



© Chamissos Schatten, 2014 © Ulrike Ottinger

Chamissos Schatten

Chamisso's Shadow

Ulrike Ottinger

Producer Ulrike Ottinger. **Production companies** Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion (Berlin, Germany), ZDF/3sat (Mainz, Germany), Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg (Berlin/Potsdam, Germany). **Written and directed by** Ulrike Ottinger. **Director of photography** Ulrike Ottinger. **Editor** Bettina Blickwede. **Soundmixing** Sascha Heiny. **Commissioning editor** Udo Bemer, Jens Stubenrauch.

Voices Burghart Klaußner (Georg Wilhelm Steller), Hanns Zischler (Adelbert von Chamisso), Thomas Thieme (James Cook), Ulrike Ottinger

Chapter 1: Alaska and Aleutian Islands, 193 min.
 Chapter 2, Part 1: Chukotka, 192 min. / Part 2: Chukotka and Wrangel Island, 156 min.
 Chapter 3: Kamchatka and Bering Island, 177 min.

DCP, colour. 720 min. German, English, Russian.

Premiere 12 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

It starts with *Peter Schlemihl's Miraculous Story*, which tells of a man travelling the world in seven-league boots. Adelbert von Chamisso wrote the tale before setting off to Russia on scientific expedition in 1815. He analysed the flora of Alaska and then explored the Northwest Passage, just like Cook and voyager Bering had done previously, the latter with physician and naturalist Steller in tow.

A porthole reveals the view. Thus begins Ottinger's journey from Alaska to Kamchatka via Chukotka, with her predecessors' log books to accompany her on her way. While she describes Steller's texts as "dramatic", she considered Chamisso's diaries lively and sympathetic. Ottinger also keeps a log book that bears the mark of her ethnographic and artistic interests which are also seen in images: water, fish, sea otters, stones, volcanoes, the tundra, houses, villages, photographs, objects, maps. The people she meets talk about their lives, about the past and present. She shows them working, singing and fishing, again and again. Time here doesn't mean the film's length but rather the centuries existing alongside one another, the time you gain in the cinema.

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus

What was – what is

The questions I pursued on my trip moved between these two poles. They took us into geographically distant regions, wherever the wind, the waves, and friendships with people brought us. The vast, unknown countries revealed much to us, but some things remained hidden as if behind a thick wall of fog – and in fact the Bering Sea and its coasts are famous for their persistent fog. As with the fire makers used there, I tried to strike sparks from what I gathered, experienced, saw, and talked about, to illuminate this unaccustomed and unknown world and capture it on film. Like all world travellers, I kept a diary during my journeys on water and land. The film, too, follows the dramaturgy of a logbook. These entries enter into a multi-layered dialogue: with the elucidations of Adelbert von Chamisso – formulated in a literary style yet with scientific precision – and with the unsurpassably dramatic description of the Bering expedition written by Chamisso's companion, the physician and naturalist Georg Wilhelm Steller. The logbook of imagination that accompanied me on my journey and the logbook of reality that I encountered turn into a new creation: a spatial, poetic, and cinematic reality. So for me, my predecessors' writings read like theatre plays from the past that are still repeatedly staged in the present, but which have also sunk into the repertoire of oblivion or of irrecoverable destruction. On this trip, I collected everything I encountered that seemed noteworthy: pictures and original footage of people who still speak indigenous languages, songs, dances and nature. I combined the many very vividly described observations of earlier travellers with my own filmed observations. Logbooks are a feature of seafaring, and I kept one, too. From the logbook of imagination and the logbook of reality, a new creation of reality resulted, a cinematic reality.

Ulrike Ottinger

“The raven is the creator of the world.” Excerpts from the logbook of Ulrike Ottinger's journey 1 July 2014 to 9 October 2014

5 July 2014, Afognak, Aleutian Islands Alaska

Ella always wears her red pepper spray around her neck in case one of the huge Kodiak bears that live here in large numbers comes too close to her. She takes us into a magic forest unlike any I have ever seen before. Here, the myths of origin come alive in our imagination.

The raven is the creator of the world. Land, boulders, gravel and tundra arose from its solid excrements, according to their consistency. Its liquid wastes became lakes, seas, ponds, rivers and swamps. The other birds were its helper spirits. For example, the little snow bunting pecked a hole in the canopy of the heavens to let light fall on the earth.

The first human woman rose up from the soft moss on which she had slept, dreaming of a whale. Gripped by an irresistible desire, she ran quickly to the sea. A whale gambolled in the waves of the bay and blew its fountains of water into the air. When it came on shore, it transformed itself into a beautiful young man.

They spent the whole summer happily together; but in the autumn, when the whales set off for the south, the young man turned back into a whale. After only a short time, however, he returned, unable to abandon his beautiful human woman. She bore him many children; the first ones were whales, and later she gave

birth to human children. That's why in ancient days no whales were hunted; they were ancestors, brothers and sisters.

In myths and stories, the animal takes on a human form when it encounters a human being. But it retains its animal name. Thus, the bear was regarded as a human clothed in a bear pelt. In the animistic worldview, belief in metamorphoses and belief that objects are alive are closely connected. The soul of a person is equated with the soul of an object, an animal or a plant.

Friday, 11 July 2014, Tustumena, Aleutian Islands, Alaska

The Tustumena, named for a mighty glacier, is a ferry, old but robust, as is an utter necessity in the extreme weather conditions that prevail here. The Aleutian Islands are considered the cradle of storms.

Especially feared are the 'williwaws', icy, unpredictable whirlwinds that plunge down the steep mountain ranges to the sea. At long intervals, six times a year and only in the summer, the Tustumena leaves the Alaskan coast, passing Kodiak Island on the way to the Aleutians. The passengers are primarily island-dwellers returning to their families, schoolchildren on summer vacation, and people who have long been waiting for a chance to get from one island to another. They are allowed to pitch their tents on deck to sleep in. Below deck, they simply lie in sleeping bags between mountains of luggage. Whole families often occupy the few cabins. Everything proceeds uncomplicatedly, amicably, and with humour.

The various waves of immigration can be read in the diversity of the passengers and their languages. Along with the Scandinavians, who came earlier, today there are primarily Filipinos, Samoans, Ethiopians, Dinka and Nuer from Sudan, and less frequently Mexicans. They all come from coastal regions that lie on old trade routes.

Friday, 18 July 2014, Anchorage, Chukotka

In 1778, Captain Cook sailed along the Alaskan coast, seeking in vain the Northwest Passage. He entered deeply into Cook Inlet, which was named after him, and then into Turnagain Arm. Here we were able to observe a very rare natural phenomenon, the bore tide, a series of very tall waves bringing high tide rapidly from the ocean into the inlet.

27 July 2014, Provideniya, Chukotka

Provideniya has three shops where one can buy 'products' – imported foodstuffs – but not a single place where one can eat and drink or spend the night. Cooking is usually done on the beach or at home.

But twice a week, a magic cloud seems to float above Provideniya. A wonderful scent of fresh baked goods fills the air, climbing the slopes and seeping into every corner of the dilapidated, soot-blackened little town. A sudden lightness arises, and people's expressions and moods seem brighter. There are two baker women who manage this miracle of transformation again and again. No monuments are raised to them at this monument-rich site. They wouldn't understand it, nor would they want it. I know of nothing more endearing.

Friday, 1 August 2014, Chukotka

After a delay of two days, the next morning the whale hunt actually began. I was reminded of the Mongolian hunting song in which so many toasts are raised to the coming hunt that it no longer begins.

The harpoons were stuck on the wooden bars several times to be sure they were firmly in place. Three boats were filled with hunters – three or four men in each. The whales were already spotted from the roof of the little hut. Their spouting could be seen everywhere – a very cheery image that took a painful turn soon after, due to the hunt.

The whale was lost and sank to the bottom of the sea. The hunters return silently and without quarry to the slaughtering place, which was once a cult site!

Saturday, 8 August 2014, Yanrakynnot, Chukotka

The school is an assistance measure instituted by Chukotka's former governor, Roman Abramovich, as are all the new houses in the village. It's school vacation just now, and the children are festively clothed for today's school festival. We have moved into two rooms in the school, with cooking facilities and three tiny beds pushed together in each, so that even giants would fit in them. Improvisation characterises our daily life.

Tuesday, 12 August 2014, Chukotka

The 'vesdekhod', which means 'drive everywhere', brings the 'products' – oil, salt, tinned milk, jam, vegetable preserves, flour, sugar and biscuits – to the reindeer herders, who wander as nomads across the inner tundra. We use this rare opportunity and hitch a ride.

The 'drive everywhere' is an infernal device and creates a hellish noise, ruthlessly running down everything like a tank: bushes, grass, plants, moss – even the hard boulders splinter, and stones catapult upward. Birds are startled into flight, ground squirrels scatter in all directions or disappear into their burrows, cranes and wild geese head for the hills, and a few snow hares, camouflaged to match the pointy, grey-white stone, flee their hiding places. We cross countless rivers and streams, climb grades or plunge down steep, rocky slopes until we finally reach the first reindeer herders' camp as evening approaches.

As in olden days, the camp consists of two 'yarangas', yurt-like tents. Reindeer meat cut into strips dries in the smoke under the roofs. Pink salmon lie in bundles in front of the yarangas and are being prepared for drying. Stinking fish ferment in a container – presumably for the dogs.

Two herdsmen came with us, using electric torches to show our driver the way. They shone their lights from the vesdekhod's roof in this or that direction, over the fords in the rivers, through the brush, into the swamp. Their two dogs ran alongside or far ahead of the roaring mechanical monster, for at least forty or fifty kilometres.

After midnight, we reached the second camp, a wooden shed from which four men and a woman emerged. Beside the omnipresent rusty barrels, they lit a fire, heated water in teapots and buckets black with soot, were friendly and pressed a dirt-encrusted tea mug into my cold-stiffened hand. I warmed myself at the fire while the herders removed their rubber boots. Despite their high boots, their foot rags had gotten wet when they crossed the rivers. They unwrapped their feet and dried the rags at the fire. Then they carefully wrapped their feet again. I had read of such things in Russian novels by Gogol and Chekhov, but had never seen it myself.

20 August 2014, Anadyr, Chukotka

The modern architecture of the Ethnological Museum with its multipurpose cultural hall greets us right at the harbour. Ekaterina Otke not only takes us through the ethnological

department, but also shows us photographs, objects, and wonderful children's drawings that narrate the bloody routine of the hunt. What a difference from what we in Europe understand children's drawings to be!

Tuesday, 26 August 2014, Kolyuchin Island, Chukotka

On the plateau, high above the bird cliffs, is a meteorological station. Closed at the beginning of the 1990s, it was a spooky sight. We approached it cautiously, because polar bears like to use abandoned buildings for a nap, and nothing is more dangerous than a bear suddenly torn from its sleep. Inside were chairs, tables, a stove, pots, pans, a closet with old boots, behind it skis and one snowshoe, beds, one of them even made, tattered curtains, various equipment and parts of instruments. A huge store-room of rolls of film on spools, ready to be screened, rotted away outside. Were these films entertainment for the long, dark winter nights, or scientific records? We tried to unroll some of the ends of the films, but they were already so damaged that we could recognise hardly anything. Everything was abandoned, simply given up, like everywhere on Chukotka's coasts.

The Russian administrative centres fly in people and equipment in helicopters. But only people are flown back out, after they complete or break off their tasks. Hundreds of thousands of rusty barrels and metal parts lie around in these depopulated landscapes, whose beauty and rigour is moving.

Even the radioactively contaminated waste from the radioisotope generators, the RTGs, is abandoned to decay. A campaign to collect these legacies was announced in 2011, but apparently never carried out.

Friday, 29 August 2014, Chukotka

The Yupik, Russia's Eskimos from Novoe Chaplino, are wonderful dancers. Every dance has a theme from everyday life or their festivals: 'Gull Flight Against the Wind', 'Arrival of the Birds from Alaska', 'Two Ravens', 'Raven and Fox', 'Walrus Hunt', 'Preparing to Hunt', 'Processing Furs' or 'Sandpipers Pecking'.

September 2014, Kamchatka

We took the same route back from Bering Island to the coast of Kamchatka that Steller took and, like him, arrived near Kronotsky Volcano, which emerged from the fog over the horizon as the first sign of land.

Sunday, 28 September 2014, Ust-Bolsheretsk, Kamchatka

When we return in the evening to our accommodations, which bear the beautiful Koryak name Amtō (greetings) even though the Koryaks have long since been displaced to the north of the country, we encounter heavily armed police. They are charged with tracking down illegal fishermen. At dinner, which everyone must arrange for himself, as is customary here, the officers put a bowl of caviar and fried pieces of salmon on our table; they are unable to polish off the amounts they have confiscated. It is said that they are implicated in the intrigues of the trade in fishery licenses.

The fishing fleet, about thirty boats, is already dry-docked for the winter. When I ask whether we can film the boats, a worker asks his boss. He in turn calls up his own superior, who calls the next-highest in the hierarchy and so forth.

We often encounter this fear people have of making a decision or making a mistake, because any initiative could be punished.

Friday, 3 October 2014, Kamchatka

We drive alongside the Bolshaya (Great) River to its outlet in the sea. On the shore stand small huts, improvised from old, rusty buses, boats or wooden sheds. At first I take them for the usual summer huts of the fishermen. But then I notice that they are arranged in a circle, like a wagon fort, and are well fortified. Expensive jeeps are parked in front of them, and they also have speedboats with which they watch over the small fishing boats and pocket their share. When we finally reach the end of the sandbank, they come with their off-road vehicles, armed, and ask very brusquely what we are doing here. Of course they don't want to be filmed at their mafia-like business deals. I can't help but think that I have encountered the successors of the first Russian conquerors who arrived in their ships at this spot in Kamchatka, sailed up the Bolshaya and launched their campaigns of conquest here.

Ulrike Ottinger's partial convergences

Few filmmakers older – or younger, even – than seventy would have the courage to dare land on the shore of the Arctic Sea with a mere two-person crew, to picnic with Eskimos on raw whale blubber and to risk encountering mafia-like gangs or aggressive grizzly bears. Indeed, making a twelve-hour feature film like *Chamissos Schatten* at all requires courage.

The formal terrain of this film may be less hazardous, but it demands complex decisions. Ulrike Ottinger likes to compose multi-tracked, multi-layered stories in which either many voices communicate with one another, different times or places are juxtaposed or the sound track and filmic image take different paths. One principle that Ottinger sometimes follows could be called 'partial convergence' or 'associative substitution'. This principle can be found in her earlier films, for example when a voice-over describes things that can't be filmed or when fictional time and filmed present conflict with one another, as in *12 Stühle* (12 chairs) from 2004, the adaptation of a Russian novel set in the 1920s.

A group of babushkas stands at a bus stop. One of them has a plastic bag with the label 'Parfum Coco Chanel, Paris' – a documentary shot from the present that fits the film's action, which demands a bus stop with passengers but which is also anachronistically out of place. The picture represents actual happenings, showing an ethnographic observation from today's Russia; the narrative splits, becoming two-tracked at times. Fiction and documentary mix and interlock. For a fleeting moment, attention shifts from the fictional stories to the actual present and its specific phenomena – but the images neither interrupt nor contradict the story; rather, they can be integrated into the course of the plot. This creates a floating situation in the viewer's head, one that permits partial and associative congruence, like musical compositions in a feature film that only occasionally closely match the action. The film also gains ironic depth.

A dialogue of voices

As Ulrike Ottinger explains in the preamble to *Chamissos Schatten*, her most recent work, many voices 'enter into dialogue with each other' in it: the naturalist and explorer Georg Wilhelm Steller (who journeyed with Bering), James Cook, and Adelbert von Chamisso (who travelled with Kotzebue) attempted in succession – from 1741 to 1742, in 1778 and from 1816 to 1818, respectively – to

explore the Northwest Passage, its surroundings, Alaska, Chukotka or Kamchatka. They kept diaries and conducted not only geographical, but also ethnographical and natural-history studies. Cook, Steller and Chamisso report on encounters with 'natives' who seem to them to be genuine savages and whose behaviour triggers confusion and fear. While diary passages from this past are read aloud, the sublime Nordic landscape unfolds before our eyes. In such moments, image and sound, though two-tracked, fuse to a unit: we view the timeless sites and project the narrated events into them. But when Ulrike Ottinger films her own encounters, suddenly a complex change in life circumstances and behaviour becomes obvious. The two sides can make themselves understood, and those filmed are happy to provide information – preferably, it seems, looking backward to their own gradually fading culture. Historical levels and strands thereby enter our field of vision, overlay one another and carry on a never quite resolved dialogue. The naturalists occasionally mention things that are still around today, but 'the savages' have disappeared and the focus of interest has shifted.

Empathic pleasure and culinary utility

Chamissos Schatten makes extensive use of Georg Wilhelm Steller's writings, formulated in the literary style of the 18th century. They provide the foil for Ottinger's pictures, filling them with a peculiar life, but their unvarnished descriptions and remarks also create a contrast. For example, a particularly beautiful sequence shows the sea otter community, with the animals playing in the seaweed, while Steller's detailed, attentive description runs in parallel and fits harmoniously – until one sentence touches us strangely: 'The unweaned pups are so delicate that they can compete with suckling lamb, whether fried or boiled.' While today's viewers watch the sea otters' activity with anthropomorphic sentimentality, for the 18th-century naturalists, empathetic pleasure and culinary utility go together seamlessly.

The principle of partial convergence emerges elsewhere, as well. Another passage by Steller is spoken in voice-over. He describes very vividly how, weakened by illness and privation, the participants in the Bering expedition desperately set up a provisional bivouac on the shore after their ship strands, and are beset by polar foxes. The foxes, in great number, are importunate, falling upon the men's supplies and boots and eating the otters the men have killed and on which they lie for warmth. The foxes spare not even the ill and dead. But in Ottinger's footage, only the austere seaside landscape and a single fox parallel Steller's story.

For several minutes, the fox pup romps before the camera; no editing divides the sequence. We observe how the fox comes zig-zagging from the vast emptiness, busies itself with a leathery object (a bit of dried whale meat?), pulls at it, bustles in nervous circles around it, leaps into the air, and curiously and mistrustfully approaches and then runs away from the camera: a droll animal, lovingly captured on film. Meanwhile, it takes effort to follow Steller's story. The acoustic site with its cruel events stands in stark contrast to the visual scene, and the shudder that Steller's description triggers is, on the one hand, softened by the charming creature before our eyes and, on the other, exacerbated. In the tension between the two, we learn how destructive foxes can be, how the face of nature can reverse from friendly to dangerous and vice versa. The historical gap between the images of the modern digital camera and Steller's antiquated formulations heard at the same time is joined by the discrepancy between the moods, the observers' quite different situations, the

difference in our relationship to animals and the different behaviour of the animal. The film stands up to this tension.

Christine N. Brinckmann



© 2010 © Anne Selders

Ulrike Ottinger was born in Konstanz, Germany in 1942. She lived in Paris from 1962 to 1968, working as a painter and photographer. In 1966, she wrote her first screenplay, "Die mongolische Doppelschubblade". She founded the Visuell film club in Konstanz in 1969, and headed it until 1972. She moved to Berlin in 1973, and since then, she has made more than twenty films, as well as

directing plays and operas. Her films, photography, and paintings have been shown at festivals and exhibitions around the world.

Films

1973: *Laokoon & Söhne. Die Verwandlungsgeschichte der Esmeralda del Rio/Laokoon & Sons. The Transformation of Esmeralda del Rio* (50 min.), *Berlinfieber – Wolf Vostell/Berlinfever – Wolf Vostell* (12 min.). 1975: *Die Betörung der Blauen Matrosen/The Enchantment of the Blue Sailors* (50 min., Berlinale Forum 1976). 1977: *Madame X – Eine absolute Herrscherin/Madame X – An Absolute Ruler* (141 min., Berlinale Forum 1978). 1979: *Bildnis einer Trinkerin – Aller jamais retour/Ticket of No Return* (107 min.). 1981: *Freak Orlando. Kleines Welttheater in fünf Episoden/Freak Orlando* (126 min., Berlinale Neue Deutsche Filme 1982). 1984: *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse/Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press* (150 min., Berlinale Forum 1984). 1985: *China. Die Künste – Der Alltag/China. The Arts – The People* (270 min., Berlinale Forum 1986). 1986: *Superbia* (15 min.). 1987: *Usinimage* (10 min.). 1989: *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (165 min., Berlinale Competition 1989). 1990: *Countdown* (188 min., Berlinale Forum 1990). 1992: *Taiga. Eine Reise ins nördliche Land der Mongolen/Taiga. A Journey to Northern Mongolia* (501 min., Berlinale Forum 1992). 1997: *Exil Shanghai/Exile Shanghai* (275 min., Berlinale Forum 1997). 2002: *Südostpassage/Southeast Passage* (363 min., Berlinale Forum 2003). 2004: *12 Stühle/12 Chairs* (198 min., Berlinale Forum 2004). 2007: *Prater* (104 min., Berlinale Forum 2007). 2008: *Die Koreanische Hochzeitstruhe/The Korean Wedding Chest* (82 min., Berlinale Forum 2009). 2011: *Unter Schnee/Under Snow* (103 min.). 2016: *Chamissos Schatten / Chamisso's Shadow*.