

Josef Dabernig,
Wisla, 1996, 16mm
film, black and
white, sound, 8min,
still. All images
courtesy the artist;
Galerie Andreas
Huber, Vienna;
and Wilfried Lentz,
Rotterdam

‘Dein Muff makes me drunk’: The Films of Josef Dabernig

– Daniel Fairfax

Con il numero uno — Taibi; con il numero due — Polonia; con il numero sei — Lucci, con il numero quattordici — Conte; con il numero cinque — Rossini...

The ground announcer continues to unenthusiastically read out the away team’s line-up through the tannoy system. The squad is that of Piacenza Calcio, an Emilia-Romagna football club known for its steadfast all-Italian selection policy. On Sunday, 5 May 1996, in the penultimate round of the Serie A season, the team travel to Udinese’s Stadio Friuli. With both sides winding up the campaign ensconced in

of a mid-sized football ground. Inside the bowels of this stadium, two besuited men stride purposefully towards the camera, and take up their places on the team bench. But they are surrounded not, as the soundtrack would suggest, by Udinese’s animated arena, filled with clamorous fans and echoing to the metropolitan Italian of the ground announcer’s proclamations. Rather, they are in the Stadion Miejski, home of storied Polish club Wisła Krakow. Constructed in 1953, the stadium is half in ruins by the time of Dabernig’s film, and denuded of fans and players alike. This will not stop the two men — the phantom team’s balding manager (played by Dabernig himself) and his loyal, sunglasses-wearing assistant (film-maker Martin Kaltner) — from acting out a footballing pantomime. Both gaze intently in front of them, their eyes following the vicissitudes of the invisible match, in a state of vague dissatisfaction at their team’s performance. In the film’s comic high point, Dabernig agitatedly rises from the bench and mimes an uncanny gesture — putting both hands together to form a vertical paddle-shape and carefully moving them back and forth — which football fans will recognise as the universal managerial signal for the team to adjust its defensive line.

When the match is over, the frustrated duo returns to the players’ tunnel. The ground’s scoreboard, seemingly frozen in time, shows a 0–0 scoreline between Wisła and ‘Goscie’ (Polish for ‘visitors’), with the match clock also fixed at zero. In *Wisla*, the score will always be nil-all. As the ground announcer reads out the Serie A standings at the conclusion of the 29th match-day (‘Milan punti: sessantasei, Juventus: cinquantasette, Fiorentina: cinquantatre; Inter: cinquanta...’), the camera once again makes a prolonged circular pan, this time over a patch of

Daniel Fairfax traces recurrent threads in Josef Dabernig’s filmic practice — from the dissonance between image and sound to the use of humour and an emphasis on gesture — finding a poetic capacity to make the everyday uncanny.

mid-table mediocrity, they play out a dour nil-all draw, eliciting disgruntlement from the boisterous Udinese fans, whose main entertainment comes from chanting exhortations to their manager, Alberto Zaccheroni, alongside the inevitable cries of ‘Piacenza, vaffanculo!’ When the referee blows for full-time, the exasperated *tifosi* unleash a hail of whistles and jeers.¹

Recordings from this match consume the soundscape of Josef Dabernig’s debut film *Wisla* (1996), still the best-known cinematic work by the Austrian artist. But the granular black-and-white images on screen present a decidedly disjunctive view. A panning shot opens the film, swooping from a concrete tower, across a grey sky lined with gloomy, leafless trees and dotted with apartment blocks in the distance, before resting on a neoclassical colonnade — the idiosyncratic architectural flourish

¹ Acknowledgements for the details of this match must go to the illuminating website <http://www.storipiacenza1919.it>, a painstaking chronicle of the less than illustrious history of Piacenza Calcio, which ceased operations in 2012 due to bankruptcy (last accessed on 5 March 2013).

weed-infested concrete terracing, before returning to the colonnade seen earlier.² With whistles still reverberating across the soundtrack, Dabernig and Kaltner proceed to shake hands with a procession of dignitaries high up in the ground's main stand — a ritual normally reserved for winning-cup finalists — before the camera zooms out and the scene fades to black.

This eight-minute film contains, *in nuce*, many of the themes, visual motifs and formal strategies that will become recursive features in Dabernig's cinematic corpus, which today stretches across thirteen works ranging from 6 to 24 minutes in length, mostly shot on Super 16mm film. Described by the artist as 'extended sculptures',³ his films interact in myriad ways with his work in architecture, installation and photography, but they also explore the specific properties of the cinematic medium. The dissonance between sound and image, frequently generating playful montage effects, is ever-present in his oeuvre. Recurrent, too, is a thematic preoccupation with the physical decay and social anomie of post-socialist Eastern Europe, and an irrepressible intermingling of elements of high and low culture: opera, modernist literature and contemporary architecture are set off against sports cars, fruit machines, pop music and, above all, football. An aesthetic so unabashedly based on conflicts in form and subject matter may draw criticism — indeed, speaking against the claim that he 'still think[s] in terms of oppositions, which at a time of hybrid constructions would be completely anachronistic', Dabernig indefatigably asserts that his films 'are assuredly based on antagonisms, and seen in this light maybe they do have something

old-fashioned about them'.⁴ Such strictures, however, would not only end up replacing one formal orthodoxy with another; they also overlook the rich comedic seam in Dabernig's work, which enables his deadpan films to provoke an unexpectedly euphoric response from the spectator.

Austria's exceptional tradition of experimental film-making constitutes an inevitable contextual framework for considerations of Dabernig's work.⁵ But in contrast to the wholesale rejection of narrative espoused by the likes of Martin Arnold, Peter Kubelka and Peter Tscherkassky, Dabernig prefers to skirt the threshold between the avant-garde and fiction cinema. Narrative events do indeed take place in his films, but they remain enigmatic singularities, detached from any sense of continuity or progression, and further unhinged by the discordant relationship between image and sound. When concluding pay-offs do occur, their parodic tinge only deepens the absurdism of the narrative. His 'characters' are predominantly anonymous, the motivation behind their actions inscrutable, and there is not a single example of on-screen dialogue in his entire work. Dabernig's most notable point of distinction, however, lies precisely in his mordant wit — a quality not immediately associated with a milieu more often reputed for po-faced structuralism. That the humour of his films is frequently bolstered by the burlesque farce of his own performances has elicited comparisons of his work to that of Jacques Tati, while his particular brand of absurdism, at once melancholic and sardonic, evinces affinities with Béla Tarr, Aki Kaurismäki and even Samuel Beckett.⁶

2 The 29th round of games actually took place four rounds *before* the Udinese-Piacenza game that otherwise occupies the soundtrack for the most part. The artist explains that he first recorded the Udinese-Fiorentina game on 14 March 1996, but due to the lack of quality of the recording, he went back to record the Udinese-Piacenza match. The final soundtrack mixes both recordings, hence the anachronism. With no small amount of historical irony, Wisła fans had dubbed this colonnade the 'Brandenburg Gates'. For more information on the Stadion Miejski, which after a long period of renovation is presently almost unrecognisable from its state in the mid-1990s, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stadion_Miejski_in_Kraków (last accessed on 5 March 2013).

3 Quoted in Christian Höller, 'Unverträgliches zusammenführen: Gespräch mit Josef Dabernig über zwei seiner jüngsten Arbeiten', *springerin: Hefte für Gegenwartskunst*, vol. 18, no. 2, Spring 2012, p. 54.

4 *Ibid.*

5 This link is also affirmed by his long-term association with sixpack film, a distribution agency of artists' moving image and experimental film works, founded in 1990 by Brigitta Burger-Utzer, Martin Arnold, Alexander Horwath, Lisl Ponger and Peter Tscherkassky. See <http://www.sixpackfilm.com> (last accessed on 5 March 2013).

6 See Andréa Picard, 'Viva voce: Josef Dabernig's Operatic Avocations', in Peter Tscherkassky (ed.), *Film Unframed: A History of Austrian Avant-Garde Cinema*, Vienna: FilmmuseumSynemaPublikationen and sixpackfilm, 2012, p. 258; and Lukas Maurer, 'Strukturelle Rätselspiele in Raum und Zeit', *Programmzeitschrift des Filmarchiv Austria*, no. 62, 2010, p. 62. The influence of Tarr was avowed when Dabernig chose *Sátántango* (1994) to be screened in the Galerie Andreas Huber as part of the 2009 Vienna Art Fair, the theme of which that year was 'Art and Film'. See Christoph Thun-Hohenstein (ed.), *Art & Film Curated by Vienna*, Nuremberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2009, pp. 72–77.



Josef Dabernig,
Timau, 1998,
16mm film,
black and white,
sound, 20min, stills

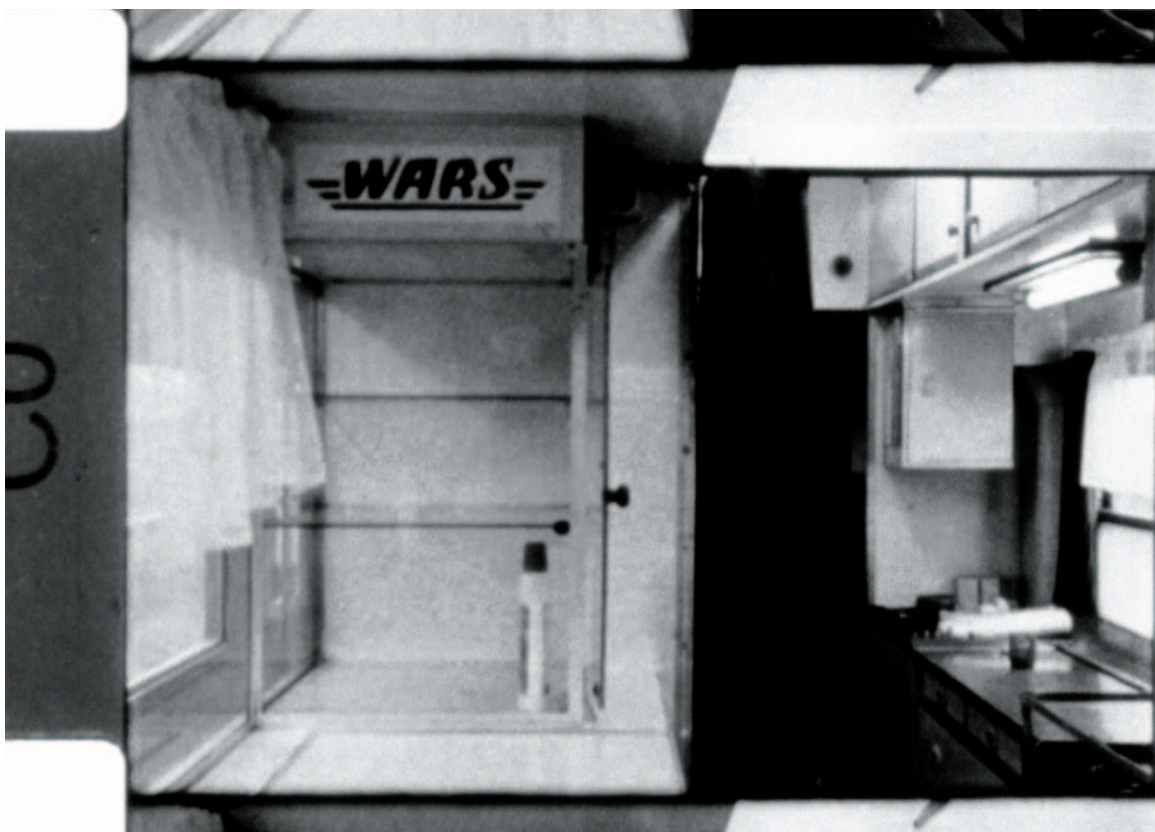


This blend of formal experimentation and wry humour comes to the fore in the 20-minute *Timau* (1998), Dabernig's follow-up to *Wisla*, co-directed with Markus Scherer. Three workers on an unexplained assignment drive an Opel hatchback along a winding mountain road, their journey filmed in long takes, recalling Abbas Kiarostami's work, as the car's windshield is pummelled by a chiaroscuro mix of deep shadow and blinding sunlight. After parking in front of an imposing cement wall daubed with the white outline of football goalposts, they retrieve briefcases from the car's boot. But the men are still far from their destination, and in the film's lengthy central section they clamber up a steep hillside, thick with tangled vegetation. A rumbling static noise announces their plunge into a Stygian cave, whose labyrinthine tunnels they wearily traverse before ascending to the summit of a cliff, their triumph greeted by the incessant drone of insects and a brief shot of a snake sliding across a rock below. Finally, the trio arrive in a hamlet, no more than a handful of huts surrounding a metallic telephone box. They get to work. In a classic shot/reverse-shot sequence, one of the men (Dabernig) watches his two colleagues

repair the malfunctioning apparatus, their strenuous efforts emphasised by the obtrusive soundtrack — which evokes a cacophony of fruit machines, typewriters and hammers. Once the job is complete, there only remains one task: to collect payment from the villagers.

Jogging (2000) is Dabernig's first film in colour, which remains atypical in his oeuvre. It can also be viewed as the central panel of a putative 'calcio triptych' — wedged between *Wisla* and *Hotel Roccalba* (2008). Like *Timau*, the film begins with an enigmatic car ride, this time through the decrepit outskirts of a southern Italian city. A multitude of canted shots progressively reveal a driver in red Adidas trousers, navigating his vehicle through a web of highways, with the scene given eerie overtones by Olga Neuwirth's modernist score. When a road sign finally offers the viewer a morsel of geographical orientation — 'Uscita: Stadio S. Nicola. Autostrada: Cassano, Bitritto' — the driver makes a sharp right, and, momentarily, an enormous grey disc can be seen in the distance. A flying saucer, landed on Earth? No, it is — as indicated by the road sign — the Stadio San Nicola. Constructed for the 1990 World Cup and designed by Renzo Piano, this vast, desolate monument

Josef Dabernig,
Jogging, 2000, 16mm
film, colour, sound,
11min, still



Josef Dabernig,
WARS, 2001, 16mm
film, black and
white, sound, 10min

is the home of Associazione Sportiva Bari, a team that is currently trundling around Serie B before a few thousand spectators and has never filled the stadium's 58,000-seat capacity. Merely a decade after the ground opened, its rebarbative concrete petals, Piano's signature feature, are noticeably stained and corroded. And yet this state of disrepair is precisely what attracts Dabernig to the site.⁷

Initially, we only catch a glimpse of the San Nicola; another turn confronts the car with a flock of sheep, gambolling along the highway at the behest of a grizzled shepherd. The clash between this rustic scene and the modernist bombast of the stadium is further accentuated with a cut to a group of mangy dogs mauling each other on a traffic island. As the film draws to a conclusion, Dabernig frenetically alternates between shots of the stadium's exterior, the stray dogs and the cerulean sky overhead. Swirling pans oscillate between these three scenes with a hallucinatory energy reminiscent of Michael Snow's *La Région centrale* (1971), before the camera rests on the sky, and the music decomposes into a single, reverberating

note, seemingly held for an eternity.

In 2008 Dabernig rounded out his 'calcio triptych' with *Hotel Roccalba*, a film centring on a gathering of the film-maker's extended family in a northern Italian guesthouse. Shot in fragmentary diagonal compositions occasionally recalling Ingmar Bergman's later work, each relative ritualistically repeats a solitary activity — knitting, chopping wood, fixing a bicycle, getting a haircut — while the soundtrack combines strains of Giuseppe Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra* (1857) with live score updates from the RAI programme *Tutto il calcio minuto per minuto* during Week 14 of the 2007–08 season.

Dabernig's output in sculpture and installation has favoured a focus on the role of spatial relations and architectonic forms in the critical reception of his films, while the obsessive gaze towards entropic Eastern European locations invites a political reading of his oeuvre as a satirical response to the breakneck imposition of neoliberal capitalism in the region. But it is an old warhorse of literary theory which beckons this writer. The concept of defamiliarisation is so commonplace as to

⁷ Dabernig has said that 'I often take photos of football grounds when I arrive in a place. [...] They are almost never new sports facilities, but mostly sites which are already in a state of transformation.' Quoted in C. Höller, 'Unverträgliches zusammenführen', *op. cit.*, p.54.



smack of banality, and yet, when viewing Dabernig's films, I cannot help but think back to Viktor Shklovsky's descriptions of Leo Tolstoy's prose. For Shklovsky,

[Tolstoy] *makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object. He describes an object as if he were seeing it for the first time, an event as if it were happening for the first time. In describing something he avoids the accepted names of its parts and instead names corresponding parts of other objects.*⁸

As a description of Dabernig's films, the above quote could hardly be improved upon, and these Shklovskian leanings are aptly put to work in the 10-minute film *WARS* (2001). With its imagery of mute workers performing rote exercises drained of any purpose or meaning, the film distils the aesthetic tendencies that distinguish his early work. In the dining carriage of a rickety Polish intercity train, three dapper employees diligently attend to their duties. Despite the train's faded glory, the dining carriage is maintained in pristine condition: the bleached white tablecloths

are immaculately laid over the tables, with the polysemic logo of the railway company WARS prominently in view, and a waitress displays a meticulously presented assortment of snacks and soft drinks. Like the Stadion Miejski, however, the carriage is stubbornly empty. No customers take advantage of the refreshments on offer, and the waitress whiles away the time by punching random numbers into a calculator. As the train swerves onto a new track, the workers run out the clock on their shift, and take to industriously cleaning up the already spotless carriage. A neon light flickers on and off, and the image freezes on a worker holding a sponge dripping with soapy water, thus concluding a film that art historian Patricia Grzonka has characterised as a 'superb metaphor for the senseless activities and gestures in bloated bureaucratic systems'.⁹

Rosa coeli (2003) marks a subtle shift in Dabernig's oeuvre: whereas his earlier work tended towards taciturnity, this film revels in a relentless excess of language, and is followed in this vein by *Aquarena* (2007) and *Herna* (2010). Dabernig himself would

Josef Dabernig and Isabella Hollauf, *Aquarena*, 2007, 35mm film, colour, sound, 19min

8 Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' (1917, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis); reprinted in David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, London: Longmans, 1988, p.21.

9 Patricia Grzonka, 'Systeme bürokratischer Systeme', *Kunst-Bulletin*, no.9, September 2004, p.22.



Rosa coeli, 2003,
35mm film,
black and white,
sound, 24min, still

recognise the unprecedented ambition of *Rosa coeli*, and he would view the collaboration with Austrian dramatist Bruno Pellandini as ‘representing an essential step in the expansion of my dramatic vocabulary’.¹⁰ The digressive voice-over monologue Pellandini penned for the film charts a man’s nostalgia-laden visit to the village of his childhood in order to attend his father’s funeral. With its intertextual references (as with Meursault’s mother in Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* (1942), the narrator’s father has died ‘yesterday, or maybe the day before yesterday’) and certain bravura passages (including a long, stream-of-consciousness checklist, itemising ‘Faschisten, Kollaborateure, Partisanen, Ungläubige, Kommunisten, Spitzel, Denunzianten, Konterrevolutionäre, Restitutionalisten, Sudetentouristen...’),¹¹ the monologue’s rich literary flavour is enhanced by Bruno Samarowski’s velvety reading.

As the film begins, the viewer is tempted to align the images with this

monologue: we see a man, played by Dabernig’s brother Wolfgang, listlessly reading a newspaper on a train, and then limping across the station platform to a taxi driver awaiting his arrival. The newspaper is in Czech, and we are apparently in a moribund Moravian mining town, photographed in ashen monochromes reminiscent of Tarr’s *Kárhozat* (*Damnation*, 1988). As the protagonist is dropped off at the bleak Hotel Dukla,¹² it is clear that he is not here to attend a funeral, as the voice-over would suggest. Instead, after a prolonged wait, our hero is greeted by a slickly dressed host in the hotel lobby, who ushers his guest into an adjoining conference room in order to co-sign a set of documents. The identity of the host is never revealed, but is hinted at by a brief glimpse of the documents in question: a shot breakdown of the film itself. After the pact is sealed with the ceremonial downing of shots of liquor, the protagonist returns to the railway station, where he resorts to stamping up and down the low-lying

¹⁰ C. Höller, ‘Unverträgliches zusammenführen’, *op. cit.*, p.57.

¹¹ ‘Fascists, collaborators, partisans, nonbelievers, communists, informants, denouncers, counter-revolutionaries, restitutionists, Sudeten tourists...’. Translation Kimi Lum.

¹² This may be an allusion to Dukla Prague, a Czechoslovak football team with links to the army that dominated the national league until its demise in 1996.



platform in order to ward off the cold. In a closing gag worthy of Buster Keaton, when a train finally arrives it has no carriages, and simply continues its journey without picking up any passengers.

Although the textual outpouring continues in *Aquarena*, here the literary voice-over of *Rosa coeli* gives way to the more prosaic excerpts from Leipzig's 1974 municipal ordinance on water usage. While Dabernig and co-director Isabella Hollauf take turns placidly wading back and forth across open-air swimming pools, the GDR-era bureaucratic jargon is read out by a monotone female voice. Yet the voice-over's dry insistence on the need to uphold 'the socialist principle of strict frugality' is belied by the sheer delight of the film's sumptuous visual patina, with the rippling blues of the pools and the luscious greens of surrounding foliage captured in saturated, sunlight-drenched colour stock.

However, it is in *Herna*, Dabernig's second collaboration with Pellandini, that the opposition between sound and image is pushed to its starkest, most openly class-conscious extent. A sullen man in his thirties, the word 'A-League' ironically

displayed on the back of his shell suit, leaves his young wife and child in a minivan parked in a depressed residential district of a Moravian town while he futilely drops his meagre wages into the fruit machines of a local sports bar. The fate of these figures, emblematic of the *défavorisé* working class of 'New Europe', could hardly contrast more with the idle prattling of the *nouveau riche* characters in the voice-over — consisting in a radio play written by Pellandini — who pepper their conversation with nonsensical *Neudeutsch* (for example, 'Dein Muff makes me drunk')¹³ and vaunt their expanding collection of Eastern European castles.

While the narrative of his most recent film, *Hypercrisis* (2011), is surprisingly limpid, it preserves the discomfiting tonality of Dabernig's earlier films. Whereas his preceding work frequently withholds key contextual information from the viewer entirely, or only reveals it in the spare closing credits that cap all his films, *Hypercrisis* is prefaced by a title card concisely setting the scene: in the South Caucasus, a former recreation home for Soviet film-makers has been repurposed

Josef Dabernig,
Herna, 2010, 35mm
film, back and white,
sound, 17min, still'

13 The artist explains that, even if apparently absurd, this expression is a riff on the use of language characteristic of the upper-classes, in which 'Muff' refers to the old-fashioned term for a tube made of fur into which the hands are placed for warmth, and functions here as a code for schnapps. Conversation with the artist, 30 March 2013.



Josef Dabernig,
Hypercrisis, 2011,
35mm film, colour,
sound, 17min

to accommodate writers. Presently, however, the only guest is Boris Martow, 'a talent from the promising times of perestroika', who is in the throes of a creative crisis. From this point, the film oscillates between scenes of the resort's white-coated managers, who, disregarding their patent superfluity, blithely devour lavish meals, and the hooded Martow anxiously meandering through the resort's expansive grounds. This parallel montage is matched acoustically with abrupt cuts between a melancholic Verdi requiem and the Krautrock of Can's 'Halleluwah' (1971), while a tension between the saturated colours of the film and the decrepit Brutalist architecture of the resort is also palpable. Eventually, the two worlds collide: Martow joins the managers in their attendance of a recital given by twin Armenian girls in the complex's plush auditorium. When a bored woman innocuously lights a cigarette, Martow's frayed nerves finally snap: he buries his head in his hands and leaves the room in agony.

As with many of his earlier films, in *Hypercrisis* Dabernig purposefully seeks out a setting whose surface-level mundanity masks underlying resonances between past and present: here, the state of perpetual crisis can be seen as a conduit

between the Soviet bloc of the perestroika era and the present social convulsions experienced by much of Europe. What most pointedly links the film to Dabernig's broader work, however, is the meticulous choreography of gestures and facial expressions transforming it into a carousel of movement and action. Dabernig's fascination with gesture, and the prominent role it plays in his films, undermines and circumvents the potential for reading an explicit message in his work. The viewer's attention is invariably diverted towards a mysterious limp or an idiosyncratic twist of the arm, and such movements will often attain a subtly rhythmic, mesmerising quality. Whether capturing the codified gesticulations of a football manager, the ritualistic activity of railway employees, the compulsive manoeuvres of a gambling addict or the improbable lyricism of a radio host reciting the final scores from the weekend's Serie C games ('Foligno: due, Venezia: zero; Monza-Foggia: zero-zero; Padova: due, Cremonese: uno...'), Dabernig's films are permeated by an uncanny kinetic poetry.