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DANS LA VILLE BLANCHE/In the White City (R)

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| Directed by | Alain Tanner |
| Script | Alain Tanner |
| Camera | Acacio de Almeida |
| Editing | Laurent Uhler |
| Sound | Jean-Paul Mugal |
| Music | Jean-Luc Barbier |
| Cast | Bruno Ganz, Teresa Madruga, Julia Vonderlinn |
| Original Version | French/German/Portuguese, color, 35mm, 108 min |
| First Release | Spring, 1983 |
| Production | Filmograph |

"It happened towards the end of summer. They told me: "Come and shoot a film in Portugal". I had once seen the ships go up and down the Tagus estuary, turning round their anchors with the movements of the tide. And this made a certain impression on me and reminded me



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of earlier years, and the mystery of the streets of old Lisbon. I was day-dreaming and while watching television I saw a film with Bruno Ganz in it. I decided he would be on one of these ships going up the Tagus. I then made Rosa appear out of my memory; she would work in a hotel bar on the port, and Elisa who lives in the Rhineland. I didn't write a scenario. I just let a few scenes, a few memories, a few images and what is generally called strong emotions come into my mind from those earlier days and from a recent past. Had I written a scenario, I would have given it some meaning for this is how it goes when you are sitting with pen and paper, scratching your head, because if there is no meaning when you are sitting at your table, you start to panic. And what I wanted this time was not meaning but substance. So I went back to Lisbon, as a lonely foreigner. I followed Paul's footsteps — Paul is the name of the main character as I always call my characters Peter or Paul because it is not possible to invent names for characters in fiction, for that would look as if they were supposed to be real. Then we shot as the days went by. On the first day of filming I realised nothing happens by chance. In the bar where Rosa works, we discovered a clock going backwards, turning back time. Because of this clock Paul decides to empty the space around him, and empty his head as well. I am free he says, time has disintegrated. To break ones bonds, to be suspended in emptiness, to unfix time and space, is not easy to do. The town gives, in its magnificence, the space, and the equation is ready: light coming through the curtains of the hotel room; Rosa who runs the bar and cleans the rooms; time is out of joint; the letters to Elisa; the dangerous game; the bars and the billiard hall at night; and we filming as the days go by. On Sunday I go filming with a super-8 camera in the streets. These images are like opening the 35mm with a scalpel to look inside, and inside Paul's head as well.

The film tells its story: Paul disembarks and deserts his ship. He loves a town and he loves two women at the same time. But an accident happens quickly, in the form of a thief. Then a second accident with the same thief's face but this time with a knife in his hand, and as

accidents never happen singly, and as Paul has in fact no plans, Rosa gets weary with him and leaves him. Elisa declares war on him and this is her last token of love. Paul then goes back to the North emptyhanded but in high spirits. The final day of filming comes and is not quite like the other days, full of worries and pleasures. Even when filming is painful and your hopes fade, making a film is all the same close to happiness, and to magic. That is how we worked, trying to let the substance rise to the surface. But in a film, or a piece of music, or a book, everything is a matter of tension. In films this tension is mainly achieved through the suspense of the story and the usual tricks of storytelling. If one does not observe the rules of the game, one has to find another way of building up this tension, which then has to pervade every single shot. In each shot the fate of the film is at stake. Making *IN THE WHITE TOWN* was this sort of work, as the days went by — happiness and magic, between each "action" and each "cut". In the train taking Paul to the North, he sits facing two women, a very young one and an elderly one. Their eyes meet, but without interplay. Paul perhaps feels he is being judged, without contempt, but the childish side of men's characters sometimes is quite out of keeping with the earnestness of women. But it is difficult to guess what is actually going on in people's heads."

— Alain Tanner

A MAN CONDEMNED TO STIFLE HAS ESCAPED

An interview with Alain Tanner on the exigencies of a cinema with its back to the wall, in a country with its back to Europe . . .

Alain Tanner is an endangered species: a European filmmaker fiercely resistant to the seductions of the Euro-co-production in an age when that seems the only alternative to trans-Atlantic funding. Tanner would rather stay hungry than stay alive on drip-fed finance from Hollywood or Gaumont. "I have no ambitions to make American films and would only shoot there if the story required it", he says. He's equally hostile to the style of art movie currently packaged by the French giant Gaumont. "Serge Daney, film critic of *Libération*, has a brilliant description for Gaumont. He calls them the voiture-balai* of European cinema — they scoop up the poor fellows who



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are exhausted and out of the race".

Major European finance of this order leads, in Tanner's view, to compromised projects and bland product. Mounting his own productions is, consequently, a protracted business of "raising a cheque here, a cheque there" which saps his creative energy. He has spent the past seven months trying to find backing for his next film and still nothing is secured. "Sometimes things just fall lucky", he admits. "Paulo Branco invited me to make a movie in Portugal. I had no particular story in mind but I felt sympathetic to the atmosphere and working conditions. Something about Lisbon intrigued me: it struck me as a distant city on the edge of a continent, facing the Atlantic and Africa and with its back turned towards Europe. A place to escape to and from."

'Escape' has been a recurrent motif of Tanner's work of the last five years: *Messidor* described a series of futile parabolas within the circumference of Switzerland, *Light Years Away* developed the theme through myth and *IN THE WHITE TOWN* follows a 'refugee' German-speaking Swiss as he cuts loose from his occupation, obligations and identity. Tanner says that there's a lot of his own ennui and wanderlust in Paul (Bruno Ganz), and the idea for the film came from his own sense of alienation ("Which I admit was pleasurable") in the far-off city of Lisbon. "I suppose I was vaguely aware of the Carné/Duvivier echoes (*Pépé le Moko*, *Quai des brumes*, *Le Jour se lève*) though Ganz has found a contemporary parallel for Gabin's fatalism. But in this very



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specific sense you could say that the film is *noir* — which may be why Paul describes the city subconsciously as ‘blanche’ ”.

The light and shadow Tanner encountered in Lisbon figured significantly in his scenario, indicating the subtle shifts of mood in the central relationship between Paul and the chambermaid Rosa. Shady interiors contrast starkly with harsh sunlit exteriors, where light dances beckoningly on the waters when Paul returns to the quayside to contemplate the sea. in one lengthy, breathtaking shot, ‘Exterior Day’ obtrudes on the false ‘interior night’ of Paul’s hotel room, as the breeze causes long red curtains to billow inwards. “That was perhaps the toughest shot to edit: at three minutes it was too long and at sixty seconds it was also too long. The final cut seemed just right both for the mood of the scene and the overall pace of the film”.

Pictorial precision is uppermost in Tanner’s mind during shooting: “There was no script. I wrote the dialogue while the crew was lining up the shot. We’d photocopy it and pass it around for the actors to memorise moments before shooting. Where I spend my time is in fine-tuning the visual compositions, checking lenses and lighting levels until I’m 100 percent satisfied”. The tonal contrasts between Lisbon and Basel (where Paul’s wife lives on the banks of the Rhine) were largely a product of atmospheric differences, but it was essential that her

world should appear drab and dull, in the same way that Paul’s home-movie footage (shot on Super-8 and transferred to 35mm) should appear hallucinatory towards the end. “Again Paul is like a filmmaker in this ‘white city’, recording his actions and later his impressions in a process that distills the experience into imagery he hopes will explain his state of mind to his wife back home. It’s appropriation through imagination: what he sees becomes part of a fiction, a fantasy eventually, so that in the final sequence when he sees an attractive girl in the homewardbound train, I mix from a 35mm shot to the super-8 image even though in reality Paul no longer has his home-movie camera. Romantic perception has become totally subjective by this point”.

Earlier in the film, when the affair between Paul and Rosa is at its height, the couple take a weekend trip to a beach hut where they are seen in mid-shot making love in an old arm-chair. Here Tanner’s own subjectivity was problematic: “I wanted to strike a balance between eroticism and voyeurism, and I think it works. It’s erotic because of the way they’re making love and voyeuristic because of the camera position, shooting Ganz from behind, whereas in most other shots we see his face. I think it’s so difficult to represent sex on the screen because we in the West have evolved strict puritanical conventions for sex scenes. There’s one style for art films and another for porno. Only Oshima has really resolved that problem. When I was on the Venice Film Festival jury with Peter Handke, we were judging the films on the basis of their love scenes. ‘If he can’t do a love scene’, we said, ‘He can’t do anything else’.

Not surprisingly, Tanner feels stifled by the bourgeois morality and politics of his native Switzerland. “I can’t tolerate making another film there. *Messidor* was my last film on the subject of Switzerland”. Indeed, his libertarian conscience and Rabelaisian spirit have always seemed too large to be contained within an arbitrary national cinema. “So I’m condemned to wander, like Paul, who knows the sea is his only true home, in search of new visions.”

*In the Tour de France cycle race, the *voiture-balai* is the van that picks up the defeated backmarkers.

(Martyn Auty. Monthly Film Bulletin, London)