

OUT OF THE PRESENT

A FILM BY ANDREI UJICĂ



Synopsis

Man's place in the universe has never been contemplated quite the way it is in this singular film. Russian cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev's ten months on board the Mir space station are captured in footage shot during his visit to the heavens, which is contrasted with images of the collapse of the Soviet Union from 1991 to 1992. While Krikalev was away from earth, the empire that sent him to space ceased to exist, his hometown of Leningrad again became St. Petersburg, and the nature of global affairs underwent massive change. "Yet, the extraterrestrial shots and scenes have the effect of somehow dwarfing and distancing these historic events, however momentous. Galaxies, like grains of sand, spread across the sky, and even the epochal sights of the collapse of the Soviet state shrivel in comparison" (Michael Wilmington, *Chicago Tribune*).

Director's Note

In autumn 1993, when I traveled to Moscow to begin work on *Out of the Present*, I had this in mind: It was to be a film about the last Soviet cosmonaut, Sergei Krikalev. He completed a mission on the Mir space station between May 1991 and March 1992 – twice as long as had initially been planned. During this time, the August coup in Moscow took place, which resulted in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. So Krikalev launched from the Soviet Union and landed ten months later in Russia. This paradigm shift from a Homeric perspective on history – the gods on Olympus look down on the doings of the mortals – to the view of the *homo technologicus* – a man in the astral monument of the October Revolution watches its end on earth – I found extraordinarily fascinating.

I already had a definite concept of the form my film would take before arriving in Moscow. I wanted to tell the story of Krikalev's space flight using exclusively original footage, i.e. video images taken during the mission. Although I didn't know whether sufficient material would

be available, I was determined either to make the film that way or not at all. In addition, I wanted to have two sequences shot in space – using film – which would frame the story as prologue and epilogue. These shots were to be coordinated by Vadim Yusov in tribute to his camera work in *Solaris*. Yusov was granted the opportunity of going down in the history of film as the director of photography responsible for the first purely cinematographic images ever to have been shot in space – that is, the first images shot for purely artistic purposes. We did in fact succeed in sending a 35mm camera up to the Mir space station in October 1994 and made these recordings.

It took a good deal of effort before I got to look over the whole image archive of the Krikalev mission, but then I was happy to see that there was enough material to make a whole film. And so I shut myself up in my apartment in Moscow with all of the video cassettes and a monitor, and had a peculiar experience: I had the feeling I was experiencing the flight myself. That's why *Out of the Present* describes this journey through space in the first person, allowing each viewer to make the same realization. Thus I entered into a play between theory and art, where the question was: How does one translate secondary material into a primary discourse? In this case, it meant contemporary documentary images telling a stand-alone narrative. I decided to have the film narrated from the perspective of one of the cosmonauts, but without any analytical commentary. He performs it in his own voice, telling the story via its internal course of events. I employed music in such a way that it would at times be in dialogue with that of Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. These are all typical elements of feature film. In the end, *Out of the Present* portrays a real event reconstructed from original documentary materials but also openly avails itself of the emotional arsenal of fiction.

Andrei Ujică in conversation with Paul Virilio at the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, Paris, April 7th, 1999.

Andrei Ujică

Born in 1951 in Timișoara, Romania.

Studied literature in Timișoara, Bucharest, and Heidelberg. Published poetry, prose, and essays at various intervals since 1968. Emigrated to Germany in 1981.



In 1990, after having made a detour through theory, he decided to make films.

Together with Harun Farocki, Ujică co-directed *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), which was quickly recognized as a landmark film on the relationship between

political power and the media in Europe at the end of the Cold War.

His second film, *Out of the Present* (1995), tells the story of cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev, who spent ten months aboard the space station Mir, while back on earth the Soviet Union ceased to exist. *Out of the Present* has been compared to such emblematic titles in film history as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*.

The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceaușescu (2010), a wide fresco of Romanian history between 1965 and 1989, concludes his trilogy examining the end of communism. It was the first found footage film ever included in the official selection of the Cannes Film Festival.

Ujică calls this kind of filmmaking *syntactic cinema*: "I try to reconstruct the film of history with fragments of conserved time." By investing all of his creative energy into expanding the boundaries of the montage film, as it was invented by Esfir Shub in the 1920s, Andrei Ujică has become one of the most important innovators of film language in contemporary cinema.

Toward the End of Gravity

The cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev in conversation with Andrei Ujică

Andrei Ujică: You've personally experienced space; for you, it's a real world. What does it mean, ultimately, to live up there?

Sergei Krikalev: When you return to the earth, the flight is of the moment and immediate, but at the same time it starts to feel unreal. Precisely because you remember all the details exactly, it makes it all the harder to believe that you really spent time there. For me, your film is a kind of forced remembrance of the flight in 1991–1992, sort of like a vacation film you watch later, which evokes all these extra images not even on the screen. That's what it's like for me when I see the film. Other than that, it's always the same: After a while, every trip seems to become immaterial and starts to resemble a fiction. That's why I often find it difficult to grasp that I've personally experienced one adventure or another.



Still, what does it really mean to live in space? What's the first thing you think of?

The mission, which you recount in *Out of the Present*, was my second flight. I already had an idea of life on board, like what is required of you and how to handle yourself. All right, then, the decisive difference between life on earth and life in space is, without a doubt, the lack of gravity, because you constantly have to be cautious of even the slightest motions, to gauge the entropy of things, and to be patient. And that's true for the entire time in space.

In the end, life there is marked by two things: being dependent on a very compact and, after a while, restrictive living area, and the weightlessness. But what I normally think of first when I recall my life in space is the view out the window. What you can see out there is overwhelming.

Let's talk a bit more about weightlessness.

Weightlessness is, no matter what, a kind of burden. It changes us physically: Our faces swell because the blood rushes

to the head, while the blood vessels themselves also expand. And this state continues during the entire flight. You need a certain amount of time to get used to it, which doesn't mean that it gets any easier. On the other hand, for me personally, it is easier to get used to weightlessness than to get used to gravity again later.

It must be a very strange feeling not to have any weight for some length of time...

You know, the bodily sensation in zero gravity is the same as that in a free fall. When someone falls from a tree, the feeling that occurs in the short time before hitting the ground is exactly the same as in a state of weightlessness. A pretty strange feeling. Many people recognize it from that dream that makes you suddenly wake up. In space flight you start to "fall" as soon as you enter orbit. The propulsion jets are turned off, the acceleration is over, and the fall begins. And this state of affairs lasts

until landing. It's not a matter of a few moments or dream minutes, but rather lasts for months. Eventually you get used to it, but at first it's hard even to go to sleep. Imagine that you've jumped from a plane and, before your parachute opens, you have to try to live a completely normal life – do your work, get some rest, etc. That is exactly what zero gravity is like.

There are only a few people who have had the privilege, once reserved for divinity, of seeing earth from space. No more than several hundred. That must occur to you, too, now and again. Has the fact that you belong to these select few changed you in any significant way?

Probably. It is always difficult to make claims like that about oneself. Important experiences in general open up new ways of seeing and change people. In space you recognize in all concreteness how small earth really is. You can see with your own eyes that it's round—the curvature of the horizon becomes visible.

Our world is far from being as big as we often think it is. And the atmosphere around it is so thin that it's frightening. You have an entirely different view of things, and that does change a person. Most people who have participated in a space mission later become much more concerned about the environment, about the general living conditions on earth. Because they know exactly what they're talking about. Other than that, though, I can hardly put a name to how space may have changed me.

I'd like to talk to you about the view from space now. Do you still remember the first time you experienced it?

If I were to try to describe it to you, the words would fail me. Because this is the critical difference between what has been experienced and the imagining of that



experience. Which ultimately holds true for every frontier experience. Everybody knows that the sky is black in space. But when you've seen with your own eyes how the sun appears in the black heavens and that the stars are right next to the sun, then it's indescribable in the truest sense of the word.

You know, the stars shine without twinkling. When you look down on the earth, you can recognize a lot immediately. But often you don't

really know exactly where you are anymore. On my first space flight, when I looked back at earth for the first time, first I saw the ocean and then land. It was South America. A region at the other end of the world, where I had never been, and which now, a few minutes into the mission, I could see through the porthole. I saw the ocean, pristine jungle, giant rivers. Landscapes that I'd only ever seen in photos drifted past my window. I could even see storms on the ocean. What can I say – it's something like the

difference between a photo and a film, or a film and real life. Children who are grown up enough to travel by themselves experience something like it: They recognize a town from stories or books, for example, but it's the first time they've ever been there, and so suddenly they get another image of it. When someone has seen all the regions of the earth with his own eyes in



a single orbital pass, then it's never the same as it was. These impressions become indelible.

In the space station, you're on Moscow time. You officially work

eight hours a day and have the weekends off. What is Sunday like in space?

Not much different from a Sunday on earth, but with an important difference: You can't go out. Even though our whole dwelling is crossing great distances, in real terms we're always in the same place. In general, people use the weekend to finish things that the week was too short for. That's no different in the space station. Normally it's only by Sunday that I can get around to putting away the instruments used in the previous week's experiments. Or else I get the experiments ready for the next week: I look for the necessary equipment, put it together, and if necessary spend some time poring over directions. Then we also have to put the household in order now and then and tidy up our personal belongings. If any repairs on the space station itself are needed, then everything else has to wait. Just like at home, where now the car breaks down, now the house needs work.

As I understand it, you would watch videos in the space station since there's no way to watch TV.

Actually, there are all kinds of TV signals, but because of the great speed at which we travel, each channel can only be received for a few minutes.

Does that mean that during each orbit around the Earth, you could see images of the coup in Moscow for a few minutes on Soviet television, then a few more on Chinese TV, a short while on Japanese TV, et cetera, as if the whole



world below were zapping you to the next channel?

Yes, we had to constantly turn the knobs looking for channels. We tried to pick up video signals from TV stations equipped with directional antennas, but by the time we had a halfway decent picture we were leaving the transmission area.

Did you ever watch videos in the space station?

Every once in a while. On the weekend when our work was done – if everything worked out, that is, and we could afford to take a night off.

You have seen Tarkovsky's film *Solaris*...

Solaris is one of the films that is on board the Mir, and during one of my flights I watched it again.

I would like to ask you one last question about the view from the space station. Where did you look more often: toward earth or into the depths of space, into eternity?

You really do look in both directions. Nevertheless it seems to me that you do look

The complete text of this dialogue, translated by Sara Ogger, can be found in Grey Room No. 10, Winter 2003. It took place in Moscow on April 29, 1999, and was first published in the exhibition catalogue *1 Monde Réel* by the Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, Paris, 1999.



more often at earth, since it is our home. Our relatives live there, our friends, and we come from there. If someone were born on the moon and had lived most of their life there, he or she would look toward the moon more than somewhere else. And so we are more interested in the earth and are always trying to make out places that are familiar and that mean something to us.



Credits

Written and Directed by
Andrei Ujică

Assistant Director
Marina Nikiforova

With the Cosmonauts
Sergei Krikalev
Anatoli Artsebarski
Aleksandr Volkov

Director of Photography
Vadim Yusov

Operators
Lena Kondakova
Talgat Musabaev

Stock Shots of the Space Missions
RKK Energia
Videokosmos
Ivan Galin
Vitali Kalinin

Stock Shots of the Putsch
ITA
Vesti
RIA Novosti
Eduard Dzhafarov
Andrei Pishchaev

Paintings and Drawings
Mikhail Romadin

Editing
Ralf Henninger
Heidi Leihbecher
Svetlana Ivanova

Music
Lazonby
Temporary Items
Mory Kante
Johann Strauss
Jean-Luc Ponty
Stefan Miesem

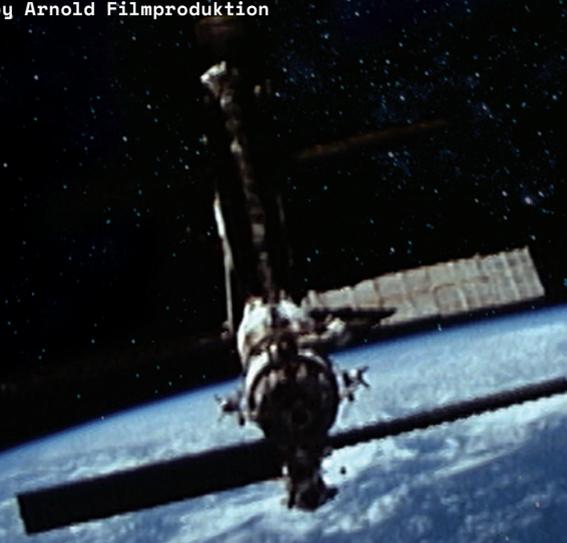
Producer
Elke Peters

Executive Producer
Werner Dütsch

Production
Bremer Institut Film/Fernsehen

Coproduction
WDR
la sept/arte
RTBF
St. Petersburg Documentary Film Studio
Harun Farocki Filmproduktion

© Loy Arnold Filmproduktion



Out of the Present is one of the five films that I would take with me to a lonely island.

Kees Brienen, International Film Festival Rotterdam

DAILY TIGER, January 3, 2007.

When the MIR Space Station descends to the earth in 2001, the mystic date of science fiction, and the soviet space travel thus comes to a definite end, what will last of it is *Out of the Present*.

DIE ZEIT, October 28, 1999.

An epochal film from an epoch that has not yet occurred.

TIME OUT NEW YORK, January 2, 1997.

This film is a classical novel. First you think a space flight is being reconstructed. Then you see this is about a few people and the changes they go through during a space mission. And then you realize: all of this is actually a story about time - the terrestrial and the extraterrestrial. But there's still more to it...

Sergei Krikalev, Cannes, 1997.

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