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Author(s)	Carlos Clarens
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MESSIDOR

Directed by Alain Tanner

Toward the end of *Messidor*, Alain Tanner's new film, the two Swiss girls we have followed for nearly two hours in their flight from society enter a restaurant to beg for scraps. The owner explains in Schwitzerdeutsch that one should pay for what one eats, and that the scraps are being saved for the pigs, whereupon one of the girls, almost hysterical after going without food for several days, calls him a pig. The owner is too solid a bourgeois to be ruffled, and once the girls leave he shrugs the whole thing off: "One doesn't see that every day."

Not in Switzerland, to be sure. The scene makes explicit Tanner's message that a rebellion as minimal as that of the two girls can be easily smothered through the sheer indifference of a country that takes pride in running society like clockwork. Tanner himself makes films that are somewhat like Swiss watches — carefully crafted but a tad too cold and precise. (The one exception is *Jonah who will be 25 in the year 2000*, a more relaxed group comedy that could well have influenced John Sayles in the writing of *The Return of the Secaucus Seven*.) Through the '70s, Tanner represented Swiss cinema all by himself, and his goal seemed to be to challenge the accepted universal notion of Switzerland as a land without neuroses. *Retour d'Afrique* was typical of the early Tanner position: a young married couple miss their chance to go abroad for the holidays, lock themselves up in their apartment, disconnect the phone and, after only a few days of seclusion, become mildly antisocial.

Messidor is as agoraphobic as *Retour d'Afrique* was claustrophobic; the action moves from mountain to valley, from one spotless town to the next, but the same unfocused malaise lies at the core of both. The *Messidor* girls hitch rides or wander on foot from one canton to another without a conscious aim — they just dread to return to their former lives. Jeanne (Catherine Retoure) is a student from the city who teams up with a country girl, Marie (Clementine Amouroux) on the highway. The girls are certainly not criminals, not even subversive, although there is the possibility that Jeanne may have been mildly politicized at the university, that she at least has heard of the May 1968 student uprising in Paris: she



Say Swiss Cheese: Alain Tanner's road pic, *Messidor*

gives *Messidor* as her last name to a questioning policeman — *Messidor* is a word coined during the French Revolution to denote the harvest month — but needless to say the reference is wasted on the policeman.

But a little freedom can be a dangerous thing: Almost from the start, the girls get into trouble, when all they want is to postpone the inevitable moment when they will have to conform, Jeanne to her studies, Marie to her work as a shopgirl. Two men who give them a lift turn out to be rapists, a father and son working in tandem; and Marie has to brain one of them with a boulder to get him off Jeanne. (Marie is more beautiful, but Jeanne provokes men because she is more insolent and articulate.) Soon after, they steal a policeman's gun from the glove compartment of his car and wield it to keep an an-

gry farmer at bay after he discovers them asleep in his barn. When the farmer reenacts the episode for a TV news program, the girls become outlaws Swiss-style, which means no crosscountry dragnet but an increasing difficulty to pass unnoticed or obtain food, so that eventually they must hold up a store for the equivalent of nine Swiss francs of food, roughly \$4. At

the end of their rope, hungry, baffled and paranoid, they shoot an innocent diner at a restaurant whom they suspect of having called the police. They remain at their table until the cops arrive and take them away.

Messidor is the most recent and successful of that batch of girls-on-the-lam pictures that also include the brainless *Times Square* and the frivolous *Voyage en Douce*. Tanner's actresses have fresh faces and dazzling smiles: he holds them in close-shot as often as possible, to the exclusion of everyone else. The men remain faceless and interchangeable, as impersonal in their occasional acts of kindness as in their meanness. *Messidor* is, in fact, admirably parochial. It's easy to imagine Godard, another Swiss-born director (but one who belongs to the world), setting out from the same basic situation, then outdistancing the Swiss locale and characterization, as he did in *Every Man for Himself*, to reach some sort of universal despair. Not so with Tanner, who zeroes in on the Swiss national character with a modest but unerring eye. The mountains in *Messidor* are majestic all right, yet they seem less indifferent to the girls' plight than the peaceful, prosperous race that inhabits them.

Carlos Clarens