

A CINEMA GUILD RELEASE



COUNTING

A film by Jem Cohen

110 minutes / 16:9 / Dolby Digital 5.1 / U.S.A. / Not Rated

National Media Contact

Julia Pacetti
JMP Verdant
1000 Dean Street, Suite 329
(718) 399-0400
julia@jmpverdant.com

Synopsis

Counting's fifteen linked chapters conjoin city symphony, diary film, and personal/political essay (documentary's unruly stepchildren) to build a vivid portrait of contemporary life. Shot in locations including Russia, Istanbul, and New York City, its subjects range from naturally occurring Moscow street theater to NSA spying to the dismantling of Brooklyn landmarks. In Cohen's 30 year exploration of documentary as a path of open inquiry, the film is perhaps his most personal reckoning.

Single Sentence

In fifteen linked chapters shot in locations ranging from Moscow to New York to Istanbul, *Counting* merges city symphony, diary film, and personal/political essay to create a vivid portrait of contemporary life.

Director's Statement

by Jem Cohen

Skywriting, the piece that initiated the *Counting* project and now constitutes its final chapter, was made in reaction to the passing of filmmaker Chris Marker, whose work and death affected me deeply. While I did not know him well, he was hardly the recluse that he's often stereotyped to be. We were in occasional correspondence for over a decade, met a few times, and the film's final epigram is drawn from one of his emails. I'd once sent him a young filmmaker's first effort (Garret Scott's *Cul de Sac*) and with characteristic generosity he responded that he felt it was a masterpiece. A few years later, Scott died suddenly. I reported the sad news to Chris and he wrote back noting the recent death of the sound engineer for his *Le Joli Mai* and reflecting, in his matchless way, on loss, memory and Walter Benjamin, whom we both revered. The pebble of those words became the ripples of this film.

So, I made *Skywriting*, and then kept going, pulling from my archive and shooting more whenever I could. What began as a loose and personal tribute with attendant "markers" (the most obvious being cats) took off into other territory altogether. It became a portrait of the world as I saw and experienced it over the last few years, in a sense a kind of home movie, and a way of navigating difficult times. It also became a way of thinking about documentary itself - and a reaction against certain tendencies in the field - in particular, the increasing pressure to conform to formulas, most often related to "three-act storytelling" built around characters who embark on "arced journeys with satisfying conclusions." While fine films have been made via that template, there are whole other realms of documentary based on registering life as it unfolds, where observation and close listening are primary and little can be scripted, much less "pitched." These films take on the idiosyncratic forms that personal engagement, rather than the marketplace, demands. Often, these films are also deeply political. (I think not only of Marker, but of many filmmakers whose work I am thankful for - from Vertov, Vigo, and Jennings, to contemporaries including Farocki, Akerman, Benning, and Varda).

In regards to my own work, *Counting* continues in a mode that I sometimes think of as life-drawing, in which free observation of uncontrolled events plays a crucial role. In reaction to my last film, *Museum Hours*, a woman in Long Island came up to me after the screening, which was at a strip mall. She said "I had nothing to hold onto but I also had everything to hold onto." (I am hard pressed to pin down exactly what this new film is about, but it could be about that.)

It's about riding subways, planes, and trains; it is in fact affected by jet lag. It's about the afternoon light on a visitor's face. (Does it matter that this very light from my own backyard will soon be blocked by a luxury condo tower, one of thousands now obliterating countless neighborhoods across the globe...?)

It's about Gareth walking Tom and Tom walking their dog. It's about seeing blood on the subway platform. It's about the Jewish Telegram joke ("Start worrying, details follow.") It's about animals and music; without them we are lost.

Counting

Most of all then, the project embodies an insistence which many filmmakers have shared but which Marker exemplified - that the most interesting terrain is the grey area between recognized categories and genres, the no-man's land where we actually live.

Jem Cohen Bio

New-York based, Cohen's feature-length films include *Museum Hours*, *Chain*, *Benjamin Smoke*, *Instrument*, and *Evening's Civil Twilight in Empires of Tin*. Shorts include *Lost Book Found*, *Amber City*, *Little Flags*, and *Anne Truitt – Working*. His films are in the collections of NYC's Museum of Modern Art and Whitney Museum and have been broadcast by PBS, Arte, and the Sundance Channel. He's had retrospectives at London's Whitechapel, BAFICI, Oberhausen, Gijon, and Spain's Punto de Vista. Recent projects include the *Gravity Hill Newsreels* (about Occupy Wall Street) and *We Have an Anchor*, a portrait of Cape Breton.

He has collaborated with musicians including Fugazi, Patti Smith, Terry Riley, Godspeed You Black Emperor!, Gil Shaham/Orpheus Orchestra, R.E.M., Vic Chesnutt, and the Ex, as well as writer Luc Sante.

Filmography (projects 60 min. and over)

2015 COUNTING

2012 MUSEUM HOURS

2012 GRAVITY HILL NEWSREELS

(Series of 12 linked documentary shorts about Occupy Wall Street, 64 min. total, HD)

2008 EVENING'S CIVIL TWILIGHT IN EMPIRES OF TIN

(100 min., 16mm and dv)

2006 BUILDING A BROKEN MOUSETRAP

(62 min., 16mm/dv)

2004 CHAIN

(99 min., 16mm)

2000 BENJAMIN SMOKE

(75 min., 16mm, Co-directed by Peter Sillen)

1999 INSTRUMENT

(115 min., 16mm, Super 8, video)

1994 BURIED IN LIGHT

(60 min., Super 8)

Credits

Produced by	Gravity Hill Films
Executive Producers	Patti Smith, Ryan Krivoshey, Graham Swindoll, Peter Sillen / Brendan Doyle, Paolo Calamita
Senior Advisor	Guy Picciotto
Post Production	Metropolis Post, NYC Colorist: Jason Crump
Audio Post Production	Rumble Audio Re-recording Mix: Ryan Billia Sound Design: Billia, Cohen
Post Production / Online Assistant	Sam Schnorr / C41
Assistant Researcher	Lisa Bell Weisdorf
Songs	Dirty Three – “Furnace Skies” (Ellis, Turner, White) From Toward The Low Sun The Evens – “Minding Ones Business (Farnia/Mackaye) From The Evens, Dischord Records No. 150 Xylouris White – “Forging” (Credits) (White, Xylouris) Recorded by Guy Picciotto

©Gravity Hill 2015

A Cinema Guild Release