

TOBIAS ZIELONY

DREAM LOVERS
THE FILMS 2008–2014
Dec 6, 2014–Feb 14, 2015

Tobias Zielony is internationally acclaimed as a photographer; we now present a complete survey of his work in film. Zielony began filming with increasing regularity in 2008, and the medium has come to occupy a central place in his oeuvre. He first trained his lens on the outer edges of Western prosperity in 2000. Many of his early subjects were teenagers, striking poses that imitated the blueprints of the movie and music industries with their meticulously staged dreams of the good life: visions of self-determination and resistance, grand gestures, and communities that stick together; pipe dreams that recur in the aspirational self-conceptions of many of the people Zielony meets. But the gulf between illusions and realities, between fantasies of heroism and the suburban settings remains, and his subject's faces bear the melancholy mark of the discrepancy. In that sense, the visual and narrative languages of the cinema inform the action in front of Zielony's camera as much as behind it. The composition of his photographic series operates with the means of cinematography while undermining their plausibility. It made obvious sense that the photographer would eventually start making moving images as well.

His first film (*Big Sexyland*, 2008) is set in a porn theater in Berlin, where young male prostitutes from Eastern Europe hang out and sometimes crash for the night. Zielony films the face of a sleeping man rhythmically illuminated by the movie projection's flickering reflections. Shot in a single perfectly steady take, the film unfolds the photographic frame solely along the axis of time and teases out the echoes of the invisible motions and noises on the screen in the man's tranquil features.

Working on the series *Manitoba* in Winnipeg, Canada, in 2008, Zielony recorded a prison inmate's narrative on Super 8 (*The Deboard*). A member of Canada's First Nations, the man survived a ritual that the gang he'd once led required of him before allowing him to drop out. Again, the artist works with what little natural light there is, leaving the space's contours and the character vague. In the dark of his cell, the man tells a personal story that sounds like a legend in the tradition of indigenous oral histories.

Film's temporality comes to inform and change the way Zielony explores spaces. In nocturnal Naples, he roamed the sparsely inhabited architecture of a housing project controlled by the Camorra wielding a high-resolution digital camera, his finger permanently on the shutter release. He subsequently compiled the thousands of individual pictures into the photo-animation film *Le Vele di Scampia* (2009). Depending on the lighting conditions, the camera silently records more or fewer frames per second. Edited as a film, the sequence runs faster, then more slowly than real time, yielding a jumpily nervous mute portrait of the neighborhood, which became notorious after serving as the backdrop for the movie adaptation of "Gomorra".

Zielony subsequently made several more animated films using the same technique, including two, in 2012 and 2013, in conjunction with his work on the project *Jenny Jenny* in Berlin. *Der Brief (The Letter)* shows two prostitutes in conversation. On the soundtrack accompanying the images, they talk about a colleague who aroused such passion in a john that he started threatening her, forcing her to change places of work. His love letter authenticates the story.

In 2013, authorities in Dortmund implemented harsh measures against street-walking, forcing the city's sex workers to ply their trade illegally or leave for city's outskirts. Zielony's camera follows a woman as she waits by the side of a country road on the fringe of the Ruhr region (*Danny*). She shows him the woods where she goes with her clients and the colorful little plastic lights she uses to attract attention in the dark. Light is a device of mise-en-scène in Danny's workaday life, no less than in Zielony's film.

The situation is very different, but the scenes resemble each other. In 2013, Zielony accompanied underage refugees from Bangladesh who live without their parents in a reception camp on the outskirts of Rome (*The Street (C.P.A.)*). The street from the camp into the city and toward the beaches where the teenagers sell colorfully blinking electronic gadgets to tourists is the stage on which they perform for the camera in the lights of their neon and laser toys.

In 2014, Zielony made two films while working in Ramallah for two months. *Al-Akrab* (The Scorpion) pays homage to the opening scene in Luis Buñuel's "L'Âge d'or", which premiered in 1930. Four young women huddle in a dark room, their white headscarves and dresses gleaming bluish in the black light. A disco? A laboratory? A hospital? They busy themselves with a scorpion, which is first alive, then dead; its skin dazzlingly fluorescent. The women – they are high school students in a village in Palestine – meticulously photograph the animal; it emerges that they are making an animated film in which the dead scorpion returns to life as if by magic. The fruit of their efforts plays as a film within the film toward the end of Zielony's surreal production, which crackles with minute passions, subtle eroticism, and nuanced archetypes.

Kalandia Kustom Kar Kommandos is Zielony's most recent film and the first one that involved staging. The exhibition at KOW is its public debut. It reprises Kenneth Anger's "Kustom Kar Kommandos" (1965) in a very different setting. Anger's short, a precursor of the music video genre – the Paris Sisters' "Dream Lover" (1964) plays in the background – turns a hot vintage car into a fetish bristling with homoerotic energy. Two strapping lads groom the no less strapping automobile as though it were the body of their desire. Zielony shot his variation on the theme near the Kalandia checkpoint, a high-volume border crossing in the wall between Ramallah and Jerusalem. Day after day, it is a flashpoint for the manifold problems and phenomena of the Israeli-Palestine conflict. International journalists report from here on a regular basis, a refugee camp is close by, but it is also where the members of the local VW Beetle club drive on evening jaunts in their vintage rides, which they turn into dream machines with homemade extras. Zielony arranges his Anger remake in a nearby car wash; it stars two young Palestinians lathering and primping a red Beetle. Accompanied by the soothing notes of Dream Lover, "*Kalandia Kustom Kar Kommandos*" is a multifaceted allegory.

Tobias Zielony lives and works in Berlin. His work will be on display in the German pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale organized by curator Florian Ebner.

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