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Berlinale FILM REVIEW: Andres Veielâ??s â??Beuysâ?? is One for the Ages

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Andres Veiel brought the documentary *Beuys,* an in-depth look into the profound psyche of German performance artist and 1960â??s era philosophe, Joseph Beuys, and a co-production from Terz Filmproduktion, KÃ¶ln, SWR, Baden-Baden, WDR, KÃ¶ln in cooperation with Arte, to the 2017 Berlin International Film Festival. Veiel studied directing and dramaturgy at the KuÌ?nstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin under Krzysztof KieÅ?lowski. Some of his other documentary works include *Balagan* (Berlinale 1994) and *Black Box BRD* (*Black Box Germany*, Berlinale 2002). His feature film debut *Wer wenn nicht wir* (*If Not Us, Who*) premiered in the Berlinale *Competition* in 2011 and won the Alfred Bauer Prize.

Utilizing previously unpublished archival video and audio footage, In *Beuys* Veiel brings light to a man of profound intellectual capacity in the vein of Goethe, Voltaire and Machiavelli. Often derided in his home country of Germany, Joseph Beuys, holds the distinction of being the first German artist to be granted a solo exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. While most contemporaries compare Beuys to another 1960â??s era personality, Andy Warhol, Veielâ??s *Beuys,* emerges from a much deeper metaphysical, philosophical framework.

The film is a linear piece. Veiel uses a cookie cutter approach in introducing the viewer to the central character. A Beuys voice-over-narration philosophises on the properties of art while still photos are shown in 3-5 second intervals set to non-diagetic music and sounds.A first real, humanistic impression is of Beuys performing on the street in clown-like fashion drawing attention to himself. Eccentric. Yet quite popular.

From here Veiel moves right into one of the most critical tenants of Beuysâ?? social outlook with an archival video clip of Beuys on money. Beuys acquiesces he wants to get by and thus money is important. Then, Beuys goes nuclear with â??but itâ??s not part of the revolution.â•

Quickly an interesting distinction is made by Veiel as Beuys is commonly referred to as the â??Andy Warhol of Germany.â• Warhol, an American pop cultural icon, loved and adored for his flamboyant use of everyday, commonplace items like a Campbellâ??s soup can to create art, is shown via archival footage stating â??every moral situation has the potential to become art.â• Beuys, on the other hand is often shown being mocked and derided by the formal press in this documentary, takes Warholâ??s statement further into the humanist/social philosophical lineage that â??every social situation has the

potential to be art.â?•

A well-liked teacher, philosopher and Green Party candidate for Prime Minister, Beuys was questioned deeply, just short of being interrogated, over his art and his ideas. One particularly obtuse questioner, posed the query, â??Do you consider yourself an artist?â?• Followed by â??Will you use baby buggies in your next art project?â?• Loud guffaws from the present journalists set the tone for Beuysâ?? response. With a quiet, reflective voice, Beuys answered that he felt â??everyone is an artist.â?• Facing further derision, Beuys quickly moved his response into a less provocative line of thought with â??I mean social art when I say everyone is an artist.â?• Herein lies the essence of Beuys truth. Beuys profoundly believed in everyoneâ??s unique capacity to move society and culture forward to a more perfect state of being through â??the existence of an objective, intellectually comprehensible spiritual world that is accessible by direct experience through inner development,â?• known as anthroposophy. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthroposophy)

Throughout the film, Beuys defied and acted against much of what he saw as injustice through his art work seeking a better way and ultimately a better society. With this mindset, Beuys endlessly worked toward a more perfect state. His art and his world views reflected this aim. In one particularly bold art project Beuys promised a planting of 7000 new trees. Using 7000 rock boulders placed in a free space the project began. As a tree was planted a boulder was removed. Veiel uses time lapse via still photos to mark the passage of time as the boulders slowly disappear and new trees are seen being planted. As the project neared completion, however, Beuysâ?? light began to fade as he called for an end to currencyâ??s dominant role in democracy. Despite his art work being called â??the most expensive piece of trash,â?• Beuys, disciplined and tempered from war wounds, held his ground responding, â??Yes, I want to expand peopleâ??s consciousness.â?•

In *Beuys,* Director Veiel lets the artist speak for himself without outsiders commenting creating an expansive space for the exploration of Beuysâ?? ideas. Joseph Beuys passed away in 1986. Interestingly, Beuys sweeping concepts of art are still alive and relevant today in Germanyâ??s ongoing social, moral and political debates. The film was presented in black and white with traditional documentary filmmaking techniques including narrative voice-overs, still photography, archival film clips, and present day interviews from primary and secondary sources.

As the film closes, Joseph Beuys emerges as a man of the ages, a thinker beyond his time. Often seen as a revolutionary, Joseph Beuys was seemingly always a mind in touch with the absolute principle behind Thomas Hobbesâ?? â??Leviathan.â?• Highly recommended and hands down, my favorite film of the festival.

*All photos courtesy of berlinale.de

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