

**UP THE RIVER
WITH ACID**

a film by
HARALD HUTTER

Logline:

Two days in the life of Horst, an elderly man whose life has been upended by dementia.



Film Details:

Runtime: 63 minutes

Country: France

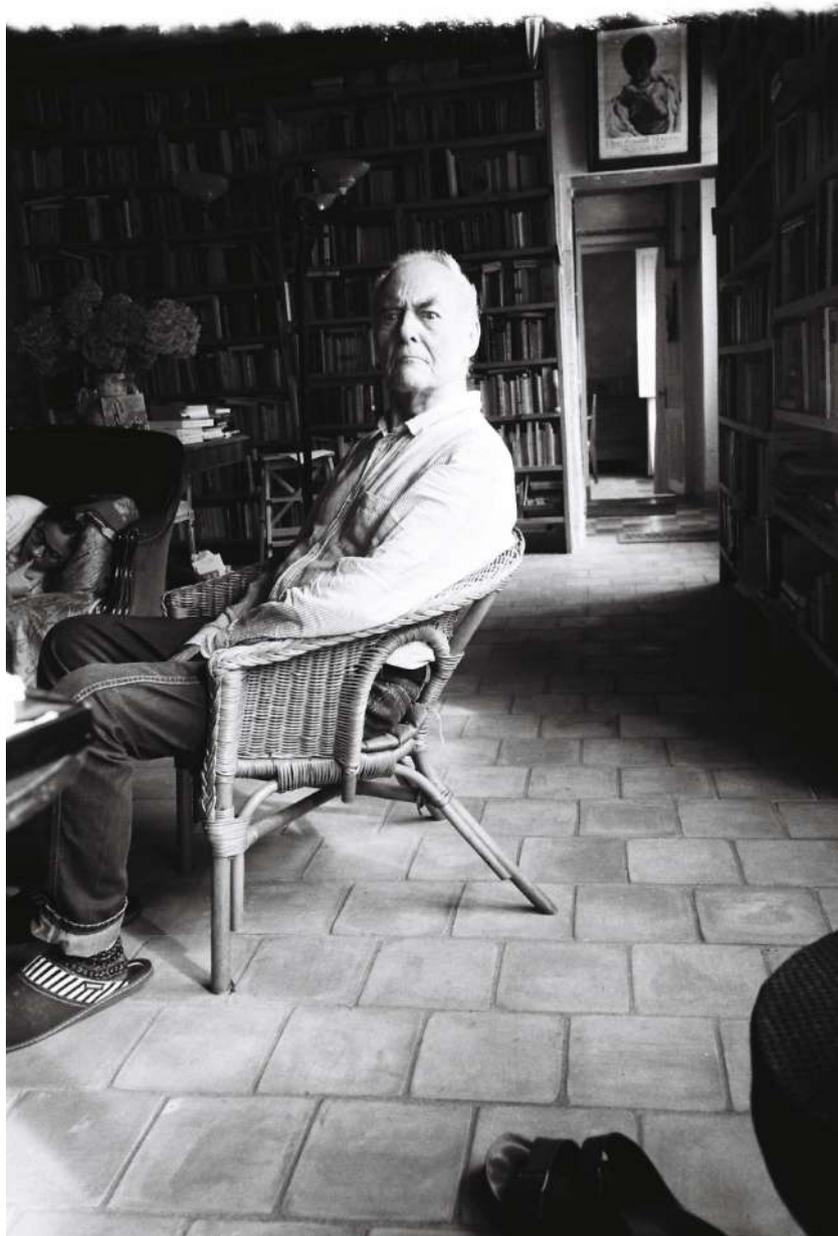
Screening Format: 4k, DCP, 35mm

Image: 1.66:1 Colour

Sound: 5.1 mix

Synopsis:

After years of wondering the globe my parents have returned to my mother's village in France. My father, who worked as a philosophy professor for 42 years, has slowly seen his cognitive abilities decrease and his daily life increasingly difficult to negotiate. Through a series of portraits we observe a man's attempt to hold on to a rapidly shifting and alien world.



Director Statement:

It started 13 or 14 years ago. At the time I was living in London, my parents were in Montreal. I had recently finished my M.A. and was working at the Prince Charles Cinema. It was the early afternoon. I got a panicked phone call from my mother saying that my father had lost his ability to see. Apparently he had been like this since the night before. Horst was 71 at the time. He had been wearing reading glasses for a few years but his eye sight was considered good and he would only use them sporadically. Being an academic, most of his waking hours, and for as long as I could remember, were spent reading the printed word. As children, my brother and I would get annoyed at him for always having his nose in a book and not spending more time playing with us.

On the phone, neither my panicked mother nor stunned father knew what to do. I tried to calm her saying that she should go see a doctor. Horst was a little reticent for reasons that I forget, and they ended up only consulting an optician who simply waved them away. A few months went by before Horst got professional help and was diagnosed with macular degeneration. By that time he had lost one eye and was quickly losing the other. This ailment was accompanied with a decline in hearing and ultimately also a decline in cognitive ability.

The process has been slow and steady since that initial phone call. His relationship to the outside world has radically changed in those 14 years — from being a sociable bird, attending boisterous dinners with fellow academics and students, arguing about Nietzsche, Plato and very often the state of American politics, to being virtually completely alone and introspective.

My parents moved away from Montreal when my father retired in 2012; not because he wanted to, he was still very passionate about teaching, about sharing knowledge and ideas, but because his ability to read and hear made being in a classroom almost impossible. His last years of teaching were done mostly from memory. I am told from students that were with him in those final years that his oration was precise, rich and engaging; probably more so than when he would still use the great thinkers as crutches to his thought.

In the small French rural village where my parents currently reside, their life is organised around the church bells and its rhythm that marks the passing of time. They now live in the house where my mother was born, where her mother was born and which was bought over a hundred years ago with gold coins... or so the legend goes.

The family home has mnemonic abilities. Those have become crucial to the organisation of my father's daily routine. Each room has a very specific function and their organisation must be consistent in order for him not to be lost and confused. Horst still takes his daily walks in the village but venturing to the nearby town for groceries has become tiresome and anxiety-laden.

I have been toying with the idea of making a film about my father and his cognitive decline for some time now. Initially, I started writing a fiction which then morphed into a documentary and back again into fiction before I realised that time was running out, money needed for fiction not materialising and the pandemic reeking ravages amongst our older generations.

I called up my trusted collaborator and friend Alex Nevill who within a few weeks — and not without a number of obstacles due to the pandemic — came from London with his camera. I bought 15 rolls of 16mm film, borrowed some sound equipment and we spent 8 days filming my father going about his daily routine. With the passing of time and the advance of his illness I noticed that his memory problems translated into his body in strange ways. His way of moving, the anxiety of his hands, his hesitations and extreme focus on mundane tasks clearly show his ailments; his loss of memory and the huge concentration needed to live his life. With this in mind, Alex and I wanted to record the way he moves about the house — show how his body mimics the changes happening in his brain. Given the limitations imposed by the amount of film stock and also a desire to observe in real time, we shot mostly static, tripod-based shots. We were trying to capture the reality of his body and how it moves through space and time.

The questions that kept running through my mind whilst filming were: what remains of that life lived? What has been passed down to my brother and I? Or is it all fading away under the thick fog that is isolating him from our world? Is he only 'alive' in the few photographs, diaries and recorded class lectures? To be sure, my father still has moments of lucidity and sometimes quotes whole passages from Goethe or Shakespeare but most of the time he is completely shut out from the world and only concerned with his immediate reality. Faces are becoming increasingly foreign and only the people in his immediate circle are familiar.

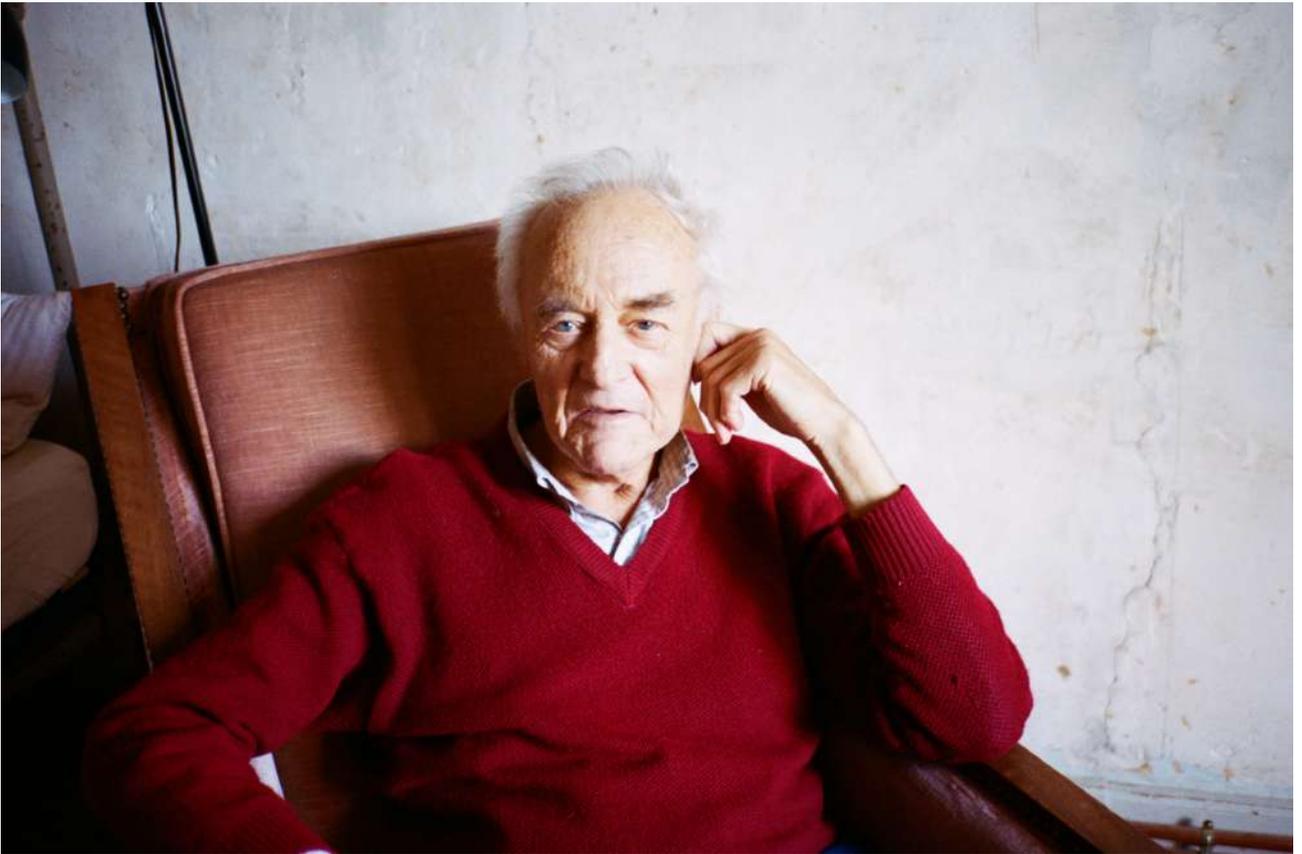
Prior to undertaking the filming I was at a dinner with a good friend Germano Cecere who heads the Cecere Lab at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. The focus of their research is epigenetic inheritance; in short, they are trying to understand whether any type of lived experiences are inherited. Through the years I have heard him talk about his research numerous times but as the filming was approaching it occurred to me that his preoccupations were exactly the same as

the ones of my film! A few days after the dinner I was at Pasteur Institute filming the worms they use for their research.

My mother has been the closest to my father for many years now and she has been diligently recording her observations. Sometimes her writing is direct, but at times, given her life as a poet and a need for distancing, the musings morph into abstractions. It was always my intention to include her writing in the film but as the editing took shape, the inclusion of her point of view became essential and crucial to understanding the ravages of time on my father.

The insights of my mother and the research of my friend are unable to provide me with clear answers but in my own way I have attempted to give flesh to the impermanence of body.





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