

ARTFORUM

Borscht Belt

By Nick Pinkerton, January 24, 2015



Bleeding Palm, Adventures of Christopher Bosh in the Multiverse, 2012, animation, color, sound, 11 minutes.

AMONG GROUPS OF BACKYARD, amateur filmmakers, it is common practice to create your own “studio,” an entity in name alone that serves as a password, an ego-bolstering sense of identity, a communally-bonding inside joke. When I was making movies with friends in Cincinnati we used the name Technetium Enterprises. I have a friend who started his own BS company, Creatively Bankrupt, when he was at university. And around a decade ago, some kids in Miami, many of them graduates or current students at the New World School of the Arts, a magnet high school downtown, formed Borscht Corp.

I was thinking about this while walking along Biscayne Boulevard toward the Intercontinental Hotel in downtown Miami, whose external LED lights had been programmed to flash the Borscht Corp. logo (a kind-of ouroboros circle, but with two heads, a snake and an alligator), along with scrolling texts (“EVERYTHING YOU DO WILL BE FORGOTTEN”) reminiscent of the THE WORLD IS YOURS blimp text in that most seminal of Miami movies, Brian De Palma’s *Scarface* (1983). If not the world, than Borscht today have a decent claim on owning Miami—it turns out that if you keep working at your inside-joke fake studio thing for ten years, you can fool everyone else into believing it’s real as well.

The LED display and installations in the Intercontinental lobby were among the many site-specific elements of the event which is the raison d’être of Borscht Corp., the Borscht Film Festival. Now in its ninth semiannual appearance—2013 was a year off—this year’s festival was five days of screenings and associated events, with a program of shorts commissioned and produced by what their website describes as an “open source collaborative” as the centerpiece. Among the attractions: A screening of *Scarface*, interspersed with janky homemade, crowdsourced clips submitted by friends and fans, at the incongruously lavish Mansion Nightclub on Miami Beach; musical performances, replete with 3D light shows, at the planetarium of the soon-to-be-shuttered Miami Museum of Science; a twentieth anniversary outdoor screening of the Miami-set *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994).

A film whose plot hinges on the kidnapping of Dolphins quarterback Dan Marino, *Ace Ventura* is actually relevant to the Borscht Corp. mission, for much of their practice has to do with creating a mythology for the Miamian scene and its indigenous celebrities, a neon Tolkien kind of thing. Coral Morphologic, a group whose multimedia works reference the coral reefs of the city’s urban waterways, are frequent Borscht collaborators, while one of the most widely-seen shorts made under their auspices is *Adventures of Christopher Bosh in the Multiverse*, which was passed around on the Internet quite a bit last year. (Borscht works are designed as much for the laptop as the theater, as attuned to new media as to any traditional idea of cinema.) Attributed to “a Miami based mystic organization founded by Ronnie Rivera” called Bleeding Palm, *Christopher*

Bosh has it that the Miami Heat power forward is in fact a deposed “twelve-dimensional God” from another galaxy, and imagines the circumstances of the 2012 “Miami cannibal attack” as part of a skirmish in a battle for humanity’s survival.



Mayer\Leyva, Cool as Ice 2, 2014, color, sound.

A *Christopher Bosh* sequel was announced as missing in action on the eve of its premiere, or “on Miami time,” as the evening’s emcee had it, before he led the crowd in a chant of “MIAMI-DADE, BORN AND RAISED!” While the Fest would appear to be sponsored-up and well-funded—the shorts showcase was at the 2,200-seat Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, and Borscht Corp. has been the recipient of a handsome grant from the Miami-based Knight Foundation—it retains an air of by-the-seat-of-the-pants amateurishness in its improvised form (fun) and not-infrequent a/v gaffes (less so). This amateurishness extends to Borscht’s dedication to the short-film form—not as a stepping-stone to making that first feature, but as a perfectly legitimate medium in and of itself.

Scanning the credits on the Borscht films, one finds the same names popping up time and again—musician Otto Von Schirach, the standard-bearer of the classic 808-driven booty bass sound, who performed one night at local bar/screening venue Gramps, or Julian Yuri Rodriguez, whose short *Lake Mahar*, described as “a nightmare of caucasian emasculation on Flagler Street,” was a convulsively funny work of caricatured typage. (A cartooned aesthetic prevails at Borscht—short *Biscayne World* combines smuggled vignettes from Miami city buses with animated drawings by regular rider Ahol Sniffs Glue.)

Most ubiquitous of all were the names Jillian Mayer and Lucas Leyva, who collaborate as Mayer\Leyva—they co-wrote *Bosh*, and one or the other has a hand in nearly everything at the fest. This year’s Mayer\Leyva debut was *Cool as Ice 2*, which offers the purest distillation of the Borscht Corp. ethos, combining regional boosterism (“MIAMI-DADE, BORN AND RAISED!”) and cosmic remove (“EVERYTHING YOU DO WILL BE FORGOTTEN”). Like their 2012 *The Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke*, a sci-fi “biopic” of 2 Live Crew frontman Luther Campbell, *Cool as Ice 2* plays fast and loose with the legend of another Miami hip-hop star, Robert van Winkle, a/k/a Vanilla Ice. Where *Uncle Luke* was made with the participation of its subject, *Cool as Ice 2* pirates Ice’s image, projecting his face onto that of a performer wearing a mask/screen. The film follows Ice through his youth, rise to fame, downfall, and beyond—a despondent Ice’s suicide jump is foiled when the sun expands into a red giant during his freefall, leaving him as humanity’s lone survivor, drifting the cold cosmos in conversation with another exploded star. While *Uncle Luke* was billed as “Based on *La Jetée* by Chris Marker,” *Cool as Ice 2* references texts by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Frank O’Hara, as well as Ice’s own manufactured backstory. (“The world I built around myself, same way you build your world around yourself.”) Mayer\Leyva approach their high-low culture mash-ups as though they’re the most natural thing in the world, so they’re never coy or cutesy, and *Cool as Ice 2* proves them boundlessly resourceful artists, getting a maximum of *coup de theater* effect from a minimum of resources. It gets across more cinematic awe, feeling, unexpected humor, and take-home ideas than Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar*, in one-eighth the time and God knows what fraction of the budget.