

Acropolis Cinema presents



March 22, 2019 ~ 8:00pm ~ Echo Park Film Center

ABOUT THE FILMS

***DRIFT* (Dir. Helena Wittman, Germany, 2017)**

Filmmaker-artist Helena Wittmann's subtly audacious first feature follows friends Theresa, a German, and Josefina, an Argentinian, as they spend a weekend together on the North Sea, taking long walks on the beach and stopping at snack stands. Eventually they separate—Josefina eventually returns to her family in Argentina and Theresa crosses the Atlantic for the Caribbean—and the film gives way to a transfixing and delicate meditation on the poetics of space. Self-consciously evoking the work of Michael Snow and masterfully lensed by Wittmann herself, *Drift* is by turns cosmic and intimate. *96 mins.*

Preceded by:

***ADA KALEH* (Dir. Helena Wittmann, Germany, 2018)**

This precisely calibrated domestic diorama alights upon the imagined futures of a group of anonymous young adults. In Helena Wittmann's warmly rendered feat of formalist filmmaking, questions of time and the realities of space convene in languid interior pans, incremental shifts in light, and the private reflections of her subjects. *14 mins.*

Between the Waves: An Interview with Helena Wittmann by Phil Coldiron

The following interview was originally published by MUBI Notebook, May 22, 2018

NOTEBOOK: The bulk of *Drift* takes place between two shots of Theresa at her laptop, both of which refer to Michael Snow's *Wavelength*. How did the shape of *Drift* come to be what it is?

HELENA WITTMANN: The shape of *Drift* came to be with the process of making this film. We shot it over the period of about two and a half years. Whenever I had new material, I first watched it obsessively in order to grasp its meaning and potential. Then I started to build sequences, which I would change constantly with the proceeding in understanding the material and the shooting of new parts. The prologue with Theresa and Josefina on the island in the North Sea was the first part to be shot and edited. It now introduces not only the protagonists of the film, including the ocean, but also its form of narration. Your observation is adequate. The main part starts with Theresa working on her laptop and ends with her having a skype conversation with Josefina on the same device. Both scenes were conceived and shot in the very end, when all other parts already existed. In all other cases I reacted to our surroundings and situations in order to concentrate the relevant aspects into a scene. The two framing scenes you mention were conceived in response to these existing parts and shape the narration for the film as a whole. *Wavelength* by Michael Snow sneaked back into my mind while thinking about the missing parts that were the ones you name. This thinking was less conceptually rather than intuitively. But I am sure it came back to my mind for a reason and not by coincidence. In both films, the passing of time is shown as something inevitably. In this time things happen, it could be many things. These situations are very concrete and become relevant when you decide to include them into a film, they structure our time. But time still passes and is not impressed and definitely not changed by this dramatic activity. There is a quote by Christa Wolf, that I like very much: "Time does what it can; it goes by."

NOTEBOOK: On a more micro level, once you had that shape, how did you go about ordering the various wave sequences?

WITTMANN: That is a good question and very difficult to answer. The wish to shift the narration towards the ocean in the center part of the film was there from the very beginning. There was a hidden promise in this imagination. But for a long time I didn't know how this could even work. And in the editing it was definitely the most complex and complicated part. One difficulty was the transition between the minimal, but still more conventional narration to this much more abstract part (ag-

ain terms of narration, for me it is very concrete in itself). The other difficulty was to really understand the ocean shots. I watched them so many times, again and again. For days, for weeks. And at some point they "spoke to me". This might sound cheesy, in fact it does. But for now it is my only way to describe it. With this connection I started to edit and this meant to find the most expressive parts and to decide on the right duration. That was a delicate work. As all other scenes, the single shots tell very different aspects. I tried to treat them in an equal way to these other scenes. And then there is Nikas work on the sound. We collaborated very closely on every single scene, but we knew that the sound for the ocean part would play a very special role. This again shaped the narration very much, the composition would influence the order and duration of the shots as much as the other way around. It was a working phase of constant feedback between Nika and me in order to find out how the material tells what it now tells.

NOTEBOOK: At the risk of being overly literal, when the waves spoke to you, what did they say?

WITTMAN: The waves informed me about very different aspects. There is the sunset, filmed from a very low position, close to the water. Throughout the shot, the sun goes down several times as the horizon is shaped by the movement of the waves in the foreground. I needed to wait some days to get this shot, as it only works with a cloudless sky. It tells me a lot about spatial relations and the fact that it is always related to our perspective. This can be transferred directly to the relationship between Theresa and Josefina and the distances between them, but it obviously doesn't need to be read like this. Through the perspective that I bring into the cinema, every viewer is put into this position and becomes part of this particular relation between space and time.

In the beginning of another shot we see a dolphin very briefly coming to the surface. In the film, this dolphin gets the role of an ambassador from the depth. For the reflecting characteristics of the water's surface, this dimension is not visible from above. Therefore it is only the sound and, in this case, the animal that make us recall the space underneath the vast surface of the ocean. This is also a good example for how I chose the extracts within a certain shot. There is more than one dolphin in this unedited shot. But I was very aware of the fact, that animals as well as human beings immediately attract attention. If the dolphin would appear in the middle of that shot or was followed by a second animal, it would gain much more importance and therefore shift the meaning. It would no longer be an ambassador with a delicate message, but become another protagonist.

I could talk about every single shot, but I will for now end with the longest one, that is the wavy ocean at night, illuminated by a full moon. For me, the potential of this shot was obvious from the moment I shot it. Strangely enough it is much more difficult to translate its "story" into words. Let me give it a try. The ocean appears like black ink, oily, moved by the strong wind; the boat runs quickly through it (this again is our position when we watch the film; and it is not a quiet one). Whenever a bigger wave pushes the boat (and with it the fixed camera) to the side, the sky opens up and seems infinite. The moon serves as a huge indirect spotlight that provides a natural vignette inside the image of this enormous space and the bright cool moonlight always focuses our gaze as it travels over the waves and modulates their ever shifting forms. The story is probably about the tension between this overwhelming vastness and the feeling that it could offer us a kind of shelter. A story about us feeling very small on this planet and a hidden memory of us growing up in a womb. Surrounded by water, safe and warm, but never being independent. It is as extremely beautiful as it is extremely unsettling. We lose control.

NOTEBOOK: Is that movement between openness and closedness important to you?

WITTMANN: It definitely is. In most cases the quality of a space is the starting point to develop a scene. That is nothing I have decided upon. I suppose it just follows my personal understanding of relating to this world with the tools I have. You can see this throughout my whole work. In *Drift*, we can see very different relations between indoor spaces and the outside. In the scenes that take place in Germany, on the island in the beginning as well as in Josefina and Theresa's apartments, the indoor spaces are much more enclosed than, for example, the house on Antigua. Here, the windows have no glass inside their frames, which allows the outside sound and the air to enter the room. The border between the inside and outside is more permeable, it's fluid. The balconies present another form of threshold. Then we have the vehicles: the bicycle, the car, the boat and the train. Each of these determine a particular relation to its surroundings. The car is the most private

and excluding space, in the train Theresa is exposed to others, but not to the outside, on the bicycle she is exposed to the outside but not so much to others. The boat is an interesting space. As its body is resonating and distorting the sounds from the outside as well as from the inside, and as it is constantly moved by the external influences, the borders between the inside and the outside become very vague. In the cabin one feels enclosed and exposed at the same time. It somehow mirrors the tension that I mentioned before.

NOTEBOOK: How did these characters, and their relationship, come to be what they are?

WITTMANN: Theresa and Josefina are friends in real life. And it happened to be that Josefina decided to go back to Buenos Aires after having lived in Germany for five years. We decided to include this into the film and it became a main part. Therefore I could build on what was already there. We had also decided to fictionalize everything, which gave me the opportunity to leave things out without having the feeling of trimming my friends' characters. In general I am very much interested in situations themselves and not so much in how something leads to this situation or how it could be interpreted on a psychological level. The relationship between the two women can be read as a romantic relationship as well as a deep friendship. It doesn't matter to me how the audience reads it, as both forms include love and care. And these are the important aspects for me. This openness or vagueness in terms of interpretation is wanted. It reflects my attitude in relation to how I feel and think. The audience might fill the space between the lines and will position themselves as well. But I won't tell them which is the right position, as there is no right or wrong.

NOTEBOOK: I'd like to close by asking your feelings about the effect of surprising the viewer. Both *Drift* and your short film *21,3°C* include moments—I won't spoil them for those who haven't seen the films—which suddenly force us to consider that what might have seemed loose and observational has in fact been intricately arranged and designed.

WITTMANN: My feeling is that a strong framework enables deeper observations and a more delicate perception. This starts already with the working process on a film. When the most important parameters are clear and formal decisions have been made, it is possible to rely on them. This gives me the free space to perceive all the details that lie beyond the surface as I don't have to think about the essential questions all the time. With the finished film, I hope to transmit this confidence to an audience, I really hope for them to trust the film. With *Drift* this is essential as it becomes an experience only when you are able to surrender yourself to it. It is also true for the moments of surprise. As soon as I place them at a certain position inside the film, they become something that is decided upon. It becomes irrelevant if these moments just happened during the shooting or if they were arranged. The surprises in these films are not shocking, they don't betray the audience. At its best, they allow us to broaden our imagination and sharpen our senses. They still remain surprising to me. And I love to be surprised. ♦



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