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ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN SLIGHTLY
DIFFERENT FORM IN *BOULEVARD*,
SUMMER 1993; NOMINATED FOR A
PUSHCART PRIZE

Voice-Over for the Documentary
Scenes from the Films of Konkowsky
as Recalled by the Executor of His Estate

Nice neighborhood. Konkowsky died in it. Strandvägen, in the film director's Stockholm suburb of North Djurgården, was not a tree-lined street, but a house-lined forest. Nothing is more natural in a forest than a forest fire, and last year's Great Fire of Stockholm got its start only a few doors away.

I say "doors," but here no doors remain: no doors, no ceilings, no walls. Even windows melted away like sheets of ice. There are only brick stairs to nowhere, birdbaths, and chimneys that rise like exclamation points from the sentence fragments beneath them.

It was a fire that swung from the trees like a great ape. It was a fire that alighted on seven thousand rooftops. It was a fire that cost the life of a sixty-two-

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year-old film director who stood five-foot-three in his boots and weighed one hundred and eighty pounds without them.

Konkowsky had always labored under the weight of a paranoia that his films would be altered. The release of the colorized *Battleship Potemkin* was, for him, the last straw, and he boarded an SAS red-eye flight to Los Angeles to stage a protest at the premiere. Beneath the shafts of searchlights dueling in the smog-milky night air, before the winking orientalia of Mann's Chinese Theatre, beside the tongue of red carpet licking up celebrities from limousines arriving at the curb of Hollywood Boulevard, the squat, bearded, wild-eyed, un-plastic-surgered director planted one boot in Hedy Lamarr's right footprint and his other in Myrna Loy's left. There Konkowsky tore his contract with Svenskfilmindustri into very small pieces and announced to a flabbergasted press corps that he would never work again.

When several of its most influential directors threatened to follow suit, the Swedish film organization relented: if Konkowsky paid to double the insurance on his films and to construct a modern storage facility, Svenskfilmindustri would turn over to his custody every negative and every print of each of his films. So it was that the Fichet Lock Company came to North Djurgården and installed in the basement of Konkowsky's home a bank vault with nine-inch-thick insulated walls and a 2½-ton door — a fortress guaranteed steadfast to the improbable level of twelve hundred degrees Fahrenheit.

But Konkowsky hadn't reckoned on anything like the Great Fire of Stockholm — and temperatures that reached two thousand degrees. When the director perished, his films — *Music, Death, Malmö, Infra-Red*; all his films, all copies of them — perished with him.

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There is a skeleton in Konkowsky's closet, and it is Konkowsky. Or *was* Konkowsky. Or *was presumably* Konkowsky. We know only that the ashes found in Konkowsky's basement vault are the remains of an adult male *Homo sapiens* who died with a garden shovel in his hands.



Konkowsky was not the first artist whose work went up in flames — Gogol burned his unpublished volume two of *Dead Souls*; Kafka instructed his executor to burn all his novel manuscripts — but Konkowsky was the first to go up in flames along with his work. Rare indeed is the successful artist who controls every extant edition of his work; rare indeed the man who has the power to wipe out every trace of his existence.

No art, no art critic: so if the critic finds his subject in ashes, he must try to rebuild the ashes back into his subject. He must try to regenerate a phoenix from the ashes of a chicken.

What a film critic does for a living is write in the dark. During years of Konkowsky's screenings I filled hundreds of pages — but nothing I wrote brings me any closer to reconstructing these movies. I never tried to replicate Konkowsky's work on paper: why, when the films themselves existed in the flesh? Film retains all it sees and all it hears. Film — like paper, like videotape, like wet concrete, like silicon chips, like brain tissue — is a medium of memory.

Film is memory. Memorizing a memory is a redundancy. Besides, even if I had copied down a shot-by-shot synopsis of any film by Konkowsky, I could no more transform that synopsis into the film itself than I could transform a telephone directory of a city into the city itself. Data, facts, details are never enough. Feed a trillion facts into a computer: it cannot fabricate a single cockroach.

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And so I find myself at a loss. Film is memory; what does one remember of a film? Worse, what can one possibly remember of Konkowsky's films, which made no sense unless one made them make sense? Still, as a student of Konkowsky's — at first his only student, his John the Baptist — later, as perhaps his foremost critic, and finally now as the executor of Konkowsky's estate, I must try.



Watching Konkowsky's images I feel I am getting somewhere, but whether it is up or down I cannot tell. The images that face me on the screen are like passengers on the other escalator — the one going down if I am going up, up if I am going down. Though I see each image only for an instant, I know it will continue to exist, to live once it is out of my sight, just as it existed before I saw it, just as I lived and will continue to live outside the moment when the image and I found ourselves face to face.

Konkowsky has not created or even captured the image but intercepted it; and just as he cannot control the life of the image, he cannot select the moment when it chooses to pass before his lens. Each of Konkowsky's images appears almost casually — not necessarily at a pivotal or even a definitive juncture in its existence.

Sometimes you want to immerse yourself in an image, to bathe in it, to drown in it, to inhale it deeply into your lungs and hold your breath, to eat of it until you are stuffed, to lie down and roll in it, to grab hold of it and draw it loosely round you, to pull it tightly over your head, to mask yourself in it and pass among the living, to cloak yourself in it and pass among the dead, and to dream it and to live in it.

Konkowsky's images, like the people on the other escalator, don't hold still long enough for any of that. What color was his hair — gone! Her coat? Gone! How

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old? Gone! Male? Female? Student? Soldier? Priest? Gone, all gone, quite gone, each gone back into a separate life, toward a meal, a job, a home, each toward its own private mystery. You haven't enough left over in your memory, even now, to sketch out a decent likeness of any of them.

Instead you'll get a composite: Y's forehead with Q's hair, R's mustache on N's lip — and perhaps your own eyes because you're so used to looking at them that you've come to think all eyes resemble your own. You are recombining, collaging, reanimating, sewing it all together. You are forcing jigsaw pieces into spaces that do not fit, because you lack — can never have — the original solution to the puzzle. You are re-acting, re-shooting, re-editing, re-releasing the film. You are making a new movie.

Konkowsky knew you would, knew you couldn't help but, wanted you to, counted on it. He knew that an image of a thing is not the thing itself — not an object made up of specific elements with numbered places on the periodic table, an object with a specific set of properties, a specific mass and volume — no, an image of a thing is not the thing itself but the distillation of a thing, a single variation of a thing of which an infinity of variations are possible.

A flock of pigeons flying through a city on a sunny day remains a flock of pigeons, and each pigeon remains a pigeon, wherever the flock flies. Yet the shadow of the flock — the image of the flock — changes shape, texture, color, even speed and direction when it flies over a sidewalk and a street and takes on the colors and corrugations of concrete and asphalt, when it flies past an apartment building and leaps up onto a vertical screen of red brick, when it flies over trees and is atomized onto a thousand translucent green leaves.

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Konkowsky's idea was to hand over images — “empty images,” he called them — and let us invest them with meaning, charge them with emotion, link them together, not only reading their story but writing it for ourselves. Konkowsky gave up his empty images as trustingly, as guilelessly, as willessly as a child gives up his empty hand to his father at a street corner.



An “empty” image:

In a famous museum, a young woman approaches a painting by Rembrandt. Staring intently, she comes very near the portrait, produces a small metal case, and applies her lipstick.

It is easy to assume that she is using the glass over the painting as a mirror, that she does not even see the face behind it, seeing instead her own face in its reflection.

But perhaps it is not this way at all. Perhaps she wishes to color the lips of the man in the painting, and since she cannot apply lipstick directly to the canvas — there are laws, there are guards — she positions herself where the reflection of her own lips matches the man's lips. Perhaps she paints *her* lips only to paint *his* lips.

His lips are quite different from hers, however, and to paint them precisely, she must miss the outlines of her own. It may be that this woman, this woman whom we suppose so selfish that she can look into a painting and see only herself, is in fact so selfless that she looks into her own reflection and sees only the portrait behind it; so selfless that to bring color into his faded lips she mis-paints her own, slips the boundaries; so selfless that she makes herself over into a madwoman or a clown only so that, whenever she will look into a mirror, she will see *his* lips, expertly and exactly delineated, and not her own. Perhaps she is in love.

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And if in love, in love not with a man her own age or even old enough to be her father, but with a man three hundred and fifty years older than she is. There are other obstacles in the way of their relationship. She speaks Russian; he speaks Middle Dutch. She can, whenever she chooses, stroll along Nevsky Prospekt or the bank of the Fontanka River; he is bounded on all sides by a wooden frame. She is talkative and energetic; he never changes his expression. She is three-dimensional; he is two-dimensional. She has a youthful body full of hormones and hungers and electricity; he has only a head.

And yet she comes here every day — yes, she does it every day — to apply her lipstick to his lips, to commit not an act of vanity but an act of restoration, to wear his mouth on hers as if in a kiss.



Konkowsky believed that an image is emptied of its meaning each time it is interpreted, that as an image lives out its life, it becomes emptier and emptier, until it is only what one makes of it, until it is an empty image.

The image is a seashell and the interpreter a hermit crab. While he inhabits the image, there is room for only one interpretation, for him alone, and he jealously protects the image, *his* image, from other interpreters. When he dies, or is evicted by a more forceful interpretation, or turns his interpretive interest elsewhere — it is all the same to the image — another interpreter moves in; and each successive occupant puts his name on the mailbox, paints his colors on the wainscoting, hangs his curtains in the window, runs his banner up the flagpole.



The fate of Rembrandt's *Night Watch* is the fate of all images.

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The master labored over this enormous canvas for two years. Indignities were heaped on it almost from the beginning. In 1715 a third of the painting was shorn away. Generation upon generation of protective varnish was slathered onto it. *The Night Watch* embarked upon a night that would not be marked in hours but in centuries.

In 1946 a thorough cleaning revealed that these “watchmen” were actually soldiers getting ready for battle. The painting known for three hundred years as *The Night Watch* was not a night scene at all — it took place in broad daylight. So its name was changed to *The Company of Frans Banning Cocq Preparing to March Out*. And fifty years later, everyone still calls it *The Night Watch*



Konkowsky was a painter, not a critic; a creator, not an interpreter; a pigeon, not a zoologist. He sharpened the distinction at a press conference during the making of *The Making of the Illusion of Gravity*. Amidst the freak blizzard that swept Los Angeles two Christmases ago, Konkowsky held his press conference as he filmed his film — outdoors.

In a Russian black fur hat that outlandishly exaggerates the huge head perched neckless on that stocky torso, Konkowsky seats himself behind a table and the customary growth of microphones. It is twilight. The tabletop is covered with snow. So are the tops of the microphones, as if they’ve gone gray waiting for Konkowsky.

“OK,” he says, clapping his hands, “Zoom zoom!” (His English vocabulary consisted almost wholly of film jargon.)

“Mr. Konkowsky,” says a critic in the second row, “you must have many commitments elsewhere. Why did you drop them all to come here?”

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Konkowsky stretches his arms upward and tilts back that great head, large clumped-together snowflakes nestling in the black fur of his hat, in his unpruned salt-and-pepper Rasputin's beard, lingering there, individual flakes landing on the ruddy exposed patches of his cheeks, melting so instantly and leaving traces so infinitesimal they seem simply to disappear.

"The snow!" says the critic from *Cahiers du Cinema*. "The snow!" she says, the ember of her cigarette sketching circumflex accents in the air. "Unlike rain, unlike heat, unlike fog, unlike tears, unlike art, snow transforms reality — yes, blankets reality with a new layer of reality, a new layer that not only changes the color of all things, the texture of all things, even the temperature of all things, but unifies them under one color, one texture, one temperature — and then, as completely, as drastically as it came across our eyes — a veil, a curtain, a hand of God wiping it all clean, subtracting everything from everything, offering our senses a preview of death or the prelude to life — as totally as it came over reality, it is gone, it returns to us our world and returns us to our world, the world we knew or thought we knew, the world from which the world was subtracted only to be added back once again — and this, then, all this, is what you find in snow?"

Yosei Mura, Konkowsky's cinematographer and alter ego, bends near the director, and Konkowsky listens to the translation, his beetling eyebrows beetling. Long before Mura can possibly be finished, Konkowsky, laughing, waves him away. He pushes snow into a peak in front of him with his fat little hands, and puts a pinch into his mouth, like a man taking snuff. His jubilant, watery eyes come bugging out, and he says, "Look! You can eat it, and it's cold."



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So he filmed the snow, and warm air melted the snow, and fire melted the memory of snow. Konkowsky died in the custom-made Fichet vault in the basement of his home — with a garden shovel in his hands. In reconstructing Konkowsky's final scene we begin with the shovel.

We begin with the shovel, for a film of snow is not snow, and the shadow of a flock of birds is not a flock of birds, and a painting of a man is not a man, and the ashes of a man and a shovel are not the man and his shovel. Each is an image of the thing.

An image is a thing riven from that which it has been and that which it will be, cropped and cut and sized and framed off from that which surrounds it in the physical world; a thing first filtered through the artist's senses, then sifted and sorted and strained by the artist's mind and soul, then squeezed down by the artist's hand into or onto a medium, in which form the image reaches the viewer: and now, all that the artist did to distill the thing into an image — the sifting, sorting, straining; the cutting, cropping, sizing, framing; the rivening and rendering — all this is done or redone or undone by the viewer, out of the artist's control and out of his awareness: until finally the image stands reconstituted, regenerated, re-created, not as the thing it was before it became an image, but as a newborn thing that only now takes the first breath of its life.

The archaeologist finds a broken plate and sets an imaginary table with it; he places the table in a house, the house on a street, the street in a village, the village in a kingdom, the kingdom under a king, the king in history: the archaeologist finds a broken plate and builds up an entire civilization around it. Yet all he has in his hand is a piece of crockery encrusted with dirt.

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Who is the artist: the ceramist who made his civilization into a plate, or the archaeologist who made the plate into a civilization? Both, Konkowsky would have said, but the archaeologist is the greater.

Who is the artist: the filmmaker or the film-viewer? Konkowsky believed a film is more than a murder to be solved, an equation with one right answer and infinity-minus-one wrong answers; he believed that most films infantilize the viewer, so he made films that venerated the viewer instead.

Now we, the viewers of Konkowsky's films and the viewers of what he left us of himself — we who file past the empty coffin — must repay the trust Konkowsky placed in us. He gives himself to us as ash and char, gives himself to us as an image: we rebuild the image into the thing. In reconstructing Konkowsky, we begin by reconstructing Konkowsky's last scene; and in reconstructing Konkowsky's last scene, we begin with the shovel.



As the Great Fire of Stockholm starts to spread — fire outstripped by scent of fire, scent of fire outstripped by word of fire — we place the slightly dwarflike figure of the director in his rose garden, turning soil up against the exterior wall of the vault in which his doubly-insured and irreplaceable films lie preserved, turning it violently, turning soil and seedling, petal and twig, stem and thorn.

Konkowsky shovels until droplets of sweat fly from his whiskers, until the teeth of the fire crash through the houses on Strandvägen. As the flames leap his barrier of dirt and roses, Konkowsky dashes down into the vault. Throwing the shovel aside, he grabs an armful of film reels — but no, his home is melting, raining down around him; he must retreat back into the vault, must crawl beneath the heat and smoke, and limp-crawling now, his films still crooked in one arm, he swings

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the enormous door shut behind him; yet even here the hot air pushes in, in on his face, in and in, pressing and pressing, until a final mad and heat-maddened inspiration seizes him: laughing that laugh of his that knows no language and no limit, Konkowsky heaves open the vault door so the flames may enjoy access to his life's work: yes, picking up the garden spade, and, the sweat pouring from his beard, shoveling cans of film into the fire like some maniacal engineer on a train to Hell.



For film is a train, its windows fleeting by, each an image filled with color, framed off from the next; and a train is a film, the strip of colored landscape seen from behind one of those train windows, the world hemmed in, squared off, encapsulated in an arbitrary border, which is to say the world transformed into a film of the world. Angle, reverse angle: either way you look at it, a film is a train and a train is a film.

The frames in a film are railroad ties, the tines of a zipper, stitches sewn in injured flesh; and the images in a film are cars on a rainy highway, flagstones on a garden path, lilies floating downstream, their upturned faces reflecting moonlight and the water reflecting nothing, zero, black: black as the night cut by a searchlight, a searchlight announcing, for example, the premiere of a film; a searchlight which cuts the sky and cuts a film from the sky, from the smog, from the pigeons; a searchlight which, shined down instead on the street, cuts a film from the city, from asphalt and concrete, brick and mortar, flesh and cloth, and the people lining up to see a film become actors in another film of whose existence they remain oblivious.

For film is a train and a train is a film. Run a length of movie film through your hands, long and long and narrow like the path of a human life: a train is a

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film, the frames of a film, the colors in the frames of a film, the empty images in the frames of a film by Konkowsky, a train braking on the edge of town, a train pulling into a station, the film flapping in the projector, a train stopping, a film ending, a man dying.

So now Konkowsky's films do not exist. Do not exist, at least, as long colored strips of cellulose acetate rolled up in disc-shaped aluminum cans.

But though a train may break down, wear out, derail, explode, may meet a thousand fates, nothing can destroy the memory of the places it has been; though a book may be burned, nothing can burn its contents out of the mind of the reader; and though a film may rot, may mold, may crack into a hundred pieces, may disintegrate into a million particles of dust, may incinerate into a trillion atoms, its images, once created, once communicated, can never be effaced. For just a train is where it takes you, just as a book is what is in it, so a film is whatever the viewer uses it to create.

I have taken the long way to say that Konkowsky's films still exist. To say that Konkowsky's films were not destroyed in the Great Fire of Stockholm. I see him, shovel in hand, cans of film in shovel, shovel in fire, sweat dripping from beard, laughing that laugh of his that knew no language, no limit, no stopping, no end, laughing because he knew that the only thing going up in smoke was a sixty-two-year-old film director who stood five-foot-three in his boots and weighed one hundred and eighty pounds without them.



Konkowsky was a spinner, spinning threads from the colors of all he saw; and he was a weaver, looming the threads into a bolt of fabric thirty-five millimeters wide and as long as his life; and he wrapped his fabric around him and around him until it was a shawl, a veil, a jacket, a straitjacket, a coat-of-many-colors,

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a mummy's bandage; a bandage that at first protected his skin, then stuck to his skin, could not be removed from his skin, could not be distinguished from his skin, a bandage that grew into his flesh as his flesh grew into the bandage, until warp and woof were cell and cell; and when finally this bandage, this bandage wrapped so tightly, engrafted so deeply, when finally this bandage of film was peeled away and borne aloft by fire, Konkowsky had become the bandage and nothing of him remained inside the bandage: ascending on an updraft, Konkowsky reached down, took hold the last scrap of bandage, of fabric, of film, and pulled the last scrap up after him.