

# PRATER



*always flying whether sitting or lying*

a film by  
**Ulrike Ottinger**

[www.prater-derfilm.com](http://www.prater-derfilm.com)

world sales: media luna entertainment, Hochstadenstrasse 1-3, D-50674 Cologne - Germany  
contact: Marthe Wolbring phone: +49 221 801498-13 fax: +49 221 80149821  
info@medialuna-entertainment.de [www.medialuna-entertainment.de](http://www.medialuna-entertainment.de)

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*People, monsters, sensations! Ulrike Ottinger's Prater transforms the mythical Viennese amusement park into a roller coaster ride through cinematic time and space, intention and coincidence.*

*.....Prater makes us laugh and think....*

# PRATER - A FILM BY ULRIKE OTTINGER

## DOCUMENTARY

A/D 2007

35mm, 24 f/sec, 1:1.85, Dolby Digital Surround Sound

104 minutes

German

English subtitles

## GUESTS

Elfriede Jelinek, Elfriede Gerstl, Herbert J. Wimmer,  
Ursula Storch, Werner Schwarz and Veruschka

## NARRATOR

Peter Fitz

## THEATRICAL RELEASE

Berlin, September 13th 2007

Austria, September 21st 2007

Germany, October 12th 2007



## IN SHORT

Vienna's Prater is an amusement park and a desire machine. No mechanical invention, no novel idea or sensational innovation could escape incorporation into the Prater. The diverse story-telling in Ulrike Ottinger's film "Prater" transforms this place of sensations into a modern cinema of attractions. The Prater's history from the beginning to the present is told by its protagonists and those who have documented it, including contemporary cinematic images of the Prater, interviews with carnies, commentary by Austrians and visitors from abroad, film quotes, and photographic and written documentary materials. The meaning of the Prater, its status as a place of technological innovation, and its role as a cultural medium are reflected in texts by Elfriede Jelinek, Josef von Sternberg, Erich Kästner and Elias Canetti, as well as in music devoted to this amusement venue throughout the course of its history.

## SYNOPSIS

Ulrike Ottinger's Prater transforms Vienna's beloved amusement park into a cinematic experience. Through a hypnotic series of images, we discover the Prater's dynasties - a carnie tells us stories from his life, we meet the descendants of the "human torso" who established several new attractions in the Prater with his wife and children at the turn of the century, the owners of the Schweizerhaus, a firstclass restaurant whose ancestors were imperial huntsmen, and the Prater repair man, who diligently keeps the illusion-machines running. We go on a journey with today's visitors to the Prater along with those from the past, thanks to a fascinating archive of images, without leaving our seats: Vienna becomes a miniature Venice, with its canals, the Rialto Bridge, and the Ducal Palace. From there, you can send postcards out into the whole world. And towering above it all is the Riesenrad, the gigantic Ferris wheel that takes you up over the rooftops of Vienna.

By day, the Prater is full of families. Children ride in go-carts and stare in wonder at the puppet theater. At night, the park draws teenagers like a magnet, along with the young-at-heart. The polite tea-time dance turns into a wild disco for lonely hearts. In the whirling Centrifuge ride, teens move like acrobats to Eastern European rap music, nothing can throw them off-balance. Young men slug the humanoid "Watschenmann" with all their might to prove themselves. Up above, the bright lights of the roller coaster sparkle. Rocket ejection seats, carousels and bumper-cars compete with the stars in the night sky. Reality and illusion, past and present are all part of this wild tryst.

The breathtaking images in Ulrike Ottinger's Prater plunge each and every spectator into their own universe of desires and sensations. The film brings together the cultural history of the oldest amusement park in the world with brilliant insights into the changing nature of technological attractions. We are introduced to people for whom the Prater is a place for fun or for memories or it is simply the center of their life. Vienna's Prater is a desiring-machine. We can speed toward the moon with the latest technology for space travel. The Tunnel of Horrors is filled with all the monsters from film history. The word "Prater," from the Latin pratum, means "meadow" and originally referred to the imperial hunting grounds that were located there.

Today it is a hunting ground for everyone's desires. Take a journey through time and space - at the Prater, everything is possible!



## CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS

### INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, asked the questions, January 2007.

*With PRATER, you take a leap from the cinema of stations to the cinema of attractions: In your previous films, the alternation of standstill and motion was a structuring element, but now your journeys no longer take the viewer to China, Russia, or the labyrinthine underworld of Berlin. Instead, everything plays out in a single place - the Prater in Vienna. What fascinated you so much about this site?*

**Ulrike Ottinger:** What you call a leap is for me a balancing act connecting things. And to stick to Prater terminology, these tricks of creating relationships between things that on a first, superficial glance don't seem to have anything to do with each other are my specialty. The Prater's visitors, too, follow a dramaturgy of stations, because one wanders as if in a procession from one attraction to another. The Prater is connected with downtown Vienna in a direct line via the Praterstrasse. From the Ferris wheel, you can see St. Stephen's Cathedral and vice versa – an image of the connection between sin and penance. And so it is traditional to go directly from one's confirmation in St. Stephen's Cathedral to celebrate in the Prater. Many generations of Austrians followed and still follow this ritual of dual initiation.

Although the Prater is in direct proximity to the downtown area, it is an extraterritorial place. Here almost everything is possible. The poor encounter the rich, the country the city, the foreigners the native Viennese. For well-to-do tourists, especially those from India or the Emirates, a visit to the Prater is a "must" on their European tour. Perhaps their new travel guides have copied the old Baedekers, or they have a special predilection for this kind of amusement. A few months before his sudden death, Oskar Pastior told me a Prater story that he actually wanted to tell in the film. He traveled with his mother from Romania to Vienna. When they sailed up the Danube back then, people said proudly: "We are traveling to Europe."

Oskar Pastior was about 13 at the time; his mother was an enthusiastic Charleston dancer. Stolid Hermannstadt was sometimes a bit too narrow for her unconventional zest, so she especially enjoyed her rare excursions to the metropolis. They went to the Prater on their first day. Their goal was a funhouse called "Hotel Mysterious". It had stairs with moving steps, carpets into which one suddenly sank down, floorboards that shifted as soon as one set foot on them, and fans that produced the famous Marilyn effect. So with a pounding heart little

Oskar entered the "Hotel Mysterious", this place of sensory deception, with his mother. His mother not only brilliantly mastered all the challenges, she also entertained the crowd with Charleston performances, while Oskar stumbled after her like a little oaf. All this could be seen by the crowd standing below, which always gathered to watch people at the funhouse. Their little show was so successful that the owner of the attraction offered the two of them free admission any time they wanted.

As the world's oldest amusement park, the Prater was an important component of world tour guides to entertainment and also, in the broadest sense, to culture. The Prater was the model for Coney Island in New York, for the amusement park in Budapest, and also for the old Treptower Park in Berlin, which the emigrants I interviewed for **EXILE SHANGHAI** still waxed enthusiastic about.

What's fascinating about this place is how history, the cultural history of amusements, becomes astonishingly visible across classes, social strata, the spirit of the times, fashions, and technological developments and inventions. Its 250-year history began when the former imperial garden and the aristocracy's hunting grounds were opened up to everyone: as a recreational part in the "Green Prater" and as an amusement park in what was called the "Wurstelprater", after "Hanswurst", the character of the fool.

*With your film, you recreate an old connection: the amusement park and cinema. A descendant of one of the Prater dynasties recounts how his forebears discovered the movies as an attraction for the Prater and turned it into a movie house chain. The next stage for the family, after the destruction of the Prater in 1945, was to offer the first bumper cars: a ride. You take the viewer into this world of experience, for example when you mount the camera on the cars and let it shoot into the air with the car, when you trigger visually the physical pleasure of amusement park attractions. What role do enticement and attraction play for you as a director and photographer?*

**Ulrike Ottinger:** The attractions here are called "illusion businesses", and that's true of cinema as well. It too works with the strategy of enticement, to which the viewer must add his own imagination to make it work. With this film in particular I thought anew about the themes of illusion and imagination, imitation and simulation, or techniques of simulation. Early cinema was a cinema of attractions, and it was born in the travelling carnival. It has much more to do with the Siamese twins of illusion and imagination than today's cinema does. The latter has become primarily a cinema of simulation, analogous to the arcades whose products are derived from aerospace research and pilot training. The



ventriloquist who seems to make his dummy speak is more of an imitator in the old sense, like the animal voice imitators in nomadic or hunting societies.

What is illusion? Is it a rocking horse a child rides in a wild gallop? Is it a "snow paradise" in an air-conditioned mall in the Emirates, where one can climb to a summit or ski with high-tech equipment and clothing? Is it space travel, a flight in a fighter jet, a racing boat, or a ride on a motorcycle with the aid of new simulation technologies? Does this originate in the wish to create something one would like to have but, because of cost or for other reasons, doesn't have? The old amusement parks were able to fulfil people's wishes in an imaginative theater of illusion or imitation.

The desire for a trip around the world was satisfied in elaborate panoramas through which one rode in fantastically illuminated scenes. At the World's Fair, one could stroll on an afternoon from Constantinople through Cairo to Kyoto and take a detour through New York or Sydney on the way back. In the wax museum, one could stand eye to eye with the great figures of the world, satisfy one's desire for sensations with a delicious shudder vis-à-vis a notorious murderer, and view the disreputable with a good conscience under the mantle of education.

Interesting for my image composition was the possibility of using attractions like Starflyer, a huge merry-go-round; Super-8 Bahn, a roller coaster; the Blumenrad Ferris wheel; the haunted house; or the giant Ferris wheel for tracking shots. The effect is that of extremely elaborate tracking shots. And of course they are difficult in terms of securing the camera, because you are dealing with tremendous centrifugal force. For camera motion, I used only these movements; that was my aesthetic principle. Otherwise I used a tripod, especially for the Prater architecture, and a few hand-held camera scenes with people I followed spontaneously. A camera was mounted in the Ejection Seat, an extreme catapult attraction that flings those who dare ride it into the sky; the camera was connected to a monitor for spectators. People always gathered around it, fascinated by the cries of fear or pleasure. Later a video recording of this flight through the air could be bought. I used this possibility and connected our little HDV - and so we were there, "live".

*There is another aspect of enticement when Veruschka von Lehdorff, who played Dorian Gray in one of your earlier films, forgets the world around her while engrossed in playing with the distorting mirrors. The viewer sinks with her into these visual experiments. Not only does Veruschka appear again, we also see excerpts from FREAK ORLANDO, which tells the world history of freaks in five acts. To what degree do the cinematic possibilities, the play with illusion that your theme permits you, have to do with your earlier films?*

**Ulrike Ottinger:** The mirror, but even more so the distorting mirror, has great significance for me. It appears in most of my films, especially in the Berlin Trilogy. I have made thousands of photo studies using it with Tabea Blumenschein, Magdalena Montezuma, and also some with Veruschka from the early 1970s to today. It is a disturbing or grotesque, sometimes also funny and very expressive image for distortion, transposition, metamorphosis, transition, or fusion. *THE IMAGE OF DORIAN GRAY IN THE MIRROR OF THE YELLOW PRESS* with Veruschka as Dorian Gray operates intensely with these possibilities. In *TICKET OF NO RETURN* with Tabea Blumenschein, mirror images dissolve when they are splashed with liquids. In *FREAK ORLANDO*, metamorphosis is the means of alienation. In this connection, it occurs to me how, on my first trip to India, at the foot of temple stairways or in interior courtyards, I encountered beggars, lepers, or people deformed by elephantitis - like those I had staged a year earlier in the medieval episode of *FREAK ORLANDO*.

It is terrifying when your own world of images encounters reality. When I was making *FREAK ORLANDO*, from 1980 to 1981, beggars were not such a familiar daily sight as they are today, when in particular poor people from southeastern Europe kneel with folded hands on every corner, the way representations of benefactors are seen in the lower margin of old paintings as part of the scene.

*Your films were always world theater: in the documentary films like CHINA - THE ARTS, THE PEOPLE, in which the picture frame gives reality a stage space, as well as in your feature films, which are full of artificial figures surrounded by an opulent, often stagelike setting. In PRATER, too, the fictional, sometimes very artificial aspects stand beside several documentary scenes: you observe a group of young people testing their strength with the hammer and bell; a lonely woman sinks as if into a trance alone on the dance floor in the evening; an Indian family disguises itself before the camera for a photo. Fiction and documentation are closely interwoven.*

**Ulrike Ottinger:** Yes, like in all of my films. The fiction comes frighteningly close to reality, and reality is a construction, sometimes an illusion.

*Veruschka appears as Barbarella, i.e., as an artificial figure, who visits the Prater and thereby takes us by the hand for a short time. In another episode, Elfriede Jelinek, a representative of literature as a site of fiction, takes us through the Prater. The voice-over is a mixture of reportage and fairytale, spoken by actor Peter Fitz. What role do these figures play for you in a documentary film?*

**Ulrike Ottinger:** The Prater is a time machine. That's why, in addition to my new footage, I also worked with all kinds of quotations. Veruschka as Barbarella or as an evil Barbie doll is also a quotation. Elfriede Jelinek wrote a personal and simultaneously analytical text for the film. She reads this carefully worded text with its complex meaning. So she quotes herself.

The film is self-referential, with documentary and feature film excerpts from the turn of the century to the 1960s. From an incredible wealth of great literature, I chose to quote Elias Canetti, Felix Salten, and an unpublished typescript by Erich Kästner. Among the many photographic documents, Emil Mayer is especially remarkable. He captured the Prater in photographs from the turn of the century until the 1930s, with a predilection for the viewers' observations. Music from mechanical music automats, fair organs, orchestrions, pianolas, punchcards, mechanical dolls, music boxes, and the catchy tunes of the various periods are all quoted. These quotations, in combination with the new images, not only display history, they also form an amalgamation that clearly makes visible an astonishingly constant structure of amusements through time.

*The Prater is a leisure amusement for the masses, and at the same time an image of social structures: during the day it is open for families with children, in the evening for adults, couples, groups, and at all times for young people. And yet the theme of loneliness also emerges in your film: Veruschka in the hall of mirrors, a woman's genuine fear in the ejection seat just before her flight, the woman dancing alone, and even the solitary camera that observes the group of young people. What function does the Prater have as a social site?*

**Ulrike Ottinger:** Like *EXILE SHANGHAI* before it, *PRATER* too reports on a site that is extraterritorial. These places are miniature models of the world. Just as Shanghai of the 1930s and 1940s focused the global political situation like a magnifying glass, because all the parties involved in World War II, on both sides, were present in Shanghai. Colonialism was slowly coming to an end, an incredible spectrum of Chinese reform movements was virulent, and the Nationalists under Chiang Kaishek battled the Maoists. All the precarious social and political banana peels were present in one place, and everyone slipped on them. The Prater is also a model that is subject to changes in time, fashions, and technology. The developments toward an urban society and then a global village with its changed living conditions are especially legible in the Prater. What the spirit of the time finds attractive is offered. The enthusiasm for outer space brought the Ejection Seat, the Mozart Year brought the Mozart Flip, the hand-operated carousel

developed into high-tech centrifugal attractions. Tests with astronauts designed to determine their resilience and limits under acceleration or extreme braking brought the Prater the newest extreme attractions.

*You do not travel to exotic worlds with this film. But the faraway was staged in the Prater, brought close, so to speak. The visitor to the Prater could write postcards from Little Venice to those left at home. In 1896, an Ashanti village was reconstructed. Its inhabitants, who were shipped in from Africa, lived there as if in a zoo: the visitor could take part in this Big Brother-type scenario. Over time, the people on display came into close contact with the Austrians. What is your view of this "openness to the world" that the Prater put on display and that arose from a sometimes touristic, sometimes colonialist imagination?*

**Ulrike Ottinger:** Along with the Ashanti village, there were also Kabyles, Fiji Islanders, Hottentots, Native Americans, and miniature cities that the public could view. I think it had to do with an encyclopedic view of the world. At that time, almost all European countries had colonies and among the societies that regarded themselves as "civilized", hegemonic thinking was the general consensus. At the same time, there were life-reform movements whose slogan was "back to nature" and that saw their ideal of a "natural life" embodied in these "wild people". There were artists who journeyed to exotic countries, writers or poet-anthropologists, whose work and imagination was greatly influenced by these cultures. The gaze at the anthropological displays was an extremely contradictory one and often characterized by ignorance and lack of feeling toward unfamiliar people and peoples.

*Question: In the film TAIGA we hear the following song of the shamans, which could easily stand in the opening credits of PRATER:*

*Sky above  
earth below  
See my herd  
from the north  
See my horses, from the south.  
Look, see, come.*

**Ulrike Ottinger:** The film has just been completed. I'm sitting in a Viennese coffeehouse over my third café au lait answering your questions. Where in Germany is there a public space where one can sit, think, write, and dream so comfortably and undisturbed and without a hint of pressure to consume?

## CREDITS

SCREENPLAY, DIRECTOR, CINEMATOGRAPHER	Ulrike Ottinger
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR/ LOCATION MANAGER	Hanne Lassl
ASSISTANT CINEMATOGRAPHER	Martin Putz Elsbeth Freidl Anna Manhardt Volkmar Geiblinger
MATERIAL ASSISTANTS	Rüdiger Schnur Martin Putz Peter Musek
CAMERA RIG (SFX)	
UNIVERSAL ASSISTANT	
SOUND	Klaus Kellermann
COSTUME FOR VERUSCHKA	Art for Art, Annette Beaufaÿs Benno Wand Beate Lentsch-Bayerl
MAKEUP FOR VERUSCHKA	
SCRIPT	Maria Turek
EDITOR	Bettina Blickwede
EDITING STUDIO	Concept AV, Berlin
SOUND STUDIO	Tremens Tonstudio, Vienna
SOUND EDITOR	Veronika Hlawatsch
SOUND MIXER	Bernhard Maisch
COLOUR GRADING	Tom Varga
ONLINE EDITOR	Geoffrey Kleindorfer
DATA TRANSFER ARRI-LASER	Herbert Fischer
35MM COPY	Franz Rabl LISTO Videofilm
CAMERA EQUIPMENT	MOVIECAM, F.G. Bauer GmbH. JURACZKA Audiovisuelle Systeme Martin Weixelbaum
LIGHTING EQUIPMENT	Paul Bogotaj LGL Lichttechnik GmbH.
FILM MATERIAL	Rudolf Möstl KODAK GmbH.
TRANSLATION	Christina M. White
SUBTITLING	TITRA-Film Wien
PHOTO SETTING "GORILLA RAUBT WEIßE FRAU"	Atelier Seiz & Seiz Renate Seiz
INSURANCE	Regine Reiger Aon Jauch & Hübener GmbH
PRODUCTION COORDINATION, BERLIN	Ulla Niehaus
PRODUCTION COORDINATION, VIENNA	Silja Lex Marion Rutzendorfer
PRODUCTION MANAGER	Gerhard Hannak
PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR	Kurt Mayer
PRODUCTION ACCOUNTANT	Franz Klein
PRODUCER	Kurt Mayer

CO-PRODUCER	Ulrike Ottinger
EDITORIAL STUFF WDR ORF	Jutta Krug Peter Wustinger
GUESTS	Elfriede Jelinek Elfriede Gerstl Ursula Storch Werner Schwarz Herbert J. Wimmer Peter Fitz
NARRATOR	
BARBARELLA	Veruschka
MAGICIAN	Robert Kaldy-Karo
ASSISTANT	Barbara Prewein
ORIGINAL VIENNESE PRATERKASPERL	Georg Albert Evelyn Sulzbacher
PRATER-HEINZI	Heinrich Holub
MUSIC IN "EISERNER MANN"	Die Spezis - Gregor Mörth, Johann Stromberger
PRATER FAMILIES	Liselotte and Silvia Lang Hedy and Elisabeth De Jonge Alfred Kern Lydia, Karl and Hanni Kolarik Agnes and Philipp Kolnhofer Eva, Thomas and Stefan Sittler
ARCHIVES	Filmarchiv Austria Österreichisches Filmmuseum Wien Museum Österreichisches Volkshochschularchiv Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Bildarchiv Wien Wienbibliothek im Rathaus, Plakatsammlung Österreichische Mediathek Museum für Mechanische Musik, Familie Rechberger Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion Mayer's Filmaktualitätenbüro kurt mayer film
PRIVATE ARCHIVES	Familie Lang Familie Kern Familie Kolnhofer Familie Kolarik Familie Sittler Günther Schifter Wolfgang Stadler Timm Starl

## **SPECIAL THANKS TO**

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## **FESTIVAL**

### **2007**

- Berlinale Internationale Filmfestspiele, Germany
- Festival Internacional de Cine de Mar del Plata, Argentina
- Barcelona International Women's Film Festival, Spain
- Jerusalem Film Festival, Israel
- Era New Horizons International Film Festival, Poland
- Melbourne International Film Festival, Australia
- Museum of Modern Art, New York



## EXHIBITION – MUSEUM FÜR FILM UND FERNSEHEN, BERLIN

„ULRIKE OTTINGER“

September 13 - December 2, 2007

Ulrike Ottinger is one of Germany's most willful and unconventional filmmakers of international stature. This exhibition honors the artist and her work by presenting – in photographs, journals/notebooks and costumes – the diversity of the visual world she has created in her documentaries and fictional films. The exhibition will be accompanied by a retrospective of her films at the Arsenal cinema as well as a special series of events.



## ULRIKE OTTINGER - FILMOGRAPHY (EXTRACTS)

- 2004 **TWELVE CHAIRS**, 35mm, color, 198 min.  
Premiere: February 8th, 2004, Internationale  
Filmfestspiele Berlin
- 2002 **SOUTHEAST PASSAGE**, DV-CAM/ DigiBeta, color, 363 min.  
Premiere: June 8th, 2002, Documenta11, Kassel
- 1997 **EXIL SHANGHAI**, 16mm, color, 275 min.  
Premiere: February 18th, 1997, Internationale  
Filmfestspiele Berlin
- 1992 **TAIGA. A JOURNEY TO NORTHERN MONGOLIA**, 16mm, color,  
501 min. Premiere: February 21st/22nd, 1992,  
Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin
- 1989 **JOHANNA D´ARC OF MONGOLIA**, 35mm, color, 165 min.  
Premiere: February 14th, 1989, Wettbewerb, Berlin
- 1985 **1985 CHINA. THE ARTS - THE PEOPLE**, 16mm, color,  
270 min. Premiere: October 16th, Festival International  
du Film Documentaire, Nyon
- 1984 **DORIAN GRAY IN THE MIRROR OF THE YELLOW PRESS**,  
35mm, color, 105 min. Premiere: February 18th, 1984,  
Berlinale, Internationales Forum, Berlin
- 1981 **FREAK ORLANDO**, 35mm, color, 126 min.  
Premiere: November 1st, 1981, 15. Hofer Filmtage, Hof
- 1979 **TICKET OF NO RETURN**, 35mm, color, 107 min.  
Premiere: October 27th, 1979, Hofer Filmtage;  
Cannes, 1980
- 1977 **MADAME X - AN ABSOLUTE RULER**, 16mm, color,  
141 min.  
Premiere: Steirischer Herbst, Graz, 1977
- 1973 **LAOKOON & SONS**, 16mm, black&white, 50 min.  
Premiere: March, 25th, 1975, Arsenal, Berlin

## ULRIKE OTTINGER - SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Ulrike Ottinger was born on June 6, 1942.

She lived in Paris from 1962 to 1968, working as a painter and photographer. In 1966 she wrote her first screenplay, directed her first movie LAOOKON & SONS in 1972-73. In 1969, she founded the film club "Visuell" and the art gallery and edition "galeriepress" in Konstanz.

Since 1973 she has been living in Berlin. In addition to making films she stages operas and plays, as well as exhibiting her photographs at international exhibitors and showing her films at retrospectives.



## CONTACTS

### KURT MAYER FILM

Wiedner Hauptstrasse 45-47/18  
A - 1040 Wien  
Fon +43 1 967 89 29  
[office@kurtmayerfilm.com](mailto:office@kurtmayerfilm.com)  
[www.kurtmayerfilm.com](http://www.kurtmayerfilm.com)

### ULRIKE OTTINGER FILMPRODUKTION

Fichtestraße 34  
D - 10967 Berlin  
Fon +49 30 692 93 94  
[office@ulrikeottinger.com](mailto:office@ulrikeottinger.com)  
[www.ulrikeottinger.com](http://www.ulrikeottinger.com)

### DISTRIBUTION AUSTRIA

Filmladen GmbH.  
Mariahilfer Straße 58/7  
A-1070 Wien  
Fon +43 1 523 43 62-0  
[office@filmladen.at](mailto:office@filmladen.at)  
[www.filmladen.at](http://www.filmladen.at)

### DISTRIBUTION GERMANY

Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH  
Mehringdamm 33  
D - 10961 Berlin  
Fon +49 30 285 290 90  
[info@salzgeber.de](mailto:info@salzgeber.de)  
[www.salzgeber.de](http://www.salzgeber.de)

### WORLD SALES

medialuna entertainment GmbH & Co.  
KG  
Hochstadenstr. 1-3  
D - 50674 Köln  
Tel: +49 221 801498 0  
[info@medialuna-entertainment.de](mailto:info@medialuna-entertainment.de)  
[www.medialuna-entertainment.de](http://www.medialuna-entertainment.de)

### PRESS CONTACT VIENNA

apomat\* büro für kommunikation  
Andrea Pollach | Mahnaz Tischeh  
Hollandstraße 7/17  
A - 1020 Wien  
Fon +43 1 908 12 97 30 or - 40  
M +43 699 1944 84 51 /  
+43 699 1190 22 57  
[office@apomat.at](mailto:office@apomat.at)  
[www.apomat.at](http://www.apomat.at)

