

AUN

Interview AFC with Edgar Honetschläger

If you follow your film career thus far, AUN is a clear step towards a different type of storytelling, away from the essay-style into a fictitious direction, a distinctive and very symbolic brand of fiction. Were there special sources that inspired you?

Edgar Honetschläger: AUN is a poem – made out of images. I consider the movie more of a return – *Milk (feature film 1998)* was fiction taken from real-life and AUN too developed initially from my experiences, like the motor driven by water that appears in the beginning. It really exists - this motor is an invention of Yukika Kudos' (producer + Hikari) father. The character Sekai [=the world] says in the film though: "Good idea, but too late, we have to go beyond that to save ourselves..."

Influences come from the Italian anthropologist Fosco Maraini, who I consider to be the finest Western reflector on the subject of Shintoism (the ancient religion of Japan). And there is Claude Lévi-Strauss: The opening scene, Aun's birth, may seem like Greek theatre, but it goes back to a native American ritual described by Strauss in which a jungle tribe surrounding a woman in labor recites (animal) names. The one spoken in the very moment the child breathes in for the first time, becomes the child's name. Furthermore, the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector should be mentioned, whose family was from Belarus and came to Brazil as a child and later turned out to be one of Brazil's foremost poets. AUN feeds off of that which is read, that which is experienced and purely fictitious elements – like any film – in order to create a fairy tale dream world. I think that only in rare cases one remembers the plotline of a film. After one month at the latest, just a feeling remains and if more time passes, then even more so. That interested me. Whoever is willing to dive into AUN will leave the cinema with a cozy feeling. The pictures speak a language that remains in the mind of the spectator.

Is there a continuous thread through the story?

The Japanese inventor Dr. Sekai's wife Hikari dies in labor when giving birth to their son AUN. As a toddler he discovers a sea snail washed ashore. Sekai, seeking a bright future for mankind, dies when involving his own body in experiments with it. 20 years later the Brazilian scientist Euclides continues Sekai's research. Missing the essential component his wife Nympha sets out on a hunt for AUN. Now head priest of a Shinto shrine he lures her into a place inhabited by spirits and mysterious creatures, leading her into a dream world nobody would ever want to escape from.

From the first image on one is immersed in a dream world, taken away from everyday life, as if one escaped time. The past, the present and the future all are moulded together in the storyline.

Edgar Honetschläger: I am not interested in reality. I guess I never dream, since my life feels like one. But for the audience I try to conjure up a dream. As a person I am very interested in a current, political discourse, but as an artist, a further reaching debate seems to me more fruitful. In AUN things happen between the frames; what is evident is hidden, the political, as well as the philosophical. I play with time levels. You see it based

on the main character Aun, whose entire life runs the course of the film. You experience him at birth, at 7, 17, 40 and 80. Towards the end of the movie I let him age from one scene to another from 40 to 80. This is one of the great things about film-making – one is master of the time.

What philosophical questions did you want to raise with AUN?

Edgar Honetschläger: AUN came about against the backdrop of not being willing to accept the myth an 'Apocalypse' as a threatening scenario that man has feared from the beginning of his existence on anymore. The character Sekai [= the world] is a contradiction in itself because on the one hand he insists on the eastern tradition of perception and then he is suddenly sitting on the water like Jesus Christ. By doing so he precisely embodies what he criticizes in the dialogue, namely: "How far can individualism go?" He acts like a Western scientist and nonetheless wants to invent in an 'Eastern way'. His son Aun [=the beginning and end of all things], a God, contradicts him, believing that he owes his life to external forces, the world, he considers it a gift from the universe. Later he will commit incest on a metaphorical level (in the dream) with his mother HIKARI [=light] who died when giving birth to him. So eternity is pairs with light. The Faustian theme is interwoven twice – once applied to the Japanese scholars and the second time to the Western scientists, from Brasilia, Brazil's capital, which to me represents the Climax of Modernism. This scientists name is Euclides [after the ancient mathematician], a mute who is obsessed with the 01 code. The spirits of the forest feel threatened by him, who are embodied by a Japanese urban phenomenon: The maids from the Manga cafes. Their master is the 40-year-old Aun – who serves as a priest in a Shinto shrine. Shinto is animism – there are millions of gods, who are increasing every day. Everything is God – because everything is nature, even that which humans create – which is exactly the opposite from monotheistic principles of thinking. Japan serves only as a backdrop though, but surely Japanese concepts of the world are being incorporated.

Is Japan in fact so little present?

Edgar Honetschläger: The film was shot in Japan – but AUN is not a Japanese explanation of the world. One must not forget that I've been living for twenty years between Japan and Europe, more than half the time I've spent in Tokyo, which I consider my home. I am familiar with everything there, nothing appears exotic to me anymore. To the audience some stuff in AUN might appear exotic, that I cannot guess. That nature is God and man himself is divine as well was not invented in the Far East only. This concept is never expressed in the movie anyway. I do hope though that the exoticism of the film that might be perceived by the Western eye will nonetheless allow one to reach deeper layers of understanding. With AUN I am back to my old subject of inventing rituals in order to contradict reality – which was also present in *Milk*. I invent things, which spring from my imagination, but then appear as if they really existed and as if they were happening in real life. The invention of symbols equals the invention of a new world.

If we are talking about symbols, the names of the characters certainly bear their meanings?

Edgar Honetschläger: Yes, Nympha adds to the ones already mentioned. She is the wife of the scientist Euclides and together they set out to find Aun [=the beginning and end of all things]. AUN, the movie itself, is a search, just as all characters in the movie are looking constantly for something: from mushrooms to meaning, from time to the future. Nympha stands for pupation and transformation. Therefore a butterfly reappears again and again trying to tempt her – well he stings her, inserts something into her, just as the syringe needles do for the scientists – those men who insert things into their bodies in order to get to the future. To Nympha things happen and she ends up being the only one getting what the gentlemen so much desire. She does not seek – things just happen to her as she travels in the river of things. But once she has smelled that air she wants to return there. It is like a drug and she believes if she copies certain things Aun, the character, is doing – she will succeed. The butterfly stands for vanity - he is handsome, his life short and therefore tries to seduce everyone. Euclides, the number freak, cares about nothing but numbers, he can understand the world only in these terms and fails in his own physicality. He grimly seeks a viable future – he wants to play God as science does – but only Aun has the key. Euclides finally succeeds to retrieve this key (the sea snail) from Aun but he does not know how to use it. Then, with his final breath he creates a new world, which arises equally as ambivalent, as the one we know. Hikari [=the light], Aun's mother, evaporates and Sekai [the world / the earth] fools around with his experiments to a point where he kills himself. He is the one who says: All that man creates is nature. The belief in the destruction of the world is an act of hubris. And even if it were possible – how insignificant earth will have been in the vastness of the universe...

If this is not meant to be ironic?

Edgar Honetschläger: No, absolutely not. Everything that surrounds us, everything we perceive as nature is secondary nature, created by man. But in the Eastern philosophy they go even further: Everything we create is nature too. This goes absolutely against what is common practice in the West. We lament what we destroy. In this area of tension I find myself with AUN, because I love nature and mourn its loss. At the same time I am very happy about civilization – to put it simple - I would not want to live in the jungle. AUN's characters embody the dichotomy of human culture and nature. The movie believes in people and their ability to solve problems. But I would not be European if I'd let that go unchallenged. Euclides exhales pollen, which fall on a piece of the past he had been creating as future, which he believed could save the world, and out of this a new world arises, which.... It is a very ambiguous statement because I have found neither an answer, nor would I even dare to give one. For a long time I was trying to project a very positive future. Alone in the face of what happened in the last few months in the world, it is very difficult to imagine that all this can still end well. I will not join in the chorus of defeatists, or in the canon of scientists – in the movie presented by themselves – like in the commedia del arte. My conclusion is an open one. The premise of this project was to create an artwork that can speak within the intellectual spectrum to a broader audience than my previous films. I hope that we succeeded, because I wish

like all directors the widest possible audience. I hope that the audience can get drunk on the images and dive into the sensuality of the film.

The film is set entirely in a Japanese context into which you have placed two Brazilian figures. What led up to Brazil?

Edgar Honetschläger: Modernism. I consider Brasilia an exciting attempt of man to the future. But isn't this search for the future simply ridiculous, impossible to gather - just like the past? This once again became evident to me at an exhibition I visited a few days ago because a museum so well puts before your eyes how faint the will to preserve really is. Ancient Rome is just 70-80 generations back and what is left: a bunch of stones. We fixate ourselves on material and then nothing remains but ideas and concepts. It is touching to see what man preserves, what he seeks and how desperately he seeks the preservation of things. There are some lines in AUN by the Japanese writer Yoko Tawada, who has lived a very long time in Germany and writes in German. When I was discussing with her the rights to use some of her lines for AUN she told me with an incredible callousness: "I am not the least interested in the future." I really liked that. Accordingly, I was charged with the task of finding images concerning the question of how beautiful the future can be. I have found images – but I have not solved the paradox. I guess because of the lack of funds. Haha.

How was it then realized?

Edgar Honetschläger: Thanks to the persuasiveness of Yukika Kudo. We worked with some of the best film professionals Japan has to offer. The light is so beautiful for a reason. We had top grips and designers. Rosanne Mulholland, who plays Nympha is considered one of THE muses of contemporary Brazilian cinema, and so the list goes on. We had only the crème de la crème available, who, as so often is the case, were willing to collaborate only for a spot since the project was interesting to them. The producers did an outstanding job - otherwise AUN could have never come about. I'd always tell the investors that in film making there is only two options: either you have money, which will make things move fast or you are on short funds and then one has to be patient. If you want to work with the best people, then you have to wait until they have a gap and they will participate out of pure pleasure.

Once you have become at home in Japan as in Europe and the USA, was Brazil, also for you a country that represents something strange and mysterious?

Edgar Honetschläger: Yes, a new form of exoticism is definitely playing in there. I am curious about cultures, which have strong characteristics. Brazil has developed something thoroughly individual, something genuine in modernism. This can be applied not only to architecture but also to music and photography. The city of Brasilia is incomparable to European and American modernism and the Brazilians have really brought about great things as a people, as a nation, as a culture, a mentality. The jump from Japan was hence not so big, which is also unique and has a very strong identity.

The people in AUN all speak their own languages, whether Japanese, Brazilian, or sign language, but understand each other without a problem. An ironic or utopian moment?

Edgar Honetschläger: Brazilian Portuguese and Japanese sound beautiful together. That went so wonderfully, even though the actors had been afraid as they thought they would not be able to understand each other. It turned out that their timing was perfect, without one understanding what the other had just said. Of course they knew the script in their own language that I had worked out with Reinhard Jud and they knew who was saying what when. On the set itself there was, like in all my film production, no common language for all participants, the perfect Babel of languages.

The movie has very impressive imagery, reminiscent in some ways also of a universe from the world of children, I am thinking of the little girl in the woods.

Edgar Honetschläger: The fairies are portrayed as so sugar-sweet and naive, but they are the mistresses of the forest and destroy Euclides, who represents a threat to nature and therefore to them. All of them have large, wide Manga eyes but their 'customers' are not tired office workers in the urban canyons of the mega-metropolis of Tokyo, but instead the flora and fauna of the forest at the foot of sacred Mount Fuji. I turn them upside down, those flowers of the city culture. I had to let nature speak, but how? We humans seem to understand everything that is not human only when we humanize it. The maids/fairies and Aun as Shinto priests give nature a voice. They also provide for me an element from the genre of the Commedia del Arte, and hence the antipodal approach to the "chorus of scientists".

The movie is made up of very impressive, powerful images. Can you talk about the artwork and the cooperation with the cameraman?

Edgar Honetschläger: I had excellent DP's for all three parts. I generally work only with cameramen who can go along with the fact that I'll do the framing – I won't give that away. I am grateful for every good suggestion, but ultimately I make the decision, because I paint with the camera. I always have a large monitor, which I use to adjust the camera to the precise millimeter. This certainly has to do with the fact that I am a visual artist. Pictures arise, which are composed into the smallest detail. e.g. for the seed that opens up we had to take 50,000 photos, which then were assembled to a short sequence. My studio transformed into a laboratory, just as in AUN – it's all about transformation.

And then there were the microscope images ...

Edgar Honetschläger: Yes, but that there is no misunderstanding, there is CGI in AUN, but a fair share of what the audience might believe to come from this corner was created analogue. The microscope scenes all have reality as their basis, they were filmed in the studio without the additional help of CGI. When Sekai looks through the microscope, for us this meant weeks and months of trial and error, finding out how we could create my visions with the little means we had with the means of reality – not virtual. It was

therefore associated with much distress. For the computer-generated images I have worked with CGI people in Vienna and Tokyo. The ending of the film is pure CGI work. Working with the computer graphic designers was not easy. They speak a different language, one that I first had to acquire. I wondered a long time whether I should draw everything myself, but always came back to the conclusion that my drawings would turn out too naïve for what I was aiming at. It was exciting to create a world with these people, even if only for a few minutes.

The music by Christian Fennesz has also become a very important element in AUN?

Edgar Honetschläger: It was a long and intense, very comforting collaboration. With Fennesz, I had a wonderful sound artist on board. I am sure, one of his best albums he ever made will be the soundtrack to AUN. There are three tracks at the beginning of the film that come from an album that he'd made together with Ryuichi Sakamoto – those blend in perfectly too, as well as the songs for the fairies, which Fennesz composed and I rehearsed with them. Fennesz is a master of disquieting, which comes along hidden and smoothly - basically like a wolf in sheep's clothing. The collaboration was a good experience since it was a premiere for me to having something composed for a film of mine. So far I had always used existing music. We'd work parallel - Fennesz knew the script and my intentions – he composed a fair share for AUN before my pictures were locked. At the end of the process we both agreed that in the many meetings we have had on the way were fruitful for the project.

For me, AUN was a deceleration. Was that intended?

Sure, the pace belongs to the world, which I introduce. It is different from the one one is used to from film and also from life. If you let yourself fall into the "poem" and the fable it will feel very soothing. The best you can do is lean back, let the pictures speak and not think too much, not try to 'understand'. Forget about 'logic' for 100 minutes – if you can – and you will enjoy it.

We had a lot of material, and this was gradually reduced for the sense of clarity. The 95-minute film has only 500 cuts. I cut a little myself, but the bulk of the cutting was one by one Austrian and two Japanese. Like almost everything in this production, the cutting was also a combination – a fair mix of the Orient and the Occident, East and West.