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# Counting

## Jem Cohen

**Producer** Patti Smith, Jem Cohen, Ryan Krivoshey, Graham Swindoll. **Production company** Gravity Hill c/o Cinema Guild (New York, USA). **Director** Jem Cohen. **Screenplay** Jem Cohen. **Director of photography** Jem Cohen. **Sound design** Jem Cohen. **Editor** Jem Cohen.

DCP, colour. 111 min. English.

**Premiere** 9 February 2015, Berlinale Forum

Jem Cohen's newest film is a personal, essayistic documentary in 15 chapters. The director composes images, sound and music with remarkable intensity, combining them into a hypnotic foray through the metropolises of our world: New York, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Istanbul, Porto and a city intended to remain unknown. Time passes and stands still at the same time. The camera is like a magnet for attracting and capturing the ephemeral: Flickering lights in windows, bunting and plastic bags fluttering in the wind. Snapshots of places both popular and unknown and of people, striking observations of everyday life, a tender gauging of reality, snippets of voiceovers in passing. It is life itself that the director shows us. Jem Cohen is at once a flaneur and a street smart worker, with his film an archive of his steps – a storeroom replete with dreamlike memories, including ones of Chris Marker's *Chats perchés*. Cats of all shapes and sizes appear in the frame again and again. *Counting* is like taking a Sunday walk through spatial and temporal interstices, as touching as it is magical.

*Ansgar Vogt*

## Similar to life-drawing

*Skywriting*, the piece that initiated the *Counting* project and now constitutes its final chapter, was made in reaction to the death of Chris Marker. I certainly can't claim to have known him well, but he was hardly the recluse that he's often painted to be. We met a few times, had been in occasional correspondence for over a decade, and the postscript is drawn from one of his e-mails. I'd once sent him a young filmmaker's first effort (Garret Scott's *Cul de Sac*) and with characteristic generosity he responded that he felt it was a masterpiece. A few years later, Scott died, suddenly. I reported the sad news to Chris and he wrote back noting the recent death of the sound engineer for his *Le Joli Mai* and reflecting, in his matchless way, on loss, memory (and Walter Benjamin, whom we both revered). The pebble of those words became the ripples of this film.

## No three-act storytelling

So, I made *Skywriting* and then kept going, pulling from my archive and shooting more whenever I could. Chapters began to accrue and reverberate. What began with a loose and personal tribute soon took off into other territory altogether, some of it urgent, some celebratory, and some uncomfortable. It became a portrait of the world as I saw and experienced it over the last few years, a chain of home movies, and a way of navigating difficult times. It also became a way of thinking about documentary itself and a reaction against certain tendencies – in particular, the increasing pressure to conform to formulas – most often related to 'three-act storytelling' built around characters who embark on 'arced journeys with satisfying conclusions.' There are, of course, excellent films made in that mode, but there are whole other realms of documentary work that take different routes altogether. Some are based on registering life as it unfolds, where observation and close listening are primary and little can be scripted, much less pitched. These films take on the stranger forms that personal engagement, rather than the marketplace, demands. Often these films are also deeply political. (I think not only of Marker, but of two others whose work I admire whom we recently lost, Harun Farocki and Alan Sekula).

## The afternoon light on a visitor's face

*Counting's* approach can be fairly described as less intellectually rigorous than the work of those filmmakers – it continues in a mode that I often think of as life-drawing. In reaction to my last film, *Museum Hours*, a woman in Long Island came up to me after the screening, which was at a strip mall. She said 'I had nothing to hold onto but I also had everything to hold onto.' I am hard pressed to say exactly what this new film is about, but it could be about that. It's about riding subways, planes, and trains; it is in fact affected by jet lag. It's about the afternoon light on a visitor's face. (Does it matter that this very light from my own backyard will soon be blocked by a luxury condo tower, one of thousands now obliterating countless neighbourhoods across the globe...?)

It's about Gareth walking Tom and Tom walking their dog. It's about seeing blood on the subway platform. It's about the Jewish Telegram joke ('Start worrying, details to follow.'). It's about animals and music; without them we are lost.

Most of all then, the project embodies an insistence which many filmmakers have shared but which Marker exemplified – that the most interesting terrain is the grey area between recognised categories and genres, the no-man's land where we actually live.

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Jem Cohen was born in Kabul, Afghanistan in 1962. In 1984, he graduated with a degree in Film and Photography from Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. He lives in New York. Cohen's films are in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Whitney Museum and have been screened in retrospectives in London, Oberhausen and Gijon. Jem Cohen has collaborated with the author Luc Sante and with numerous musicians and bands, including Fugazi, Patti Smith, Terry Riley, Godspeed You Black Emperor!, Gil Shaham/Orpheus Orchestra, R.E.M., Vic Chesnutt and The Ex.

## Films

1994: *Buried in Light* (60 min.). 1996: *Lost Book Found* (37 min.). 1999: *Amber City* (48 min.). 1999: *Instrument* (115 min.). 2000: *Little Flags* (6 min.). 2000: *Benjamin Smoke* (Co-director: Peter Silten, Berlinale Forum 2000, 75 min.). 2004: *Chain* (Berlinale Forum 2004, 99 min.). 2006: *Building a Broken Mousetrap* (62 min.). 2008: *Evening's Civil Twilight in Empires of Tin* (100 min.). 2009: *Anne Truitt, Working* (13 min.). 2009: *Buildings in a Field* (Berlinale Forum Expanded 2010). 2012: *Gravity Hill Newsreels* (64 min.). 2012: *Museum Hours* (107 min.). 2015: *Counting*.