

# SHOCK OPERA:

The First North American Film Retrospective of Werner Schroeter

BY MÓNICA SAVIRÓN

“We were 20 students at the film academy in Munich, and Werner was by far the greatest eccentric there. The only dandy in the group,” Wim Wenders said about his friend Werner Schroeter. Dressed in solemn black, his face hidden beneath the hat of a solitary man, big rings shaping the languid movement of both his hands, a constant cigarette enhancing the romantic aura of an artist destined to be born and to die in April, “the cruellest month” (1945–2010), Werner Schroeter is one of the most unclassifiable, striking, and sophisticated European film directors of our time. He emerged in the late '60s at the same time as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders, and Werner Herzog, and lit up the screen for 40 years with a strange and sumptuous flame. Schroeter weaved his way through the international avant-garde, collaborating with Andy Warhol at the Factory and acting in the films of Rosa von Praunheim, one of the founders of the gay rights movement in Germany. A great lover of music, poetry, photography, and theater, Schroeter became a filmmaker and producer through his passion for the texts, the opera, and above all, the divas and actresses who fascinated him—Maria Callas, Magdalena Montezuma (his love, his muse), Carole Bouquet, Isabelle Huppert, Ingrid Caven, and Bulle Ogier. From May 11 to June 11, the Museum of Modern Art will present a retrospective of 38 of Schroeter's feature films, alongside rarities in 16mm, and never-before-seen 8mm experimental works.

Werner Schroeter's films are complex vehicles of powerful energy and sensuality. They tend to lack the conventional codes between content and meaning, and elude traditional film theory paradigms. A shot-by-shot analysis would spoil the cumulative, impressionistic, and emotional quality that characterizes a Schroeter film, often expressed through shock, surprise, the surreal, and the grotesque. The films emanate a perpetual melancholia for his beloved Italy, inspired by a childhood filled with constant travel, and for his muses, who appear and reappear throughout his entire filmography, exceptional performers acting in a kind of theater of the absurd, where a constant musical flow emphasizes the adopted gestural excesses of the silent cinema. His films want to be a testament to the beauty of the body, of the perfectly sculpted Mediterranean Adonis, trapped in the visual style of what later could be described as “Almodovarian” painterly compositions, floating in an almost non-narrative storyline with asynchronous sound. The connection between the external lives and landscapes of his characters and their inner urgencies is fatally broken, like bodies separated from their voices. This rupture is reflected on a cinematic level through the fragmented pace and structure of the films, which unfold on a theatrical terrain in which Schroeter directs every detail, every intonation, every slight deviation of the voice, every nuance of the soul. It is often through the gestures, poses, postures, clothes, and lights that shine on Schroeter's actors' faces and bodies that this multi-layered reality comes into effect. Like Warhol, Schroeter had a habit of making Polaroid images of the people he loved. His films at times feel like dramatic recreations of these ephemeral instant images and the many meanings they held for him.

Perhaps owing to his love of theater and opera, Schroeter's films are better understood using the theoretical framework of the performing arts. The *gesamtwerk*, epitomized by Richard Wagner's operas, embodies the concept of a totality whose parts cannot be separated. These parts are not combined in harmony, but fight one another, step on one another, conflicting, contradicting, and creating an inner



*Der Tod der Maria Muldran* (The Death of Maria Muldran) 1972. West Germany. Directed by Werner Schroeter. Image courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.

chaos and despair—emblematic of how Schroeter also sees the drama of the lives we live. He won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1980 for *Palermo oder Wolfsburg*, in which a court case is a reflection of the cultural differences between the North and the South of Europe. In a sequence that becomes a circus of hysterical consumption, the young Sicilian Nicola, after falling in love with a German girl, is accused of murder. It is the third part of a passion play and the gestures seem comical, the voices are distorted, the nonsense increases like bubbles in boiling water—it is the metaphor of a world in which harmony simply doesn't exist, and never will. Schroeter's world is one of blood and love and longing, of blacks and reds, of cut organs, explicit amputations, slow incisions made by lovers or strangers, or upon oneself—and words: “Words on a sign, names on a poster, book titles, a name in a phonebook, an epitaph in Slovenian on a gravestone, a placard, a line on a page . . . Sometimes these fragments insist on being heard . . . Language is punishment: everything is in it, and through it error makes all things vanish.” This line, from *Malina* (1991) represents the mental suffocation of Isabelle Huppert's character in an unforgettable performance as an anxious writer whose identity is in disarray: “I've never been happy, but I've seen beauty.”

Schroeter explores montage as the sensory motor of a time that ceases to flow chronologically, but works as the coexistence of diverse temporalities. We are in a world that challenges the spectator's own capacity to make connections and interpretations. Image repetition and circular narratives trigger a kind of memory that forces us to question what we just saw (which links to the theory of montage articulated by Alexander Kluge, whose interviews with Schroeter are also part of this retrospective). This dreamy confusion is highlighted by surreal intercuts of single, rapid shots (bloody eyes, bloody lips), or entire sequences of expressionistic mannerism, impious provocations, and exuberant kitsch. In Schroeter's world, a fox can be the guest eating a baked chicken on Isabelle Huppert's kitchen's table, or a young boy can graft roses onto his lover's body, in a combination of the figures of Christ and Saint Sebastian.

It is important to realize that this cinema emerges in the second half of the 20th century in contexts of social, political, and sexual repression, dictatorships, censorship, and religious conflicts—a harrowing hall of mirrors within which Schroeter loses himself amidst the madness, blame, porn, and pain. Growing up in a country where millions of people were slaughtered, Schroeter used his eccentricity as a scream in the abyss, a visceral effort to write a new art



*Mondo Lux* (Werner Schroeter, Isabelle Huppert, Goldregen) Frankfurt am Main, 2009. 2011. Germany. Directed by Elfi Muesch. Image courtesy Christian Holzhaus Fine Arts, Berlin.

history that no longer worked within the oppressive syntax of German culture. For Schroeter, the authority of Nazi power, represented by the figure of the father—like in *The Kingdom of Naples* (1978), whose last word is the agonizing, “Help!”—must be confronted in a never-ending war. “Blood cannot be washed with blood. Blood can only be washed with water,” states one of the characters of *The Rose King* (1986). Wim Wenders comments in Elfi Mikesch's documentary, *Mondo Lux* (2011): “Death is the important topic in Werner's films. His first feature, *Eika Katappa* . . . There's no other film where so many people die. He destroyed them, those storylines, by having people die and go on or die three times or die eternally.”

Schroeter created multiple worlds for his characters to live and die in. His actresses would often play double roles, or be referred to by their real names, and travel through time and space speaking a babble of German, French, English, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. As Schroeter used to put it, “their world is a farce in which comedy and drama are all one and the same.” His final film, *Tonight* (2008), is the story of an imaginary city, the deprivation and destruction of a community, including poor and rich alike, all in one night. It is a dissection of cruelty and horror: the infernal hopelessness of being, like a candle consumed by its own intensity. Brimming with music from beginning to end, all of his films depict a dance of human predators choreographed in the stylish manner of an abandoned *minuet*, a modern Pina Bausch *Tanztheater*, or a Kazuo Ohno *Butoh*. Werner Schroeter, the aesthete and the dreamer, left us with the beauty of images that sear into the mind and the soul, like the rapture of a face drenched in feathers of ethereal golden light, or the joy in the perfection of a Callas aria, mixed with the tragic melancholia that T.S. Eliot comes closest to describing: “breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire.”

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