

ULRIKE OTTINGER SHOWS SEGMENTS OF "EXILE SHANGHAI"

Adam J. Sacks

Dubbed by critics as the "queen of the Berlin underground," and self-described as an "ethnologue," filmmaker and doyenne of New German Cinema's experimental wing, **Ulrike Ottinger** came to Cornell University's Willard Straight Theater on February 4. Her visit, sponsored by the Institute for German Cultural Studies and the Program of Jewish Studies, was occasioned by the presentation of the latter three of five parts of her documentary **Exile Shanghai**. While taking as its explicit theme the history of successive waves of Jewish immigration to the Chinese city, the five non-episodic, refugee portraits reveal that a singular, constructed narrative of the Jewish experience in the city is not possible. Alas, the historical and personal contexts of the journey of Sephardic merchants from India and Iraq during the mid-19th Century, Siberian Jews and Russian Zionists fleeing pogroms and the Russian Civil War, and Dutch, Austrian and German Jews during the onslaught of fascism are widely divergent. The thematic bind of the film is a tapestry of cultural transportation, an encounter with the foreign at varying crisis moments undertaken by nomads and refugees who can rarely afford the exoticism of the colonizer.

An oft-cited tension at the heart of many of Ottinger's films is that between "documentarism" and "innovation/construction." In **Exile Shanghai**, artifice is injected into the documentary through the removal of a present narrator in exchange for several narrative layers. The roving camera of Ottinger performs a filmic archeological dig through the ruins of the past and the vibrant streets of present-day Shanghai. While revealing that Shanghai has survived all European encroachments, through this cinema verite, urban-planning archeology, the camera lens reconstructs the past of long-vanished places, finding vestigial residues of the wartime Jewish presence.

Through archival reconstruction, a nightclub morphs into a synagogue, an alleyway into a marketplace and a noodle shop into a bakery. Interspersed on top of this foundation layer of the film's architecture is a mosaic of interviews which recreate from varying perspectives life in Shanghai. Tantamount to historical testimony, the narrative in the interviews is marked by ambiguity over the repressed, unresolved and longed for in the past, and perhaps the knowledge of alternative fates. The highly synchronized and diverse aural accompaniment highlights the symptomaticity of the former Shanghai residents, especially the refugees from Nazi Europe, as they perform their past. As the only singular European element in the film, the soundtrack, composed of Yiddish Klezmer, Viennese Waltzes and Weimar Berlin cabaret songs among others, provides a platform that acts as a stimulus to memory. It also illustrates the longing for a forever lost home of the refugees and their drive to reconstruct elements of their past in Shanghai. Sound is the privileged medium which can provide for transport into the space of a European past.

While possessing many innovative and constructivist elements, the film's leisurely pace, lingering over details, identifies it as documentary. **Exile Shanghai** is perhaps best prefigured by Ottinger's earlier four-and-a-half documentary/filmic travelogue "China-The Arts-Everyday Life" (1985) in which Chinese landscapes and people unscroll before the viewer like a Chinese nature painting, and where the position of the camera insist in a separation between the filmmaker and the sights that catch her eye. Exorbitant length was explained by Ottinger in an interview as follows, in the documentaries "there is no *mise en scene*, so you must have time to see the people and get familiar with them. To understand what they do, you need a certain amount of time to understand the whole system."

As perhaps the most cosmopolitan city in the Far East, "the last place that did not demand a visa" the open door of Shanghai led to agglomeration of foreign communities and provided home to a larger

expatriate society. The colonial multiculturalism where "you could walk from street to street and come under a different form of law" could best be approximated by the current cultural studies term, *interzone*, a border cultural space which provides for kinds of cultural interaction which resists the nation-state. Divided between different national garrisons though, Shanghai was a polyglot environment which often resisted fluidity. As Rena Krasno of Russia observed, "the bad part of the colonial system was that I had no social contact with the Chinese." Divisions between the Jewish populations abounded. In a striking reversal of the European topography, the Russian Jews were more wealthy, had more access to cultural institutions, and lived a lavish lifestyle while the German-speaking Jews were ghettoized and sent to a "restricted" area by the Japanese to satisfy their Nazi allies. After the Japanese invasion of the city on December 8, 1941, German Jews were forced to live amongst impoverished Chinese in the crowded Hongkew district, without running water and with the constant fear of being deported and worse. Ted Alexander of Berlin recounted how German Jews reconstructed "a little Vienna, a little Berlin, a little Breslau," with coffee houses, theaters, cultural institutions and synagogues. To "really leave all this behind...to enter nothingness," was how the question of exile was framed by many German Jews. Out of the "refugee mainstream," Shanghai was for many the last port of refuge, an escape route after the negotiation of barriers and chaos.

In the lively question/answer session following the screening, an audience member remarked upon the fact that the Chinese point of view is excluded and not accounted for by the film and even that some of the exiles covered up the reality of colonialism. While it would be inappropriate to speak of any cultural symbiosis between the Jews and the Chinese, the refugees were coopted into a preexisting colonial system. The interaction between refugees and colonialists calls for a redefinition of colonialism in this context. Some like Geoffrey Heller, "hoped to be part of the rebirth of a free

(continued on page 21)

of Haydn, Webster pointed out, reception of Bach has the tendency to get hung on the notion of eccentricity, refusing to move beyond considerations of the bizarre aspects of his music in order to place it in a larger context. Webster pointed as well to apparent binary oppositions such as serious vs. learned or *Kenner* vs. *Liebhaber* that often structure narratives of musical history, but which, as he explained, were already fluid categories in the eighteenth century. Moving Bach from periphery to the center of the musical-historical canon, Webster concluded, does not mean simply putting him back into the canon but rather means reshaping our view of music history. In order to do so, scholars must come to terms not only with what are termed his stylistic eccentricities but also with the notion of "sincerity" in the musical composition. Webster's paper prompted one of the most lively discussions during the conference, a discussion that involved not only the specific position of C.P.E. Bach but also the way we construct his-

clavichord. With its soft tone and expressive *Bebung* or vibrating strings, the clavichord became the ideal instrument for the expression of the *Empfindung* embodied in Bach's works; because of its hushed sound, the clavichord also became the instrument of solitude. Listening to the clavichord therefore is an entirely different experience from hearing the powerful sound of the modern piano. It requires, like C.P.E. Bach's eccentric keyboard fantasias, that the listener be prepared to invest emotion in advance; the modern piano performance may allow the fidgety listener room for a few uneasy coughs, but the clavichord performance in particular of C.P.E. Bach's intricate works, demands absolute silence and attention. For the performers as well, Bach's music seems to demand a different aesthetic; Kramer's discussion of Diderot's paradox of acting seems to apply not only to the music but also to the theatrical quality of the performance itself.

Evening concerts by fortepianist **Malcolm Bilson**, soprano **Judith Kellock**, and the ensemble **Publick Musick** masterfully demonstrated the powerful effect that Bach's music can produce.

Just as Bach's music and the clavichord require a new mode of listening, Bach as a historical figure requires a new method of study. Herein perhaps lies the greatest potential for Bach within the current narrative of music history—as a subversive force that because of his very eccentricity forces scholars to deconstruct the old paradigms for understanding music in the second half of the eighteenth century and to reconstruct new ones. As each of the papers in fact suggested, the tensions within Bach's music, and between it and its context, force the reexamination of the common assumptions and understanding we bring to the music of this period. Bach himself kept company with many of the most prominent thinkers and writers of his time; this circumstance is reflected in his music and the way it at once engages with a variety of intellectual "cross-currents," challenging musicologists to delve ever deeper into the context surrounding his works in order to come to terms with them. But musicologists are

not the only ones Bach challenges. As Richards and Hogwood pointed out at the beginning of the conference, he was the prominent musical figure of his time, a time of great developments in philosophical discussions of aesthetics. Because Haydn and Mozart would later achieve such fame and significance, we tend to think of them when we focus on music and the emergence of eighteenth-century aesthetics, forgetting that very likely the music many of the thinkers may have had in their ears was that of C.P.E. Bach. This February's conference provided a valuable opportunity for participants to examine what it might have meant to listen to this age through the ears of C.P.E. Bach.*

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(Exile - continued from page 4)

China," an aspiration thwarted by Communist unification of the country in 1949. In response to a question from **Leslie Adelson** concerning the leitmotifs within the musical accompaniment, Ottinger described the montage technique she utilized with the music to tell another story. Both digging backwards through time and building upon the central foundation of Jewish life the film presents multiple perspectives on life in Shanghai. While the evocative power of the film may be due in part to the fact that the Holocaust remains the film's hidden scene, the film exchanges the notion of a Diaspora which valorizes a defined, knowable center for the framework of exile where an originary home is unclear and which offers forward that the vital life is at the periphery. This is similar to a supernova where the center of the star is dying and energy expands outwards as opposed to a black hole where the center negates and acts as a vacuum on the periphery offering either destruction or radically new possibilities. In embarking upon this project Ottinger's historical interests and present-day concerns have intersected, as she stated, in Shanghai "the whole century with its problems was present and condensed there." •



Richard Troeger (l.) and David Yearsley

torical narratives and the place of such so-called marginal figures within them. In between papers, Cornell University music professor **David Yearsley**, Boston Clavichord Society President **Richard Troeger**, and Central College professor **Carol lei Breckenridge** gave small recitals of Bach's keyboard works on the