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Festivals

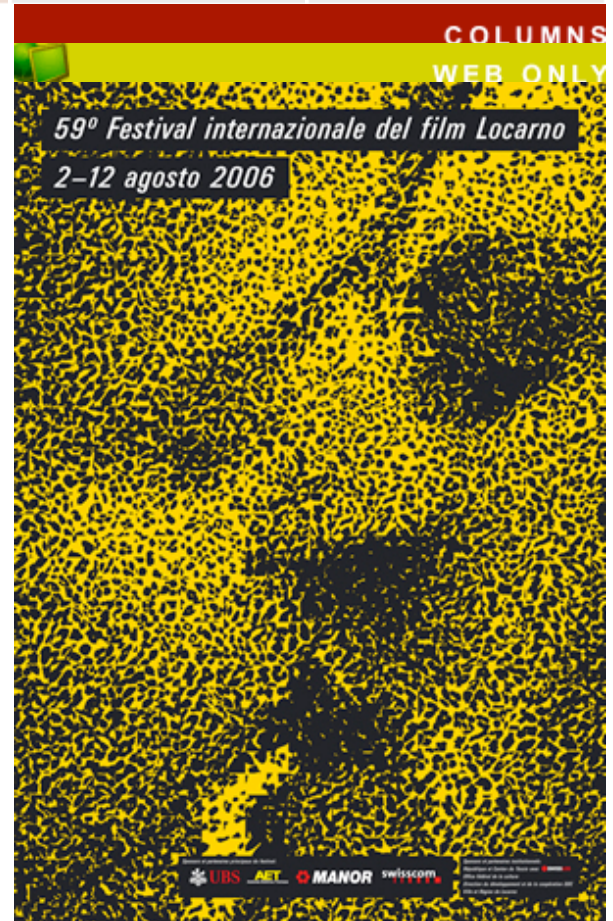
Locarno 2006: Swiss Hits

By Jerry White

Just as the 2006 Locarno Film Festival was getting underway, and just two days before their Journée du cinéma suisse, the great Swiss filmmaker Daniel Schmid died. Schmid helped put Swiss cinema on the international map, both by his association with Fassbinder (who starred in his 1976 film *Schatten der Engel*) and his own work, such as the elegiac documentary *Il Bacio di Tosca* (1984) and more avant-garde works like *Heute nacht oder nie* (1972) or *Hécate* (1982). "Pur rimanendo legato alle sue origini grigionesi," the local paper *Corriere del Ticino* said, in its front-page story on August 7th, "Daniel Schmid si è sempre presentato come un cittadino del mondo con la passione per il viaggio nel cuore." While remaining connected to his origins in the Grisons, Daniel Schmid always presented himself as a citizen of the world, with a heartfelt passion for life.

Although I never heard it asked explicitly, the question of how Swiss cinema could be comparably rooted and cosmopolitan seemed to hover over the festival. The opening day featured an address from Pascale Couchepin, Switzerland's culture minister, who defended Swiss cinema, cautioning that box-office flops did not necessarily mean the end of their project. Hopes have been raised pretty high in that department recently, with the release of smashes like *Grounding: Die letzten Tage der Swissair*. This was presented at Locarno as part of the Appellations Suisse program, and it was by far the strangest film I saw all week. A breathless docudrama about the financial collapse of Swissair, its all-over-the-place montage of four (five?) stories would have made Pudovkin dizzy, and yet, it was about what seemed (to me anyway) to be highly esoteric aspects of global finance and airline logistics.

The official enthusiasm for this film suggests that MTV-meets Swiss-banking may be the new local cinematic idiom, but there were two other highly promising solutions to the Daniel Schmid on view. Like his Swiss-Canadian friend Peter Mettler, Thomas Imbach is looking to merge narrative and experimental approaches in ways that will lead to rigorous yet accessible films. His most recent film, *Lenz*, is "based" on an unfinished story of the same name by Georg Büchner, although its passionate rambling through a distinctly modern Swiss alpine landscape made me wonder what that source material must read like. Imbach, a proponent of HD video, knows what the technology can do, how it create an illusion of intimacy. But he's also aware that this is an illusion, because the way in which video flattens out space gives parts of *Lenz* a haunted, slightly empty look, one which makes the camera seem—like the film's protagonist—to be grasping at a connection that it is so painfully close, but yet not quite there. The narrative—which centres on an artist trying to reconnect with his adolescent son and his ex-wife—makes good use of video, giving us a vivid sense of the cramped surroundings of chalets and ski villages. But a lot of the landscape imagery, including some very impressive footage of the Swiss Alps, is shot on 35mm,



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and conveys an appropriate sense of awe and instability that clearly aspires to the sublime (and here is where the film probably most closely intersects with the Romantic “source material”). Neither snidely detached nor naively sentimental, *Lenz* is a visually sophisticated, emotionally affecting work that points the way forward for a Swiss cinema that, continuing in the vein of Daniel Schmid’s work, wants to rimanendo legato alle sue origini, while sempre presentato come un cittadino del mondo con la passione per il viaggio nel cuore .

Writing from Locarno in 2003, I opined that Frédéric Choffat’s 30-minute video *Genève-Marseille* was great to see because unlike so many shorts, it didn’t feel like a calling card for a feature. Choffat’s *La vrai vie est ailleurs*, a feature shot on video and blown up to 35mm, tells three stories of people coming together and not quite connecting during train trips, two originating in Geneva and one originating in Bern. One of those stories was, in fact, *Genève-Marseille*; that exact video was now re-edited to move back and forth between the other two stories (which might have been shot at the same time, since their handheld camerawork feels very similar, and all three originate on the same digital video). Back then, *Genève-Marseille* seemed highly aware of its status as a video, making the most of video’s intimacy and visual flatness. And here we approach the nub of the problem. These three stories would have been truly lovely videos on their own, but it is hard to imagine how that would have worked. As a very short TV miniseries? As a group of 30-minute videos presented as an installation? Before long, I believe, cinema will make peace with more diverse narrative formats, finding a truly cinematic equivalent of the short story collection. *La vrai vie est ailleurs* was a warm, rich example of that new narrative form struggling to be born. And it’ll be great once it matures fully.

One glimpse of this new sort of narrative form, or at least a more flexible showcase for new narrative, was found in Locarno’s presentation of the last few years of an anthology of digital-video shorts commissioned by South Korea’s Jeonju International Film Festival. This particular strand of programming is consistent with Locarno’s ongoing desire to present “young cinema” and to remain in the centre of arguments about the direction of world cinema; in the program were found experimental, low-key films from some of the best filmmakers to have emerged in the last few years. The 2006 series was the most distinguished, featuring work from Eric Khoo, Pen-ek Ratanarung, and Darezhan Omirbaev. Pen-ek’s *Twelve Twenty* was a wistful and highly artificial evocation of a long flight, featuring his recognizable, Christopher Doyle-shot, smooth camera movements. Khoo’s *No Day Off* was a highly compact piece of anger, an evocation of the life of an Indonesian woman who goes to Singapore to work as a maid; the days she has worked are counted off in the top right-hand corner of the screen (we get to something like 1400), the camera never leaves her face, and the soundtrack is almost nothing but the abuse that various employers dish out to her. But my favourite piece was Omirbaev’s *About Love*, an adaptation of a Chekhov story about a young intellectual in love with the wife of his nouveau-riche former classmate. Like Omirbaev’s *The Road* (2001) this evokes both the slow rot of Kazakh society and the inability of the intellectual to find a place within it. But it also has moments of intense tenderness, like a scene where the hero’s beloved plays the piano in a shag-carpeted sitting room. Like Imbach’s *Lenz*, this is a melancholy but never sentimental evocation of the way people try hard but ultimately fail to connect.

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