seek conflict with domestic Austrian cinema, leading sometimes to unproductive squabbles. The director also maintained a carefully distanced relationship with genre and utilitarian cinema. There was no need, however, for Viennale visitors to forego the pleasure of prominent guests: the actors Lauren Bacall, James Coburn, Tilda Swinton and Jane Fonda came to Vienna for the festival as did the rock legend Lou Reed and more recently the entertainer and political activist Harry Belafonte.

Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet and Hans Hurch

Recent years have seen the development of something that might cautiously be called "the Viennale model": careful navigation between the important moments of current cinema, examination of living cinematic history and a certain instinct for popular culture. In addition to independently programming an international festival, Hans Hurch's declared intention is to liberate the Viennale to some extent from the complacency of its own milieu and to discuss the program in a larger sociocultural context. He makes a personal contribution with his opening speeches, which remain somewhere between castigation and eulogy and often contain fundamental criticism of the current political situation with examples drawn from the news. Nevertheless, the opening ritual sometimes has the character of a therapy session with audience participation.

Lauren Bacall and City Councillor for Cultural Affairs Andreas Mailath-Pokorny

The festival president since 1998 has been Eric Pleskow, who lends the Viennale a biographically certified moral authority. He is the son of a Jewish merchant family who fled the Nazis to America, where, following numerous biographical turns of events, he became a successful film producer and later president of United Artists and Orion. Pleskow personifies the injustice committed in the 20th century. At the same time he is a representative of the Austrian film intelligentsia that includes such directors as Erich

von Stroheim, Fritz Lang and Josef von Sternberg, who during their Hollywood exile had an important and lasting influence on modern cinema.

Viewed across the 50 years of its history, the Viennale must be seen as a success story. It has managed to continue to raise both the number of films and of visitors without relinquishing its declared goal of presenting high-quality aesthetic content. Great festival moments result not from the staged glamour of the PR department or attempts to curry populist favor; they are the product of intellectual passion and programmatic daring. Thus the Viennale today has become the favorite festival of many critics and of numerous members of the audience. The cinema critic of the Munich daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung,* Fritz Göttler, summed it up: "The Viennale, much vaunted as the world's loveliest film festival, also has a political orientation – but not in order to create a political festival but to make a festival political."

Thomas Miessgang