

*Tourist: A Traversal of Time*

*and Space*

*A Film Essay by Sam Rosner in 16mm*

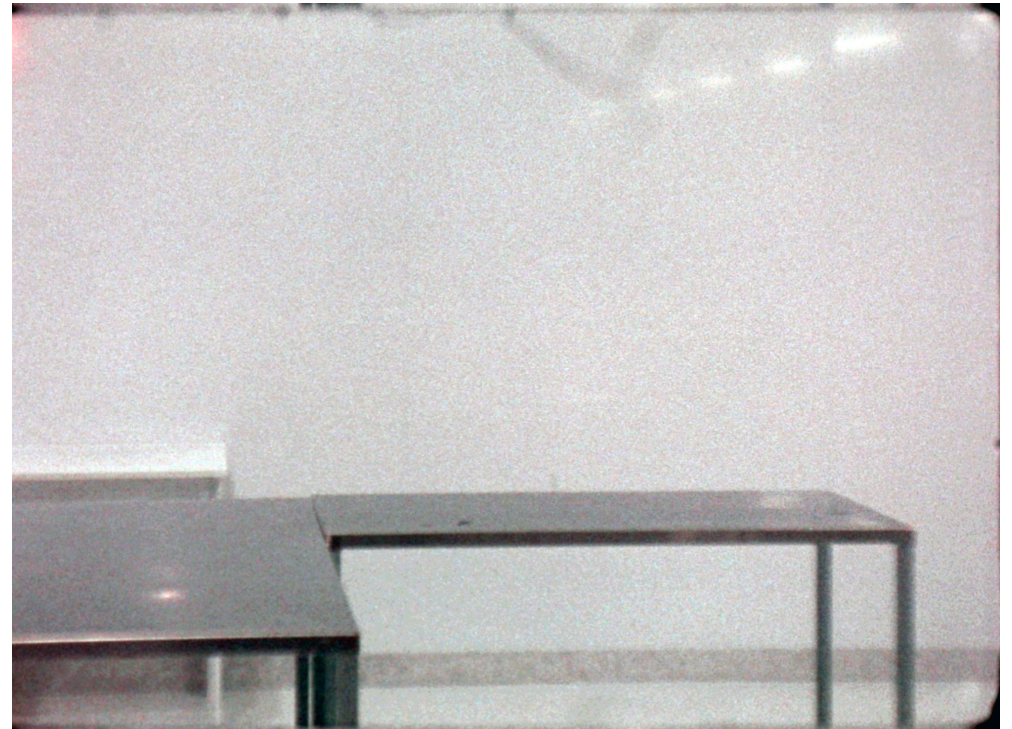
**T**his is where it began. In a dark Parisian salon, 1895. As the waves crashed against the shore, the spectators in their seats felt the salt spray on their cheeks. Through the silence, a distant roar, the waves breaking and pulling.

The mechanics are the same. Emulsion coats a celluloid strip and is loaded in darkness into the body of a camera. A shutter opens and closes at 24 frames per second, allowing light to cross the threshold and record itself on each frame. A process so simple, yet bathed in the magic of motion picture.

Film. My camera is an antique. A mechanical apparatus, shiny, loaded, and handheld. A prism which reflects 20 % of the light into my lenspiece so I can have the distinct advantage of seeing while I shoot. This privilege goes unnoticed until you try to go without it, like in my first Bolex. Reflex, high speed.

Going through airport security, I quickly learned to place it in its own bin, alongside my computer. It's tough being a vintage filmmaker in a post 9/11 world. The camera reads as hollow metal box to TSA. The response from security is either, "That's an OLD camera!" or more often and more dubiously, "What is this?" as they whisk it away for further checks. It's all I can do to keep them from opening it up.

An officer in Tokyo holds it up to his face and mimes filming, asking me to show him how it works. The result is this. A blip.



There are times when I get behind the camera that I begin to feel like those who came before me. The camera evokes their ghosts. Film has such a brief history and the players in it are my no-so-ancient ancestors. When I consider names like Godard, Ozu, Antonioni, I feel that a new branch has grown on my stunted family tree. The family that has been truncated by time and tragedy is making room for other temporal connections. I feel I know them better than my family. They've left behind so much.

Film has brought the distance nearer, compressed space to a matter of meters and foot candles. Weeks and months of lived experience, captured. Thousands of individual images, categorized and compartmentalized, each with their tidy time stamps.

Nostalgia is inherent in this medium. Only ever capturing the past. Sealing it in with light. It's a life measured in frames rather than minutes or seconds.

When I put the camera to my face, I become part of the attraction. Strangers ask if they can take a photo of me using it. Some ask for a photo of it. Most ask, "What is it?", echoing the TSA agents I'd met along the way.

*I feel strange amongst strangers.*

We're all here for the same thing, all taking the same photos, all buying the same postcards. The tourists are a constant, as are the selfies and selfie sticks. Not to judge. No matter where I go, the crowd remains the same. Copy, paste.

Tourists practice the art of exclusion. They try to get a picture without also capturing the hundreds of other people who surround them. Hence, tourist etiquette.

The practice leaves me wondering why? Why try to crop out the totality of the experience of visiting a place that belongs to the collective human history and consciousness? I can understand, but at the same time, I started to turn around and film the crowds and their gestures. I consider my place among them, and how they fit into my dialectic of criticism.

The strangeness of the Bolex separates me from them. I don't get the instant satisfaction of an LCD screen. The nature of the medium raises the intention from spectative to generative. The notion of this grants me reprieve from feeling like "just a tourist". Such a dirty word. That slight difference is just my own vanity. Truly, there is nothing separating me from them. There is only we, and us.

I pass a tour group. "This desert used to be ocean. Then, the water levels fell, and now, this is what's left." She says this with a slight Midwestern accent. She looks like a typical park ranger: long khaki pants, brimmed hat, clipboard. I wonder how I could get a job like that. "All of these formations were carved by the forces of nature and are constantly changing, now affected by the ebbing and flowing of the wind rather than the sea... One day, the whole earth will be flat, smoothed by the constant winds until all is returned to dust."

I begin to speculate about the end of the world. I think of a sci-fi book I'd read recently. It was world returned to its Carboniferous period. Vibrant, mutant green ferns as large as buildings and water levels stories high where once was dry land. Reptiles slithered in the newly formed swamps and man had retreated to the poles. It's an earth that we had created. Is that earth also prone to dust? Can we so vainly think that we will leave but a scratch on the earth's geological time scale?



**M**emorials serve to flatten tragedies and rewrite the past, creating an alternative history. They reform the shadow of the present, adapting it to the memory of the state, raising state memory above that of the individual.

Berlin celebrates its history of border drawings. Checkpoint Charlie, formerly an American border control station, is now manned by German actors. They don Aviator sunglasses and for a couple of Euros will stamp your passport and grant access to the East. It's hard not to notice the conspicuous double arches in the background. Arches have become a motif throughout this film. Gateways, transitions, passages.

Every German city has its line of postcards depicting ruin and rubble. They serve as a reminder that every building is a reconstruction of a forcibly severed past. In Cologne, the whole city was leveled except for the cathedral which lay in disrepair. Today, sitting in the city square, I watch a young man get arrested, the cathedral his meet-up place of choice. A fact the police were apparently hip to.

I'll admit it. I was inspired by certain films. I'm not ashamed of it. There are some direct references.

Walking through this library, I failed to see the ghosts who passed me by. They faded into the quiet of the reading rooms and cowered in the gaps between the shelves. I caught a glimpse of a specter; Walter Benjamin writing from his chair,

The words fade into whispers and pencil scratches. I looked into the plate glass and disrupted the silence for 1/60th of a second. Later, I found that a lone man had spied me and withdrew from my frame. By signaling his protest, he has paradoxically become the focal point of the image.



*"And later, the glassed in spot facing my seat at the Staatsbibliothek. Charmed circle inviolate, virgin terrain for the soles of figures I conjured... This work has to develop to the highest degree, the art of citing without quotation marks. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage."*

Hand gestures replace language. It's a game of charades to ask for a cup of coffee, or order off a menu, or inquire, "Where can I catch the train for Fukuoka?" The answer is often given in a makeshift tongue, composed of the few words which each of us share and fingers pointed and pointing.

This is the box where all gestures should be contained. It follows the length and width of the torso.

One, two, three.  
A part of a whole.  
Everything.  
Large, medium, small.  
That.  
That and that.  
Together.  
Me.  
You.  
To me.  
What?  
Or Where?  
Or Which?  
Or How?

In the midst of this great wandering, the question hung about me like a swarm of gnats after the rain. How do I go home? It was never really about the mechanics of return, but rather an unknowing of whether I could re-adapt to routine and stability. The stamp on my passport gave me a firm date which was fast approaching. That, and the money starts to run dry, meals become simpler, and shoes begin to wear down to thin flapping soles.

I had run out of film long ago, and I was itching to see the rolls processed and find what had been captured and what hadn't translated. There was certainly a fear which struck me with the possibility of its universality. I did not want to come home changed beyond recognition, nor did I want to come home and not be changed at all. This change manifests itself physically at first: tanner, new haircut, new clothes, jet-lag. But later, it seeps into world views and outlooks and begins to look like snobbishness at its worst and worldliness at its best. However, it doesn't seem to be permanent.

Within a month of being home, it was like I had never left at all. The relationships, the friendships, the people remained the same. My home became less foreign to me as I remembered in which drawers the kitchen utensils are. And the demands of everyday life took hold almost immediately. The months of travel faded as distant memory, and I received a shock whenever I considered that it was only a few short weeks ago. The patina of remembrance gives a dull shine.

But here, embedded in its celluloid frame, is the living, moving evidence of my time and mileage. Altogether, about 18 minutes of footage, some better than others. Shaky with hand holding, tripods too unwieldy for prolonged travel. Filmed, developed, processed, and finally digitized for longevity. Silent, very silent, but in the dark of this room, I can hear, faintly, the waves as they break on the rocky shore.

