Acropolis Cinema and MUBI present
the Los Angeles premiere of

NOTES ON AN APPEARANCE

By Ricky D’Ambrose

August 22 — 8pm
Downtown Independent
NOTES ON AN APPEARANCE

60 min // USA // 2018

A young man’s disappearance is at the center of an enigmatic, haunted film set inside New York City apartments, subway stations, bookstores, and cafés as the supporters of an elusive political theorist embark on a covert program of indiscriminate violence and censure. But Todd and Madeleine, who search for the missing David, soon enter the company of strangers promising diversion and intrigue, and the reasons for David’s disappearance become much less preoccupying — and less meaningful.

Notes on an Appearance

By Devika Girish

This review was originally published in MUBI’s Notebook, as part of the piece “Highlights from New Directors/New Films 2018”

Ricky D’Ambrose’s Brooklyn-set Notes on an Appearance is also invested in the formal qualities of still images and sparse, non-narrative moments, although to entirely different ends. Perhaps the most obviously “indie”-seeming film in the festival, Notes chronicles the disappearance of a young man with truly stringent minimalism, which, although born out of fiscal restrictions, perfects a deliberate style D’Ambrose has developed in acclaimed shorts such as Six Cents in the Pocket (2015) and Spiral Jetty (2017). (The director has also made several video interviews with filmmakers for the Notebook.)

In Notes, he assembles deadpan performances and rigidly composed close-ups of hands, faces, food, and stationery into something resembling a story. David (Bingham Bryant), a recent graduate newly arrived in Brooklyn, starts assisting his roommate Todd (Keith Poulson) with research for a biography of a controversial theorist named Stephen Taubes. When David suddenly vanishes around halfway through the film, Todd and David’s girlfriend Madeline (Tallie Medel) try to find answers using the paper trail he leaves behind.

The paucity of expository detail in Notes—characters are filmed against placeless pastel backgrounds, and travel is indicated simply by the movement of a finger along a map of the New York subway—turns every image into a sign, offering temptingly bare, sunlit surfaces on which to project meaning. As such, the film has been interpreted in varying ways by critics: as a skewering of the hermetic world of academia, an allegory about young people contending with late capitalism,
and an ode to the ever-changing scope of New York City. As the plurality of readings indicates, the one thing Notes is inarguably concerned with is the act of meaning-making.

Before he disappears, David, charged with cataloguing random writings and videos of Taubes’ that no one knows what to make of, is instructed by the scholar’s estate to remove all incriminating details of his life from the biography. These tasks underscore the difficulty—and arbitrariness—of narrativization, later reinforced by Madeline’s and Todd’s efforts to make sense of the scraps and notes David leaves behind. The film seems to ask: can we fashion a narrative out of the stray remnants of someone’s life? Are things—objects, events, utterances—inherently linked by a causational order, or do they just exist, waiting for our hermeneutic work to fill the gaps? This conceit extends meta-fictionally to the structure of the film. Some of D’Ambrose’s more inspired DIY choices, such as the synecdochal use of a postcard image and found footage of the Milan cathedral to establish a foreign location, are Kuleshovian flourishes that highlight the role that the spectator plays in filmic construction.
“An extraordinary new mode of movie narrative.”
— Richard Brody, The New Yorker

“An anti-mystery in the tradition of L’Avventura assembled with the cool reserve of Robert Bresson.”
— Calum Marsh, Village Voice

“... a fascinating little movie about people trapped by the details of everyday life and searching for a bigger picture that constantly eludes them.”
— Eric Kohn, Indiewire

“...it’s refreshing to see a filmmaker thinking so far outside the box.”
— Ben Kenigsberg, The New York Times

— Ian Mantgani, Sight & Sound

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