

Acropolis Cinema and the Cinefamily present



September 4, 2016 ~ 4:00PM ~ Cinefamily

ABOUT THE FILM

A unique aesthetic object, Spanish director Mauro Herce's directorial debut *Dead Slow Ahead* plays at once like a vocational ethnography and an experiential view of industrial advancement. Filmed on a commercial freighter off the coasts of Ukraine and New Orleans, the film situates the viewer, sans context, directly in the bowels of the ship's titanic hull, with clanking machinery, whirring turbines, and swells of oceanic furor enveloping the senses as we barrel forward in the grip of unforgiving conditions. Herce captures an astonishing array of natural wonders and crafts an extra-sensory tableaux of near-surrealist imagery with a steady hand and acute eye for the beauty of his surroundings. With its prismatic range of primary colors, aural ambiance, and disorienting spatial arrangements, *Dead Slow Ahead* constructs an immense formal infrastructure through which to conceive of the sheer physicality of life aboard the freighter.

74 min // Spain/France // 2015



Two Years At Sea by Jay Kuehner

The following article was originally published in Cinema Scope 65.

A post-industrial trance film set aboard a phantom-like freighter drifting toward shipwreck or oblivion, *Dead Slow Ahead* materializes its eponymous nautical telegraph into an abstract state of voluptuous inertia. The merchant ship *Fair Lady* is adrift in unspecified international waters, her crew diminished (if not devoured) by the machinery of the vessel as it heaves upon a vast open sea, with ports of call on a horizon that appears as if it were a post-apocalyptic landscape, however real, of late-capital commerce. A mostly Filipino crew navigates these relatively untroubled waters, while a similarly stilled camera inhabits the ship's bowels and deck, accompanied by an incessant nautical din: the clang of cable, a radar's beeping pulse, the hissing wind, and sheer mass bearing down.

Director Mauro Herce, principally known as a cinematographer (see also Ocaso [2010] and Arraianos [2012]), has sculpted an aesthetically aberrant documentary that, while grounded in the vicissitudes of uneasy labour, effectively partakes of science fiction. Herce renders the fathomable into something utterly strange, teasing an intrinsically outré quality from objects or scenarios that have become fixed by routine perception (with cinema being among such routines). Witness the film's opening sequence, which establishes a sense of remedial disorientation: what appears to be an abstract, blank colour field is revealed to be a simple curtain, its folds unceremoniously parted as the captain enters, his presence registered with a measure of static objectivity that weighs him equally to his material surroundings. In Herce's vision of the *Fair Lady's* ecosystem, man and machine become almost unrecognizably enmeshed, and the bulk of *Dead Slow Ahead* is rather non-polemically invested in allowing the contours (or hard edges) of this entanglement to be seen. The shiphands' labour is neither degrading nor dignified in this view, and it's intentionally unclear if the ship belongs to these sailors, or if they are ultimately at its mercy.

To elaborate on this distinction of the familiar in relation to the strange: there's nothing really "fathomable" about this colossal ship. But as a phenomenon of global trade, a signifier of industry, and an overloaded container for the mythology of movies—the *Fair Lady* occasions no mutiny, nor *African Queen*-like heroics—there's something universally recognizable about it. Though as striae of the hull's metal ribbing are reflected, shimmering, in water pooling unctuously within; or as the ship's cavernous belly assumes the uncanny dynamic of a colourfully illuminated stage (resembling *Potemkin* as envisioned by the Stenberg brothers); or as the itinerantly human howls of karaoke are subsumed by the din of the ship's motor, a sense of strangeness overcomes the film's taxonomy of the ship. Such essence owes to Herce's bold design of bending perception to reveal the otherworldly that often screens the real. The resultant warp achieved by Herce's persistence of vision has a way of undermining his subjects' positions in space, as well as the viewer's underpinnings. Hence the associative invocation of science fiction, in spite of *Dead Slow Ahead's* otherwise contrasting claims to realist representation. Not just another boat movie, *Dead Slow Ahead* approximates the forgotten spaces of an Allan Sekula polemic as if corrupted by a David Lynch fever dream.

While the ship is a foreign harbour unto itself, its otherworldly vista toward various shores is what begets the film's more disturbing impressions. Refineries, rigs, parched landscapes, and vestiges of unseen civilization appear in hallucinatory halations along the ship's horizontal line of travel: the furtive passage of commerce, and time, is protracted linearly. Contrast this with the expansive vistas from the ship's bow as it ploughs, laden with containers, into ominous cloud banks suggestive of 17th-century Dutch seascape painting, a beautiful but bruised light to which Herce surrenders in a striking montage. The dehumanizing effect of the crew's steadfast labour is treated unsensationally, impassively even, to maximize a materialist essence, though this does not by nature entail an absence of humanism from the film's implicit anthropology. Herce refrains from close-ups of his subjects (not until the quarter-hour mark do we get a good look at a face), but the sense of detachment serves to reveal an intimacy in the details. The sailors may lead a spectral existence at sea, but their presence is intimated within the ship's cool surfaces: their disembodied voices, gathered from phone calls to loved ones back home, become insinu-

ated into the labyrinthine interior architecture. The camera drifts along a wall of faded portraits, the sailor's gazes distilling the melancholy of solitude's context. In one small but momentous gesture—that could well spare the film from grave abstraction, redeem the bleakness of the voyage, and evince ever so discreetly the manifest poise of civilization—Herce steadies his camera upon the incidental scene of the sailors' unoccupied supper table, set fastidiously for what could be just another meal, but suggestive of the very first or last. The still life of plate, napkin, glass, and adjacent apple resting on checked tablecloth: it contains multitudes.

Scarcely narrative, compelled by mood, *Dead Slow Ahead* feels virtually inhabitable. The very fact of the ship's propulsion evokes the dread of capitalism's relentless course, of which any critique is mere water on the ship's deck. There's drama to the misfortune of a leaking keel that could potentially destroy the cargo, but both the crew and director take it in stride. This lack of exigency bespeaks an artistic strategy that goes beyond a consideration of the ship's cultural and political effect. The expressive, transformative power of Herce's camera as it navigates the ship itself yields an expansive repertoire of signification, but it is elementally the ship's sheer scale that bears commensurately, and most revealingly, on that of the film's design. The articulation of space becomes the ultimate subject of *Dead Slow Ahead*: an acute sense of displacement both physical and psychological is rendered palpable. Ironically, the prevailing abstraction becomes the film's most generous point of entry, as it sets loose our attention from the immediate fate of the crew (who will promptly move on to other tasks) while hollowing out an alternately transfixing and disenchanting realm for us to ruminate on our own condition. At the very least, we might take some strange comfort in the less-than-metaphysical realization that, somewhere far out at sea, within the deepest reaches of a behemoth whose destination is unknown, an anonymous sailor is running laps around the engine room. ♦

Upcoming Events

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October 02, 2016 ~ *The Academy of Muses*

José Luis Guerín's anticipated follow up to *In the City of Sylvia*
4:00pm ~ Cinefamily ~ 611 N. Fairfax, Los Angeles, CA. 90036