

## LITTLE BIG MAN

Gigantism rules the cinematic landscape, but Peter Tscherkassky's tiny, exquisitely crafted dreams are a ravishing anomaly

By Neil Young

The Nicaraguan flyweight Román 'Chocolatito' González may not be the biggest or most famous fighter around, but he is currently rated – pound-for-pound – the world's best boxer. Similarly, the Austrian filmmaker Peter Tscherkassky isn't even the most prominent director from Vienna; but he has a sound claim to the title of the world's greatest active filmmaker – shot-for-shot, second-for-second, frame-for-frame.

The 57-year-old's filmography over the last two decades consists of nine shorts totalling just 97 minutes. But he has amassed dozens of prizes and critical hosannas for found-footage spectacles that are now widely acknowledged as masterpieces: *Outer Space* (1999) and *Instructions for a Light and Sound Machine* (2005) both featured in this magazine's best-of-all-time poll in 2012; early indications are that *The Exquisite Corpus*, which premiered at Cannes in May, will join them when the next poll comes around in 2022.

Tscherkassky's extracurricular contributions to cinema are just as noteworthy. He co-founded sixpackfilm, the Vienna collective that has been an astonishingly successful force in the promotion of Austrian experimental sixpackfilm co-published *Film Unframed: A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema* (2012), which Tscherkassky edited, combining aesthetic appeal with academic rigour, informative practicality and non-obfuscatory prose.

The book reflects Tscherkassky's craftsmanship. He spends years on his films, exposing raw 35mm stock a metre at a time on his workbench using laser-pointers, maskings and small torches. The resulting monochrome provocations manipulate and distort existing footage, often from well-known sources, so that they assault eye and ear with rapid-fire imagery and harshly cacophonous audio – though not always: for *The Exquisite Corpus* Dirk Schaefer created a delicate score, half Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon*, half 'Sailing By', for the various dream-zones Tscherkassky navigates.

*The Exquisite Corpus* gradually unleashes a frenzy, as examples of softcore erotica (plus glimpses of an oyster-scoffing Joyce Redman from Tony Richardson's *Tom Jones*) are blended into an orgiastic celebration of the human body. This is the first time Tscherkassky has worked with what some call 'pornography' – although both *Outer Space* and its successors *Get Ready* (1999) and *Dream Work* (2001) were derived from Sidney J. Furie's sexually charged poltergeist thriller *The Entity* (1981).

At Cannes, the film dazzled the handful of critics who defied the red carpet's pull to investigate the Directors' Fortnight Short Film Corner. *The Exquisite Corpus* has since won Best Short at Chicago and played to appreciative reactions at the London Film Festival – part of a global tour that has already taken in Melbourne, Mar del Plata in Argentina and Ulaanbaatar



Blue mood: *The Exquisite Corpus*, not so much depicting sex as conjuring the feel of it

in Mongolia, often accompanied by a selected retrospective of Tscherkassky's own uniquely exquisite corpus. Shorts are usually pushed to the margins of exhibition, but Tscherkassky is among the luckier examples of those who – like Borges, Carver and Chekhov in literature – adhere to the 'small is beautiful' principle.

His films benefit from the remarkable funding mechanisms that have allowed Austrian avant-garde cinema – illustrious forebears such as Peter Kubelka and Kurt Kren, amongst many others – to flourish over the last 60 years. In this world, in which feature-length works have always been an exception, Tscherkassky stands out for the way he bridges the gulf between experimental and narrative realms. In comparison with the obscurantisms and abstractions that most maestros of the non-commercial cinema favour, Tscherkassky is accessible. As he recently remarked, "All of my films are somehow narrative. Small little narratives – *something* is going on, which really helps. It helps in terms of my production and it helps the audience watching the film, there's a certain progression." While his films showcase multi-layered visuals of near-infinite complexity, their structures are simple. As the Austrian critic Christoph Huber has noted,

*This is peak Tscherkassky: a percussive extremity that overwhelms the spectator with virtuoso editing and composition*

"Regardless of timbre and approach, the persuasive power of the work stems from its conceptual clarity... His films are essentially self-explanatory."

*The Exquisite Corpus* – its title a not-so-helpful reference to the surrealist game of Consequences *Cadavre exquis* – is in some ways a quintessential Tscherkassky work. The narrative framework is basic: we see a nudist couple sailing a boat around what looks like Greek islands; they reach the shore, where a young woman sleeps; her dreams are visualised; she awakes. Countless avant-garde films conjure dream-worlds, but surprisingly few have framed their content as explicitly as Tscherkassky does here – perhaps none since Edwin S. Porter's seven-minute quasi-experimental comedy *Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (1906).

But for Tscherkassky, the oneiric is, here as in *Dream Work*, essentially a pretext for what gradually becomes an exhilarating bombardment of images – delivered at such speed that one can't tell whether actual penetration, fellatio and cunnilingus are being shown; only careful freeze-framing reveals occasional explicitness. *The Exquisite Corpus* is, however, more about conjuring the mood of sex – its focused physicality, the joyously violent bond between two individuals – than specific images. This is peak Tscherkassky: a percussive extremity that overwhelms the spectator with virtuoso editing and composition, defying verbal or intellectual analysis, gloriously climaxing in one sensual, irresistible rush. We're happily pummelled into submission: it's a knock-out. 6