

**Naomi Uman**

***The Ukrainian Time Machine***

**Monday, March 29 at 8 pm — Ovila Amphitheater at the University of San Francisco**

**Naomi Uman In Person**

**presented in association with**

**the Film Studies Program at the University of San Francisco and Cinema Project**

While exploring family roots in Ukraine, American filmmaker Naomi Uman lived in Legedzine, a small village near the center of the country, and made *The Ukrainian Time Machine*—employing the same diary-film style as seen in her past works *Leche* and *Mala Leche*—about the people there. Together with friends from the Echo Park Film Center in Los Angeles, Uman rented a van, bought a gas-powered generator and headed out across the country. Once in a new town, they simply asked for permission to do a screening, advertising the show over their speaker system and inviting people one by one. Many attendees said to Uman, “This is the way that we live; you have captured that. We ourselves could never have made this film. We do not see these things about ourselves as something to film, yet you have made a truly accurate portrait of our lives.” This outdoor Cinematheque screening will recreate the unique atmosphere and exuberance of the Ukraine roadshow. (Mike Plante)

***The Ukrainian Time Machine*** (2007–2008) by Naomi Uman; 16mm, 85 minutes, prints from the maker

***Kalendar*** (2007) by Naomi Uman; 16mm, 11 minutes, print from the maker

***Unnamed Film*** (2008) by Naomi Uman; 16mm, color, sound, 55 minutes

***On This Day*** (2008) by Naomi Uman; 16mm, 4 minutes

***Clay*** (2008) by Naomi Uman; 16mm, b&w, sound, 15 minutes

***There are four films in the Ukrainian series.***

One of the films is about a brick-making factory. In this part of the Ukraine there is something in the earth called gleena, which is a kind of clay. It's everywhere and the bricks from this factory are made out of gleena and water baked together, that's it. Five thousand years ago, people that were part of the Trypillian culture lived in this area. They made everything out of clay. Archaeologists have found houses that had been fired. They don't know if the people burned them down as they were leaving or if it was part of the process of making the house. But they're sure the clay was burned because clay that hasn't been baked doesn't have any memory. I've seen pieces of clay with handprints from when they made the wall. There are several archeological sites in the village. There's also a museum dedicated to this culture. It's my Fulbright institution—you have to be paired with an institution—so the museum, which in fact is not even open, is my institution. [...]

***One of the films features a group of village women singing traditional songs.***

The village grannies are sitting outside of the local store eating ice cream and they tell me this story of the first time ice cream was brought to the village. Nobody had a refrigerator. This was only ten years ago. People in the village, to this day, earn about \$150 a month, that's what a schoolteacher makes. So a refrigerator is very expensive. After I shot them they burst into song. And it turns out there is a group of grandmothers, I call them grannies, the word is Babuschki. They love that word and use it to describe themselves—it's not like calling someone an old bag or something. So they sang this song for me and I'd made a mistake with the tape recorder, pushed pause instead of play, so I missed the song. I was super bummed out but I asked them if they could do it again. They said: “Don't worry, we'll come to your house and sing. When is a good day?” [Paolo Davanzo and Lisa Marr, of the Echo Park Film Center in Los Angeles] had arrived only the day before so it turned into a huge party. Cooking for days, homemade vodka, homemade bread and vareneki, boiled dumplings. They just kept coming and they came in costumes, traditional, embroidered outfits. I didn't know what to expect. It was a huge deal partly because they had stopped singing. They used to sing together but the tradition had stopped. At the party, Lisa and Paolo sang to them and then they sang together. It was amazing. Now they sing together at my house. Some time later, a group of Georgian musicians came and they sang for each other. A young friend of mine who sings traditional Ukrainian music in the city of Lviv was visiting me and he always dresses in a Cossack outfit and smokes a pipe. He has a funny Cossack hairdo. There are no freaks in the Ukraine. No freaks anywhere. At least you never see them. This guy is a superfreak. The grannies came in and he met this one woman who is seventy-two years old. The instant they met

they were like: "Let's have a wedding! Let's get married!" And so they pretended to be the bride and groom. They sat at the head of the table. I had this wreath of plastic flowers to put on her head because the bride traditionally wears a wreath of flowers. The whole night we pretended they were getting married. They called me the mother. I was the mother of the bride. And now this singing group of grannies just told me they were on national television. Music is a seed that blooms over and over again. I feel lucky to be a part of it.

***Tell us about the film called Kalendar.***

I'd been studying Russian and when I awoke to the reality that no one in the village spoke Russian, I began taking Ukrainian lessons with the Ukrainian teachers in the school. They were teaching me but it was very difficult for them because they didn't speak any English and my Russian was rudimentary. When they taught me the months of the year, they would point at stuff. It was July when I was studying and they were drying Leipen, which are Linden flowers. When they told me the name they pointed to the flower. Then they went through all the months, teaching me what the names meant and I instantly had an idea for a movie. I was so excited. I asked if I could come back and film them making tea. That's why they were drying flowers, for tea. I came back the following week and they had picked Linden flowers from a Linden tree and placed them on a nearby tree so that I could film them picking the flowers and not have to move the camera. They cheated the shot for me. So that was where the idea came from.

***And there are two more films that make up the series?***

There are two black and white films and two color films. The brick factory film is in black and white and so is a film about the pilgrimage of the Hasidic Jews to Uman, which is shot on film from the Czech Republic. It's very grainy, high contrast, different from film shot on Kodak stock. Every year there's a pilgrimage to Uman of Hasidic Jews who come to worship at the gravesite of Rebbe Nachman who died in 1810. He said: "I will be your last Rabbi. I will be your last leader." This group of Jews decided to continue following him. They're the only group of Hasidic Jews with a dead leader. He said if you come to my grave on Roshashana, Jewish New Year, and make a donation to charity, even one penny, and say this specific prayer, I will pull you out of purgatory and into heaven by your side curls. Hasidic men come and pray at his gravesite, which is on a downtown street in Uman. The city has grown around the gravesite, which is in the middle of an apartment complex. Last year 25,000 Jewish pilgrims came to Uman, just men. The women come and set up the apartments, make everything kosher and then they leave. Women and men aren't allowed to worship together. And so you have a group of repressed men without their wives in a culture that they don't respect because they only respect other Hasidic Jews, so they behave really terribly. They solicit sex from women and they throw their garbage around. They're very rude... and they're regenerating anti-Semitism. Actually, it's not anti-Semitism, it's anti-Hasidism but the people living in Uman don't realize that not all Jews are Hasids. And so this ancient conflict in Ukraine is resurfacing... and continuing.

***How did you go about making a film about this conflict?***

Well I haven't edited it. I have the elements that I think are going to go together. It was really hard to shoot the Hasidic pilgrims because I wasn't allowed to be there. I would stand around with my sound equipment or just hang around with my camera and shoot them when I could. On holidays, you're not allowed to film. That's their rule and that's when a lot of activities take place. So I just kind of stalked them. I'd spend entire days in Uman with the camera. It was really intense. I've always had a problem with elements of Judaism, not the religion but the culture of Judaism. I just read an article in the Jerusalem Post called "How about some courtesy?" It's about the history of bad manners in modern day Israel. My film is going to include footage of the pilgrims interacting with people and places in Uman. I have footage from the bazaar. And then I had an affair with one of the pilgrims, which was really insane, but it opened a door that never, ever would have been opened. He came to the village and everybody knew this guy was at my house. He was horrible. It was horrible but it was interesting. He was a professional cantor, a singer, and I recorded him singing. I used some footage of him in the longer, color film. I'm going to put this criticism in there. It's probably going to be text. The film will be short, fifteen–twenty minutes. I'm going to say something about this return to anti-Semitism.

***That leaves us with the other color film. You mentioned it will be much longer than the others.***

Yeah, probably around forty-five minutes. That film, which I need to find a name for, I'm realizing it's like a Ukrainian *Leche* [Uman, 1999]. But instead of living with one family, I'm living with the entire village. I used all the footage in chronological order from when I arrived to when I left. It's a portrait of the village and me and I'm super excited about it. ("The Ukrainian Time Machine: An Interview with Naomi Uman," by Julia Dzwonkowski and Kye Potter)