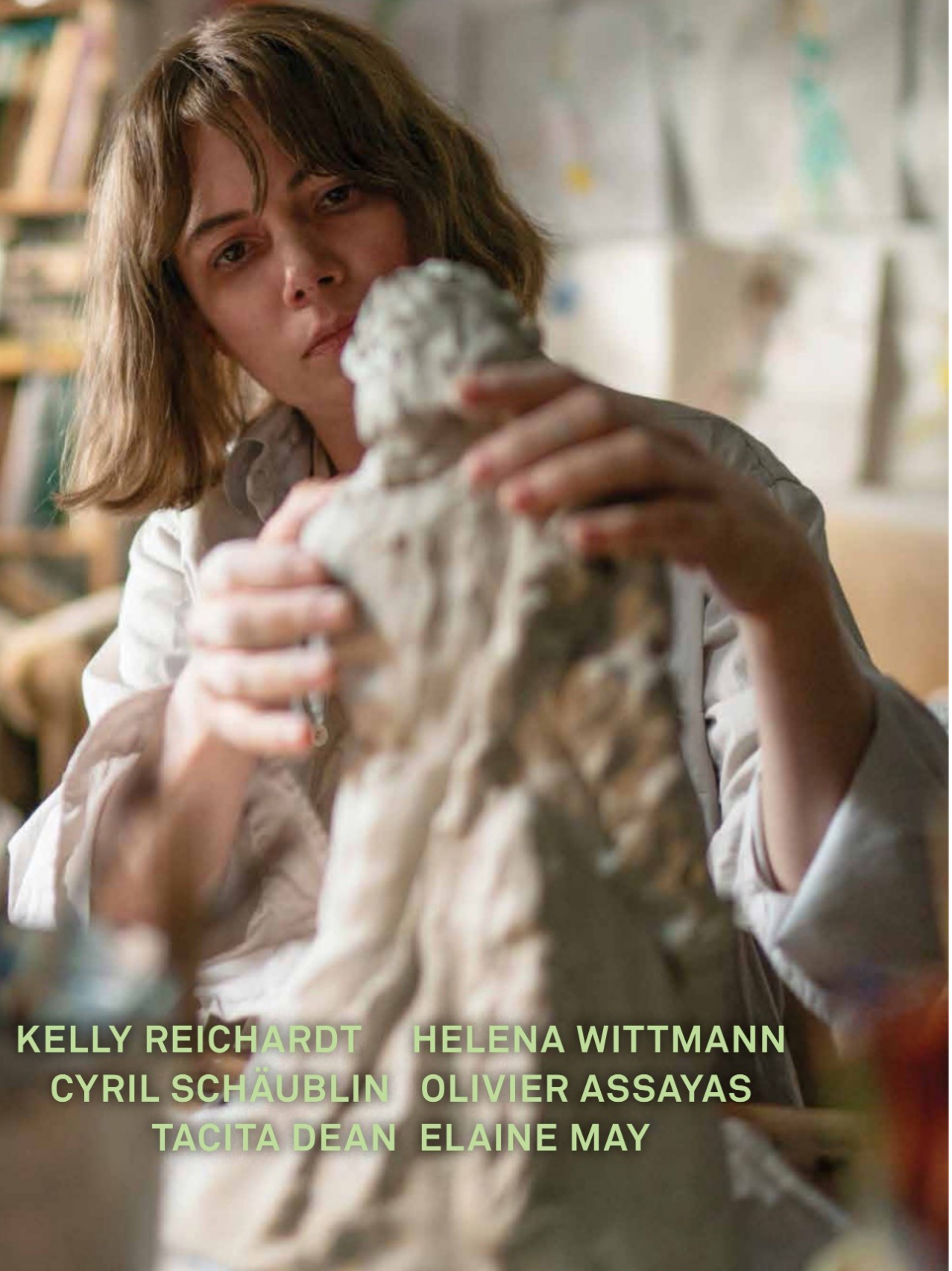


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ISSUE 92 | FALL 2022



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Unrest



Timely Circumstances

Cyril Schäublin on *Unrest*

BY JAY KUEHNER

Anarchic in spirit but formally composed, Cyril Schäublin's *Unrest* operates in the dialectical fashion fitting of its era, arriving at an unsuspecting synthesis between such notionally oppositional forces. Indeed, its radical gesture may lie in the refusal to situate them as mutually incompatible. A portrait of the small Swiss town of Saint-Imier, where watchmaking had become industrialized as factory labour, the film charts the consequent rise of anti-authoritarian sentiment that took hold in the region in the latter half of the 19th century. Schäublin consolidates such a sweeping historical purview within the far narrower confines of the factory itself, observing the labour of

loupe-sighted workers—mostly women—bent fastidiously over the mechanical marvel that is *horlogerie*.

The film homes in with exacting detail on the intricate fabrication of watches, identifying the eponymous piece known as the *unrueh* (unrest, or balance wheel), the regulating device at the heart of the timepiece. The film's protagonist, a role far less precisely defined, is a young fitter named Josephine (Clara Gostynski), who has grown weary from the devaluation of her labour (the clink of fewer centimes meted out in buttoned envelopes) and is predisposed towards an increasingly organized anarchist union among watchmakers, which offers healthcare

to unwed women. The movement has likewise sparked the sympathies of a young Russian cartographer, Pyotr (Alexei Evstratov), newly arrived in the village to ostensibly map the shifting political territories. The film occasions the chance encounter between these two strangers, drawn together in a political and possibly romantic alliance, which is delineated with a tender restraint unbecoming of its milieu.

That Pyotr, subject of much speculation among a coterie of female cousins back in Moscow in the film's prelude, is modelled on the Russian nobleman-turned-anarchist Pyotr Kropotkin grounds the film in historical precedent, but Schäublin eschews mere hagiography. Kropotkin the man was a far-ranging polymath and traveller (whom Oscar Wilde once dubbed the "white Christ") whose work in evolutionary biology had profound implications on the social sciences, and thus politics. This derived mainly from his observation in nature of a common and persistent form of mutual aid in all species: cooperation, rather than conflict, was key to survival. In this context, the benefits of self-government—of autonomous over centralized, and thus authoritarian, rule—were incontrovertible: anarchy, the thinking went, did not necessarily entail entropy.

As he is conceived in the film, Kropotkin cuts a far more modest figure, imagined from a perspective of near-anonymity, straying almost haphazardly into the frame (and thus, history). Implied in Schäublin's more humble determination is a democratized, and often decentred, view of his subjects. Historical events are scarcely mundane, but how, his schema would appear to inquire, is the quotidian historicized? Kropotkin, wearing a beard, round spectacles, and top hat, arrives unceremoniously at Saint-Imier, hemmed into the frame by compositions that privilege the eaves of buildings and trunks of trees as much as persons. Drained of drama, the dialogue is almost purely expository, but nonetheless iterates a particular materiality of the historical moment, with characters meeting the grand ideas of the "long century" as if for the first time. "We imagine a territory as the area of a state or nation" says one nonplussed Muscovite, "but for anarchists, it's just a place that we live in together at any moment."

Such pronouncements run the risk of a certain didacticism, or, worse, of reducing characters to ciphers. But *Unrest's* deployment of its non-professional cast lends the cerebrally droll proceedings an errant charm, with Schäublin effectively tasking his players to embody historically weighted material with respectful insouciance. The director's personal investment, too, of honouring his own ancestral lineage of watchmakers, serves to animate the labour-oriented scenes, which are mesmeric in their rhythm and focus. And, despite the absence of any conspicuous conflict (to wit, these anarchists have a choir), the tale is not without incident nor sufficient dread. Industrialization and globalization are radically transforming how this community organizes itself, and thus it begins to divide along economic and ideological lines, while leaving us nostalgic for such a nascent schism; even the gendarmes are polite.

The spectre of nationalism (or "imagined communities," as per Benedict Anderson) is ushered in amid such collective uncertainty, while a local election threatens to promote the factory owner

to council member of Bern. It's worth noting that voting is conducted with utmost civility, the workers' committee having resolved to cast theirs on behalf of "the Commune," with their own party differences typically settled by a majority of raised hands at the local pub, over glasses of absinthe. But they too are not averse to money, if only to send a percentage of their wages to striking railway workers in Baltimore, via telegram.

While such nominal content is ripe for social realist treatment, *Unrest* is more equivocal in its design, depicting certain human gestures with the transactional economy of Bresson and mechanical ones "operationally," à la Farocki. But the prevailing sense is that of a folktale, mythic in scope, as Schäublin is keen to resist the verisimilitude of the period piece. Lending to its storied nature is the persistent reminder of its status as a photographed object, the relative action interrupted or circumscribed by the presence of camera crews documenting select versions of the "real," to be used as factory promotional material (or, in the case of one enterprising local, selling portraits of fashionable anarchists). The implication is that of exposing various myths-in-the-making in the instant before their solidification as arbitrary truth, with capitalism being the most onerous example.

Unrest can be read less as cautionary allegory than as part of a continuum, inseparable from our modern crises. Lessons in the theory of labour value have not lost resonance, though it may be a foregone paradox that the watchmakers' performance of work is being punitively measured by the very tool they are creating (their tactical response: deliberately slowing production). *Unrest* contemplates time to reveal, like that old truism of cinema, the extent to which we are contemplated by *it*, constructed through it. Within the film, distances are insistently measured to find the most efficient route between workstations, that time might be maximized for the most expedient production. It's only fitting that *Unrest* should afford Pyotr and Josephine the time to embark on a Walseresque walk, with a timepiece left to dangle from the limb of a tree, where it might better be forgotten, or balanced to the rhythm of nature, unkept.

Cinema Scope: Given the film's opening citation—in which Kropotkin concedes he is an anarchist after spending time among the Swiss watchmakers—it is only natural that I begin with the Russian scientist, explorer, historian, political scientist, convict, and former prince. Kropotkin is far from a household name, and yet in his time he was something of an international celebrity thinker. While avoiding the trap of the dreaded historical biopic, your film gets at something of his essence. Was he a point of origin for the film? Or did it start with the watch?

Cyril Schäublin: It was a case of many things coming together, as always. It really started with my grandmother and great-aunts, whose stories I learned several years ago. I knew that they had worked in watch factories, but I wanted to know more about their daily lives, and what they were actually doing, and how they got through their days. And I learned that they were working on the same piece, the unrest mechanism, and this singular detail resonated with me.



My brother, who is an anthropologist, told me about Kropotkin. Alexei Evstratov, who plays Kropotkin in the film, said something interesting to me after the shoot: that his character didn't get the chance to speak that much. He's an avid reader of Kropotkin, but even though he was not entitled to speak from Kropotkin's perspective, to try to speak his mind, he understood that there was some spirit of him in the film—for instance, in the way that people were organizing together and exchanging knowledge. This was really instructive for me.

I've had these mental panics about making a biopic about Kropotkin. It's too obvious: let's make a film about Kropotkin the traveller, his life stories, and so forth. But the more I read about the anarchist movement among watchmakers in Switzerland, which Kropotkin describes in his memoirs, I felt that from an anarchist perspective, from the 1870s and 1880s it was questionable whether someone like Kropotkin, Bakunin, or Emma Goldman should have such an imposing impact, with such an historical investment in their names, at the expense of more common people. What became increasingly important to me was what was happening in the more marginal spaces at the time. For instance, outside of the factory among workers, on a break, or in the workshop, sharing ideas. It was about the more random situations of history rather than the importance of any one biographical figure, a man, in the 19th century. The more I spoke with historians it became evident that it was much easier to recreate the biographies of famous men, such as Kropotkin or the Swiss Adhémar Schwitzguébel, who is included in the film, than the *texture* of their so-called biographical lives. What could we meaningfully construct within a film, and bring a certain reality to bear on it, such as the experiences of the

women in my family, or the women watchmakers at the factory in general?

I came across other books and thinkers that influenced the film and were more important than Kropotkin, such as Simone Weil...

Scope: She worked in a metal factory, no?

Schäublin: Yes, in steel. Her book *La condition ouvrière* is seminal, and became critical to the film's conception, along with my exchanges with my great-aunts. It's good that Kropotkin is in the film, and, of course, I really like him and what he has written, but he becomes, in a sense, just as marginalized as the others in the film.

Scope: Perhaps the messenger is less important than the message: this idea of mutual aid so central to Kropotkin's thinking is manifest in the film. Reciprocity and cooperation appear to be something he keenly observes in nature, especially among animals in Siberia, in contrast to Darwin's notion of natural selection.

Schäublin: I think this notion of mutual aid is not necessarily in contrast to Darwin, because he was also aware of mutual aid systems. But it gets obscured by the reception of his work, so focused on conflict and struggle among species and not on cooperation as conducive to survival. So ideas of mutual aid are not antithetical per se, but rather given more legitimacy from Kropotkin's observations of nature: birds helping each other feed, herds of elk protecting their own, and even in ancient architectural systems or non-capitalized rituals, for example the gathering of wood for villages to be shared among inhabitants.

He endeavoured to recognize many systems of mutual aid, of cooperation, and I think this is reflective of a certain frame of mind. I'm interested in this sensibility, a certain orientation of thought. Do we focus on conflict, struggle, and violence, or look

at more cooperative and beneficial instincts? It was important to take this into consideration in the making of the film, of what *our* orientation would be.

Scope: Yes, it seems to be less about a narrative arc than a story about how this cooperation is played out, both socially and in the context of labour. Your invocation of Weil brings into the equation the subjective experience of labour—how it is lived. On the one hand there is this attempt to measure time as if it were objective—indeed, in the film there are four different “versions” of time, all competing—and on the other hand there is the subjective experience of it. How did you track between these?

Schäublin: With Weil there is this idea of *cadence*, the line between your own rhythm and that of a machine. There is a literal and symbolic construction of time, and at its heart is this barely perceptible mechanism inside the watch. When I spoke with my uncle, who is an advanced mechanic and knows the inner workings of the watch, I asked, rather naïvely: “What is time?” He looked at me somewhat confused and asked back: “What do you mean?” So we don’t have a shared definition of time, we don’t collectively know what time is, it’s still a mystery. But he said how the watch works is a series of events. It is a *tic* and a *toc*. By building off a series of events, you can compare other events, and through this relation you can begin to count. From this point of view, the first watch that people created was really language, for example, by distinguishing today and tomorrow. It’s a form of temporal organization. A series of events juxtaposed with another series of events. This connects with storytelling: how do we sequence narratives together, in a way that is meaningful? Still, time as measurable persists as a complete construct. From the late 19th century, there was an industrialization of time that became inseparable from consciousness. It was hard to simply “jump out of it.”

In Europe now, many people say that capitalism has become so concrete, so real, that it’s hard to imagine anything else. That was one of my hopes with the movie, to show that time too is constructed—which is why, as you mentioned, there are several official versions of time in the film, each dependent on a specific industry: factory, municipality, telegraph, and railway. I wanted to show that there are historical constructs, or fictions, in society that we abide by and take as natural. The ways in which we organize ourselves—our economies, our societies—can be reimaged. There are alternatives, other mechanics.

Scope: One of the film’s merits is the way it illuminates other possibilities; perhaps it could have gone differently since 1870? There is also this playful gag in the film involving the photographic crew shooting promotional material for the factory, in which subjects are constantly reprimanded for straying into the frame. It’s a reminder that photography too was another nascent industrial and artistic development, and it too is a kind of time-keeping machine. It could be an autocritique of the film itself.

Schäublin: Yes, it raises questions about a certain authorship, of who has the agency to take photographs of this town and its people, and present it as a kind of objective reality. Who had the means to construct this particular reality, the stories that people took for real during this time? So often it was the government, or the state, the nation.

Scope: Can you elaborate on the role of women in the factory? I’m curious about this heterogeneous mode of production. Because the watch had so many components, each unique, the workforce could not be reduced to singular labour, but instead was constituent. Was this conducive to a certain mode of resistance?

Schäublin: It’s complex, but perhaps the other way around. Women were part of a centralized labour force in the watch industry, especially in the US, who were the biggest competitors of the Swiss. By dividing the specific mechanical labour, by introducing singular modes of operation, it favoured diminished compensation: factories could be more competitive by paying women lower wages.

Scope: And how did you achieve such incredible detail in the shooting of the watchmaking process? It is so intimate, in contrast to the way you shoot your characters, at such a remove.

Schäublin: It goes back to this notion of what can we demonstrably show in a movie—how to transport the lives of these people working in a factory, especially women, because they were so underrepresented, unable to vote, unable to participate in public life. We don’t know exactly what that was like, but we do know what they did. Clara, who plays Josephine—there are no real actors in the film, just friends of mine or watchmakers I met—is from the canton of Bern and speaks the dialect. She’s an architect by trade, but she studied with a real watchmaker to prepare for the film. As for the recording of the micro shots, we used hand doubles of actual watchmakers, women working today from schools in Switzerland where you still have to be able to take apart a watch from the 19th century. Again, we could not create biographies of these women, but we could reproduce their work, what they did for 12 hours a day.

We spent three days shooting only these close-ups of the watch mechanics. Of course, in Switzerland we have had so many commercials about watches, ever since the inception of cinema. I’ve watched far too many. The ones from the ’40s are great, but the modern ones are disturbing. It was important to try to get away from this commercial, recognizable style, but we had to use the same digital cameras that watchmakers use today, which have in some cases replaced the work of the hand, basically robotics. In order to shoot the hands-on close-ups, we had to employ these specific lenses.

Scope: The framing of landscapes and people is uncanny, the compositions seemingly oblique upon first viewing. It’s a stylistic choice that was already in place in your debut, *Those Who Are Fine* (2017). Have you developed a particular grammar with Silvan Hillmann, your cinematographer?

Schäublin: It may be difficult to explain, because it is intuitive, and goes a long way back, I suppose. It has to do with finding some comfort in images, just as when I draw or take photographs. There is a certain way of looking that needs to be honoured. When I was studying in Beijing, before the Olympic games, and then in Berlin before coming back to Switzerland, I was observing cities in all their contradictions. I think the word you used might describe the sensation: *uncanny*. It was not a deliberate thing on my part, but rather a certain way of reconciling myself to my surroundings. I’m interested in these strange and marginal places, especially as they are juxtaposed with other seemingly more important things. I’m also

attuned to certain patterns of speech when I'm an outsider, which was important when working on a somewhat historical film.

Scope: This way of shooting is not intended as a kind of Brechtian distancing device?

Schäublin: It's not purely Brechtian, but I like what he implies with this idea that when we are looking at an image, we are aware of it as such, it is fabricated. We need this notion more than ever, which goes hand in hand with how we understand history. What we've been told about the past demands interrogation. But I don't want to be severe about it, like when watching a play you must be aware of its performative status and so on. What's compelling is the reality of the people inside of the construction. Their movement is real, they are not lifeless.

Scope: To humanize them...

Schäublin: Well, we don't need to humanize them, because they are already human. They are not hardened, they are delicate. With *Unrest* I wanted to bring people together and recreate a historical scenario *with* them. We so often fall into a calculated plan, systematized living, but we are foremost physical bodies. In the film there is so much devotion to the mechanical elements, but there is also the rhythm of untold heartbeats at work. A certain amount of formal distancing can draw this out by contrast. The image is an attempt to get an overview of these incongruities, and the character is a real person responding to that environment.

Scope: This depersonalization, combined with transactional dialogue, also disguises an implicit love story. It's more potent for being so unseen!

Schäublin: In the end, when their photographs are being sold, or when the watch is hung in the woods, it could be seen as a kind

of persiflage on the idea of romance, or the idea of romance in movies. But this phrase of Rimbaud's—that love must be reinvented—is hinted at in this inconclusive ending. It suggests other stories, other possibilities beyond the known. And this unspoken romance also returns to the idea of mutual aid. How do we orient our hearts and minds toward greater possibility? The portraits of these "lovers" transcends that of mere object or price; hopefully it goes beyond that.

Scope: The film is rather becalmed, given its political attention to issues of labour, self-government, nationalism, and the hazards of capitalism. And there is very little explicit violence, although one could argue that it is full of structural violence. These are all pressing issues of our day. How did you conceive of the film in relation to the global moment?

Schäublin: For one, my hope is that the concept of "nation" is unmasked. I don't think that this idea needs to be made explicit through the film: it's one that is commonly shared among many people. These prevailing concepts that were created in the time when the film is set simply won't make sense any longer. Our relation to money, for instance, cannot be sustained. The film does not have to task itself with saying this; it is self-evident. The 1870s was a time when new technologies were having a massive impact on so many levels, among so much of the population, and this is also what is happening now. How is the future shaped by our faith in such tools? In the film, it is a question of whether we reenact a medieval battle or, on the other hand, simulate the Paris Commune? I think this is the critical question now: how do we chart our history? How do we reimagine a truer solidarity? Maybe the film allows us to imagine other possibilities.

