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The Salamander

Alain Tanner's 'The Salamander' (Academy) is a small budget (£26,000) black and white feature made with a crew of six, 'often in my own kitchen'. An odd film to emerge from Switzerland's non-existent film industry, it turned out to be a neat revitalisation of the old, and supposed dead and gone, New Wave that survived a second viewing with most of its points of fascination—and

humour—intact. Tanner himself is a one-time exponent of the British Free Cinema Movement. He made 'Nice Time' here in the fifties, a short filmed around Piccadilly Circus.

The salamander of the title—a salamander is apparently a lizard that can pass unscathed through flame—is a twenty-two year old seventh child in a family of 11 who was sent to the city at 15 to live with a guntoting jingoistic uncle. Since then she's had one child ('I wanted to keep it but my mother's looking after it now'), started and given up on any number of jobs including dress maker, office workers, sales-girl, factory hand: 'I was offered a job as a hostess . . . 'An airline hostess?' 'No, in a club . . . ' Investigation proves a consensus that she's untidy, irresponsible and possibly insane'. But her sad inventory of herself includes a drive towards independence that (as she recognises) those around her hardly appreciate.

The strongest thing about the film is probably the pitting of the girl's view of herself against that of the people she meets. In particular, the film is concerned with the conflicting views of her held by two friends, and their scheme to turn a quick buck by writing a TV script round an incident reported in a local paper in which a man accused his niece of shooting him. Pierre (a tall lugubrious reworking of the Godard Belmondo character) argues that once he's discovered the facts, all he'll need for the script is a small contribution from his writer friend Paul. But Paul, a small and idealistic a European version of 'Easy Rider's Captain America (who has, the film suggests, been through flames himself) settles down in his friend's flat to write the whole thing from imagination. Characteristically it's Pierre who's wide off the mark—the imagination holds out against 'the facts'.

Paul, on the other hand, realises that the abnormality that is supposed in a news cutting cannot be found in Rosemonde's character and so 'has to be sought elsewhere'.

Bulle Ogier defines her part as Rosemonde physically—rigid by the machine in the factory, on all fours in the shoe shop or stretched out in the swimming pool. Rosemonde revolts instinctively in a strident, sad attempt at self-preservation, as the commentary remarks 'she could not forever not be true to herself'. Shoe-shop owner mum asks manager son to reprimand their new salesgirl—Rosemonde of course—for being essentially too physical and not servile enough. Back in the stacks manager son offers Rosemonde a ride in his Alfa Romeo instead. Also in the shop, an older man suggests exchanging phone numbers but is outraged when she, with deadly accuracy, mimics his gross, heavy put-on manner

right back at him. Back in her village Rosemonde fights off the advances of a local lout and has a spirited reply ready to counter his automatic abuse.

Just as she fights off other people's conceptions of what she should be like and how she should behave, so she revolts against the essentially sadistic restrictions imposed on her by respectable repetitious jobs which reduce her to servant or simply an appendage to a machine. Rosemonde is Tanner's answer to those uncompromising characters which are always marginal in Eric Rohmer's films, encroaching occasionally but never entering—let alone threatening—bourgeois strongholds to which these films return their male characters. And Tanner allows Rosemonde a strength-in-weakness that many a woman director could usefully take note of. Barbara Loden's Wanda in the film of the same name is a piece of flotsam in the crowd: but Tanner's Rosemonde is never less than a cunningly alive three dimensional human being fighting for life in a starvation-level culture.

Pierre's main characteristic is an impotent social conscience—he loses faith in an article he's writing about Swiss investment in Brazil 'What's the point of linking the oppression of brown bodies there to the oppression of the spirit here' he asks, (it will just be another item in a sea of news). In contrast, Rosemonde's sexy, headlong assault on life looks most promising. The

weakest thing in the film is perhaps its depiction of Paul's odd idealism, fleshed out at one point by a quote from Heine about a golden age, a new generation conceived in freedom—characteristically produced after his confession to his wife that he's slept with Rosemonde.

Alain Tanner

Tanner is in his forties, a kind of physical cross between his two lead male characters who he admits are more or less the two conflicting sides of his character. While in Britain in the late fifties he worked in the Film Institute Archive, then for the BBC 'learning how not to make films'. Then for Swiss TV on British stories. It was the TV work that led him to the meditation that provides 'The Salamander's' structure, on realism vs the imagination. 'Working for TV I gradually came to the conclusion that I had to get out. You are forced in television into constantly creating objective statements—but it's always *their* objectivity. It seems to me that we are forever running after reality, trying to mend it as it becomes increasingly disaster-prone, instead of abandoning the politics of the possible for those of the utopian. That is what the film is about, and it is the man who is able to transcend the present who is able to help Rosemonde so that the last scene is not one of madness but of liberation.

'The idea of 'The Salamander' didn't come from a real newspaper report but from a story I

did for television on a gaol for juvenile offenders. They weren't in for any great crime but for some small stupid thing they did because they couldn't any longer stand their lives, in factories mainly .. getting up at five, clocking in at six . . . But none of them had any kind of framework that could enable them to understand or begin to change their experience, no philosophy, no view of society. I couldn't help noticing just how many young people are brought to this state of physical repulsion for the life they find themselves forced to live. At fifteen, just out of school, they get a job and are faced with the choice—accept passively and withdraw into a life of boredom, or, if they can't do this, and if there's no available structure, they just blow up. You see, in Switzerland it's not a matter of not being able to find work—at last count there were only 63 people out of a job—but of the kind of life their job allows them to lead'. In the film those who find themselves higher up the social strata from Rosemonde ask both her and her friend about their jobs repeatedly, only to be met by a blank stare of noncomprehension and the reply 'After all, what can you say about your job?' Rosemonde works at a machine that disgorges a fixed amount of mince into the condom-shaped bag she holds over its orifice. That's all she does. 'I didn't invent the job in the sausage factory. I just took off the woman who was doing it



and doing it nine hours a day week after week, and put Bulle in her place . . .'

The film Tanner has just completed, 'Return from Africa', is also concerned with the stunted: spirits' that Pierre's article in 'The Salamander' touches on—with cultural sterility. 'It's about a young couple who feel a lack of something in their lives. The man decides to leave and join a friend in Africa. They sell everything and pack and find themselves living in their empty flat for weeks—the plan has fallen through. Gradually drawn into the life of the city again they move to an ugly satellite town, slip down a class somehow, and decide to have a child. The film ends with the wife pregnant and the couple unable to decide who will look after it—tossing a coin.

'You see Switzerland has lived outside history for a long time but can't do this any longer. In 'The Salamander' the two men are visited by a Civil Defence inspector. This idea grew out of the publication of a government booklet two years ago—there was quite a scandal—there were two sides to it, one, instructions on how to protect yourself from nuclear attack, the other went into defence against subversion, and that was dangerous. They haven't yet sent round inspectors to check out whether each household has handled the book with due reverence but could well do so. Switzerland isn't a country of cows and chocolates, but a big industrial power over-populated, polluted, importing foreign workers and having a population that is openly manipulated by politicians who see a useful opportunity to make political hay out of people's unease at the changing situation. So the country's like a turtle, pulling its head back into its shell. In other words, it is not yet fascist exactly, but it is developing a kind of pre-fascist mentality, one that is being carefully fostered'.