

## True Journey is Return:

### Detours and Returning in Ute Aurand's films

By George Clark

Home isn't where they have to let you in. It's not a place at all. Home is imaginary. Home, imagined, comes to be. It is real, realer than any other place, but you can't get to it unless your people show you how to imagine it – whoever your people are.  
- Ursula K. Le Guin<sup>1</sup>

In the winter of 1981 Ute Aurand and Ulrike Pfeiffer embarked on a film tour to eight cities across West Germany presenting their work in the programme *Neue Filme von Frauen aus Berlin*.<sup>2</sup> Travelling with two Bolex cameras and two Sony-walkman tape recorders, the filmmakers documented the trip. Fortified with reflections on the history of cinema and trains, they began filming each other, taking in not just the train journeys but each station, screening and city, recording their conversations throughout. *Umweg / Detour* (1982)<sup>3</sup> is the atmospheric yet oblique time capsule of their youthful journey, condensed during a long editing process. The filmmakers' friendship and play is contrasted with the passing world and lives glimpsed inside and outside of the railway carriages – spectres of history and intimations of other potential futures. Constructed from fleeting moments and glimpses, this kinetic black and white film, with occasional ruptures of colour, shows the entanglement of movement, travel, history and friendship which were to become some of the cornerstones of Aurand's filmmaking. Her work builds out from fragments, detours, refrains and returns; her camera picks up discarded gestures and suspends them in time. Films are always moving, always fleeting, Aurand's work reminds us. These qualities are as fundamental to lived experience as they are to the cinema.

Throughout Ute Aurand's work we encounter a world animated by her mobile and dynamic camera, following, chasing, leading and dissecting space. Her films are composed of movements, the way her camera traverses space is mirrored by her leaps in time. Her films accelerate, slow down and seemingly freeze time, capturing minute gestures and moments, giving us pauses as well as ecstatic rushes within the rapid cacophony of senses that make up the world. The act of filming is irrevocably linked to the act of

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<sup>1</sup> Guin, Ursula K. Le. 'The Operating Instructions' from *Words Are My Matter: Writings on Life and Books*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019. p4-5

<sup>2</sup> *Neue Filme von Frauen aus Berlin*/New films by women from Berlin was presented at Kommunale Kinos in Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Frankfurt, Freiburg, Konstanz, Hanover, Hamburg and Kiel. The programme featured early works by Ulrike Pfeiffer, Ute Aurand, Rosi S.M., Ilona Baltrusch, Ebba Jahn, Monika Funke Stern and Jaschi Klein.

<sup>3</sup> [The] "first edited version was 30 minutes long and we asked the filmmaker Elfi Mikesch (who was our teacher at that time) to look and her advice was to take only the sequences of filming out of the train. [...] we had filmed each other on every train station, every hotel and in every city...we also had a lot of tape recordings of our conversations - at breakfast, in the taxi etc... So it was a long editing process before the film found its final condensed version." - Ute Aurand, correspondence with author, November 2019.

returning. To return to people, places and pasts is a central element not only of Aurand's way of making films but the way we watch them. The double bind between the encounter and the return is what makes her work truly cinematic. To film is to allow time to be re-played, to make a film is to enable the return to places and people over and over.

Ways of travelling and returning as means of being, discovery and encounter form the essence of journeys in Aurand's films. We can discern three phases animated by such movement. In her earlier works, such as the aforementioned *Umweg* and *OH! die vier Jahreszeiten / Oh The Four Seasons* (1988, also with Ulrike Pfeiffer), travel is a means of enactment, a site of discovery and field for self-invention and performance. The filmmakers travel to insert themselves into the world, into the sensory fabric of chance, occurrences and encounters – from crossing Germany by train to dancing in Moscow's Red Square - a mode of being both in front and behind the camera in order to embrace the opportunities of the present. Central to this is phase is improvisation. Taking its cue from Jonas Mekas whose words open *OH! die vier Jahreszeiten*, improvisation is understood as “the highest form of concentration, of awareness, of intuitive knowledge, when the imagination begins to dismiss the pre-arranged, the contrived mental structures, and goes directly to the depths of the matter.”<sup>4</sup> This anti-method is, as Mekas characterises it, “a state of being,”<sup>5</sup> focused on attention and cultivation of all the senses.

The second phase is connected to the culture and landscapes of Iceland, which Aurand encountered through her sister the artist Detel Aurand. This special landscape entered Aurand's world through the prism of her sister's relationship with her Icelandic partner Jón Sigurgeirsson.<sup>6</sup> The idea that observable nature is divorced from human beings is a notion inherited from the enlightenment and plays no part in Aurand work, where place and people are always interconnected. The Icelandic landscape is entwined with and haunts Aurand's life, family and work.<sup>7</sup>

The last phase I want to address and expand upon revolves around three key later films grouped loosely as a trilogy. *India* (2005), *Junge Kiefern/Young Pines* (2011) and *To Be Here* (2013). Each an extended work exploring respectively the rich cultural city of Pune in India, various travels in Japan and material from a decade of visits to New England and a

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<sup>4</sup> Text read by Jonas Mekas in opening to Ulrike Pfeiffer and Ute Aurand's *OH! die vier Jahreszeiten / Oh The Four Seasons* (1988, 20 min, 16mm)

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<sup>6</sup> The recent publication by Detel Aurand *We Are here* (MMKoehn Verlag Berlin, 2019) brings together her artistic works created over the past twenty years including paintings and photos with an autobiographical text about the love between the artist and her partner Jón Sigurgeirsson (1909-2003), between Iceland and Berlin.

<sup>7</sup> From early work such as the video made with Margarita Albrecht Feucht-Trocken-Warm-Kalt-Island (1987 33min, video on 16mm), the dual portrait made between Berlin and Iceland *Detel + Jón* (1988/1993, 23min, 16mm) and *Jón in Akureyri* (1993, 9min, 16mm), as well as informing her ongoing *Fadenspiele* series, made with her sister since 1999.

road trip into the American South West. The personal and performative, which animates so much of Aurand's work, is here embodied more directly by the camera, her presence often distant – a glimpse of her earring in a mirror, her reflection in a glass doorway while filming – but her engagement with those she films is consistently tangible. She is present throughout the works responding to the world intuitively, making connections across these distinct landscapes, opening out to chance meetings, finding inspiration and camaraderie from women hat shopping in a Hans Richter inspired Japanese store to college students at the all female Mount Holyoke College. The figure of the filmmaker and those close to her, so central to her work, is displaced here. Yet these films feature some of the filmmaker's most expansive and touching portraits, populated by constellations of new friendships.

These three phases of journeys dovetail and overlap, the brief *Sakura Sakura* (2015), made with two women Aurand met while filming *Young Pines*, shows the inseparable links between her films of travel and portrait films. The key distinction between these phases is the focus and attention given to the people she films. The trilogy is marked by an abundance of encounters, openness to people who are met and filmed in order to return to them later in the cinema. In his discussion of *India*, Shanay Jhaveri describes the people in the film– from children to elderly women - as a rapid series of mini portraits. Filmed across multiple visits to Pune in 2001, 2002 and 2004, *India* combines rapturous flurries of images, capturing Aurand's sensory encounter with the vivid culture of the historic city as well as many intimate moments filming from her residence and relaxing as a house guest, often capturing moments of remarkable familial tenderness. Jhaveri identifies one particular moment in which Aurand films the “awkward and endearing gesture”<sup>8</sup> of a young girl in a new dress, a moment in which Aurand “manages to telegraph something of that uncomfortable intimacy that is caused in encountering and beholding another place.”<sup>9</sup>

From the opening images, where we glimpse the movement of people on busy streets through lush green leaves, to glimpses of women preparing and riding motorbikes, we encounter this world through tentative observation. The longer duration allows this questioning gaze to establish rhythms of routine and return. The film slowly builds an accumulation of familiar details through which Aurand captures the people close to her during her visits to Pune. Her work with sound across all three films balances stretches of silence with evocative field recordings and fragments of conversation. Other languages are captured but these are voices as sound not voices for translation, their meanings private to all but those who understand the language. Sound has an independent life from the image and is especially evocative when we can't directly attribute its origin, hinting to other insights and sensations beyond the frame, building the tapestry of impressions that make up her depictions of place.

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<sup>8</sup> Shanay Jhaveri: *As Visible from the Outside Western Filmmakers and India*, in: Ausstellungskatalog zu *Sulle vie dell'Illuminazione / The Myth of India in Western Culture 1808-2017*, Lugano Arte e cultura, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Shanay Jhaveri: *As Visible from the Outside Western Filmmakers and India*, in: Ausstellungskatalog zu *Sulle vie dell'Illuminazione / The Myth of India in Western Culture 1808-2017*, Lugano Arte e cultura, 2017

In spring 2009 Aurand was invited to Japan to show her films and as she recounted, “of course I took my camera... and started filming.”<sup>10</sup> After returning home and reviewing the footage a second visit was arranged for autumn to complete her film. Shooting spanned May 2009 to November 2010 resulting in the long film *Young Pines* and its short companion, the standalone dual portrait of *Sakura Sakura*. The tone, pace and textures of *Young Pines* are immediately distinct from those of *India*, the pace slower and more distant, the compositions informed and responding to the cities’ architecture as much as to local flora and design, from carefully observed sequences of the tending of decorative gardens to the art of flower arranging. Combining colour and black and white film, the palate is often autumnal as opposed to the vibrant colours which punctuate *India*. The camera flows more freely with longer shots moving between gentle observation and encounters. The connection to place has shifted. Often achingly beautiful, the film finds patterns and visual rhythms from traditional temples to modern high streets, from the elevated bicycle paths to the coastline. Tenderness is found in the deliberate brushstrokes of a calligrapher to the elderly farmers picking lettuces amidst white butterflies.

*To Be Here* (2013), the final part of trilogy, is inspired by a decade of visits to North America, during which the other works were completed. The film draws on a range of visionary figures and places – from the historic women-only Mount Holyoke College<sup>11</sup> to the Hopi reserve in North-Eastern Arizona and the poetry of Katharine Lee Bates, whose defiantly innocent verses are echoed in Aurand’s response to the vast lands she encounters:

O beautiful for spacious skies  
For amber waves of grain  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above thy fruited plain<sup>12</sup>

Themes spanning the three films here become more pronounced, especially the role of women, from reflections on pioneering figures and institutions to the tenderness with which Aurand films women of all ages. Here more evidently than in the other films we can see Aurand's work as a project of radical optimism. From the grand former buildings of the once mighty Eastman Kodak Company, captured in vivid black and white, to the legacy of intergenerational sisterhood found in the archives and crucially the young students of Mount Holyoke College, the film seeks optimism rather than defeat. The fragment is not the form of ruins but the form of potential, evoked brilliantly in a fleeting but central section of the film. When visiting the Hopi reserve Aurand uncharacteristically left her camera behind, rendering the trip instead through cut-out animation. These unfilmed images are perhaps key to this film. It is from this encounter that it takes its name, “No photo, film or sound recording, just happy to be here.”

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<sup>10</sup> Ute Aurand, correspondence with author, November 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Mount Holyoke College is a private liberal arts college for women in South Hadley, Massachusetts, founded in 1837 by Mary Lyon a innovator in women's education.

<sup>12</sup> Bates, Katharine Lee (1911), *America the Beautiful and Other Poems*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, pp. 3–4.

This seemingly paradoxical statement from such a dedicated collector of images and sounds, points us towards a more precise understanding of Aurand's films. While preparing this text I asked Ute about the origins for her interest in travel, to which she responded in her "youth we didn't travel far away, just to the sea or to the mountains. I think it is more the curiosity and interest in people and the poetic element which comes out of something foreign - my own people can't inspire me the way a new culture does. I lived in the same apartment for 40 years, but I like to travel." When I asked if this came from an interest in literature or cinema from other places, her response expands on the key tenet at the heart of her work, "I am not a reader, so no literature and also no cinema, I am not a cineaste. But languages and photographs of other countries can bring me to something more poetic than at home, more magical..."

Travel, journeys and return revolve around a desire for magic, for something unseen, the world outside of a film. This unseen element is behind the impetus to travel yet to capture it would risk deflating its poetic potential. Film is not about totalities. Film is a mode of being, a means to capture fragments, to allow us to return, to imagine home with and alongside other people and places. Travel, detour, return and home are central to Ute Aurand's work not just in the method of filming but fundamental to her way of being in the world. In the words of Ursula Le Guin, a fellow traveller, builder of worlds and cultivator of homes to come: "true journey is return." This refrain could be aptly applied to Aurand's films with a simple modification; true cinema is return.