

2000 San Francisco International Film Festival—Part 7

Preserving the utopian moment

An interview with Daniel Schmid, director of *Beresina* or the Last Days of Switzerland

David Walsh
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“Because the climate in the early '70s for this whole group we were somehow forming—Werner Schroeter, Rainer Fassbinder, all these people—at this time everybody was into political films, engaged films; and at this time everybody looked at us like fascists. Or like completely useless. That was a time when I said, finally, ‘I want to do movies that are completely *inutile and inoubliable* [useless and unforgettable]’...” —Daniel Schmid in a 1983 interview

Beresina or the *Last Days of Switzerland* is a wonderful film. It is a malicious and unsparing attack on the Swiss bourgeoisie, its sacred cows, its sentimentality, its conspiracies, its essential criminality. And at the same time this is a work that somehow gives everyone, even the worst human specimens, his or her due. It is not a cruel work.

At the center of the film is a beautiful, naive Russian girl, Irina (Elena Panova), whose principal ambition in life is to obtain a Swiss passport. She works as a prostitute, or, more precisely, as a kind of performer of sexual theater. Her well-to-do clientele mostly get their kicks from role-playing. An aging general, for example, will knock on her door and when it's opened, demand to know, “Are you Fritzie Ochsenbein?” Irina replies “Yes,” he points a gun at her (loaded with blanks) and fires it, and she drops to the floor “dead.” They play this game over and over.

This same general strings her along with promises about Swiss citizenship. So does an ambitious couple, a fashion designer (“It's nice to have so many mirrors—one is never alone”) and a prominent lawyer (“All Swiss are a threat to the security of the country”). They ask Irina to spy on her clients for them. They pump the poor girl for information and use it to further their careers. When she's served her purpose, they arrange for an expulsion order to be issued. Irina has 14 days to leave Switzerland. Hell hath no fury, however, and the Russian girl unwittingly sets in motion a right-wing political conspiracy—in whose organization “her” general has played a central role—that brings about the end of the Swiss republic.

Even then, however, the bank director is still in charge of things. His world outlook is summed up in a conversation with a muckraking journalist, after a corruption scandal has erupted: “Money is neutral.... The same dollar extorted yesterday by the Mafia, tomorrow brings revelations about their connections with our economic leaders. The earth is round, Mr. Bürki. Neither good nor bad, it goes round, that's all.” One is dealing here with a highly sophisticated level of filmmaking. And *Beresina* is enormously funny too.

Daniel Schmid was born in Switzerland, to a family of hoteliers, in 1941. He became part of the German cinema in the 1960s and 1970s. He directed R.W. Fassbinder and Ingrid Caven in *Shadow of Angels* (1976), based on Fassbinder's play. The titles of his films reflect the desire, expressed in the interview cited above, to make “useless and

unforgettable” films: *Tonight or Never* (1972), *La Paloma* (1974), *Hécate* (1981), *Tosca's Kiss* (1984), *The Written Face* (1995). The films, above all, convey intense yearning, yearning intensified by social restraint and by the impossibility of its being fulfilled. Schmid has also directed opera.

In the interview referred to and again in a recent conversation at the San Francisco film festival Schmid derides the efforts of “engaged” filmmakers in the 1970s to make films about the working class when not one of them had ever met a worker. He calls this sort of thing “*s ozialkitsch*.” Fair enough, although one can go overboard. There are good social realist films and bad ones, just as there good films that “elaborate the sensual fantasies people call forth to veil reality” (one critic's description of Schmid's films) and bad ones.

Is it ironic that this proponent of the “useless” should make such a concrete and engaging film about social life? But another such proponent, Oscar Wilde, who died a century ago this year, also did a great deal of useful work. Like Wilde, Schmid, of course, *takes for granted* an overall hostility to the existing social order, an hostility that unhappily no longer animates filmmakers in Europe and America.

In any event, there is no guarantee that someone with Schmid's sensibility will find his way to make a film like *Beresina*, but it should at least be noted that very few of the “engaged” German filmmakers of the early 1970s are still around, at least in the cinema, much less making films of this quality.

We spoke in San Francisco. As occasionally gloomy as Schmid's remarks were, I found the conversation moving, thought-provoking and, at times, inspiring. This is a remarkable personality and artist.

David Walsh: I assume this film is the result of accumulated feeling, but was there some particular event or series of events that provoked you into making it?

Daniel Schmid: I come from paradise, I was born in paradise, I grew up in paradise. When you are Swiss this is what you're told. “We're the best, we're the richest. We are so nice, we are so good, because we work so hard, we are so clean.” As the character says, “Every Swiss is a danger for Switzerland.” You grow up with this, then you leave. I studied in Berlin.

Growing up in a country like this ... Switzerland ... you soon find out that the things they tell are not all true. Who knows? And it's a general thing. We don't any longer know who we are. Governed and ruled by a so-called democratic system. We are ruled by banks in the global Wall Street which none of us understand. So this might be a question in a country that since the '30s at least has laundered money for anybody, from Mao Tse-tung, the Hitler regime, to the drug lords, to African dictators, a country where anyone washed or put his money.

Bankers in London and New York before the Second World War said:

Switzerland will be good during the war. And when the war was over Swiss people got used to this. Not that they wanted it at the beginning, it was decided by the banks. Now the twentieth century was a bad century, a horrible century for Europe and the world. It was a good century for Switzerland because we made money. We played a perfect joke, we were the only country in Europe that was not occupied by Hitler. And at the same time Swiss industries collaborated heavily with Germany, they had no choice in the war. The trains went through the country, more than today.

So we decided, when all this Holocaust money, this scandal came up... It's been going on for 20 years, but at the beginning the banks said, "No, no, it's nothing." Then they started admitting the money involved, thirty million, forty million, you heard about it. Martin Suter, my script writer, and I decided not only that we wanted to, but that it was our *duty* to make a film about our homeland because nobody was doing it, and there are so many countries where you can't even do a film like this because they will kill you, or put you in jail. I have this advantage that I come from a country that can afford criticism.

The movie was the most successful Swiss film in years. Many young people went to see it. It was attacked by conservative newspapers, although the international reaction at Cannes was quite good. So they couldn't destroy it totally, but they said it was out of date. The political view, the facts. Ten years ago, they said, it would have been okay. But now all these things are settled, all the anticommunist, patriotic organizations don't exist any more. The film comes 10 years too late, they said.

Then the movie opened and a week after the opening in Bern, the capital, a scandal broke out about a secret army, with secret weapons, paid for by our taxes. A high-class prostitute, a sex worker, came out naming politicians, bankers, bringing discomfort to the so-called elite. One of the big banks was involved in a scandal with Colombian drug trade. It seemed like reality was catching up with fiction, going even farther. Suddenly I was no longer interviewed on television, on culture programs, at ten o'clock, suddenly I was on at eight o'clock, in the news. It helped the movie, of course.

They asked me, on prime time television, what did I think, "Is this a coincidence?" I said, we didn't expect it, but we organized it, we'd paid everybody in advance, in case the movie didn't take off.

The strangest thing, this Swiss officer, the colonel involved in the real-life scandal was 45, he was not, like in *Beresina*, this elderly patriot. And yet he had put this crazy scheme together with some high-ranking politicians and military and banking people. And his name, we could never have invented it, was like some Mafia name, like Tedeschi [the name of a critical figure in the scandal in *Beresina*].

I said on television, in Switzerland, it's likely we can afford it, even if you don't agree, even if you think it's exaggerated or whatever.

Comedy has a specific character. You have to take everybody seriously, every person, every actor, more than in drama, I think. To respect them and love them. Even the horrible people.

And the other point that I think made the movie was that I was terribly lucky in going to Moscow and finding this incredible young Russian girl, Elena Panova. It's her debut. She's 19; she's in acting school. Geraldine Chaplin, Martin Benrath, all the old troupers, who have been in movies for 30, 40 years, were astonished, "We've never seen anything like it. Where did she learn it?"

DW: How did you find her?

DS: In a casting call at Mosfilm. Two hundred girls, screen tests with about 60, then we did specific scenes with 12, then down to 6. On the last day a girl came, who was on the list, with another girl, the other girl was Elena. They had talked. She just came along to see what was going on. She had nothing else to do, so she came along. "I'm not here to test, I just came with my girl-friend." And that was it.

DW: What about this notion of "Close up the fence!"

DS: It's quite old. In the fifteenth century the Swiss had a good army and they won against the Duke of Burgundy. They won a number of battles. There was a moment when Switzerland could have entered central European power politics. They could have controlled Alsace-Lorraine, part of Germany, the north of Italy. Then they lost a battle and then suddenly the word went out, let's close up the fence, let's go back to the old ways, let's stay away from the world's troubles, or European troubles.

DW: Isn't there a growth in support for the right-wing party, the People's Party?

DS: The right-wing party attacks everybody, but they don't join the government. We have this government, the five leading parties are represented in the government. We don't have a real parliamentary opposition. In Switzerland we call it "the magic formula." The right won't join, very cleverly, so they can go on criticizing. They received 26 percent. The People's Party leader, Mr. [Christoph] Blocher, is a multimillionaire, he's against Europe because he controls a lot of business and factories in Switzerland.

It's strange. Like Hitler's or Haider's [in Austria], the party is made up of people who feel that they can't make it, whatever the reason might be. They hold parties in the countryside for the little people, with food and drink, and these people go home and vote for the party. In the party program it is written that they should cut social help to people, it's totally schizophrenic.

In Switzerland they proposed to tax rich people at a higher rate, and in a referendum it was defeated. Not all the Swiss are millionaires, but the notion that people who make a lot of money should have a social responsibility, pay more ... in this vote the population defeated higher taxes for the rich. This means probably that if you're not rich in Switzerland the notion that you might become rich tomorrow is quite strongly inside the brain, otherwise I can't explain why 90 percent ... okay, we don't have poverty like in America, but we have people who are not doing so well ... they vote for this party and he's one of the richest men in Switzerland.

DW: It's a problem. One of the things I liked about the film, which seems to me lacking in many films today, European and American, is the sort of critical spirit, or even malicious or destructive spirit. Do you feel that absence in other films, or is it just me?

DS: Yeah, I feel it also.

DW: What is the state of European filmmaking, do you think?

DS: I don't know, now everybody in Europe is shattered, the filmmakers, by *American Beauty* and *Magnolia*, made by new, 30-year-old American directors. This has exploded in the past year. Like everyone in the world we are dominated by the big American blockbusters and by these enormous machines, which are all over the planet. Local, small films should still be made even if this American reality exists. I belong to this group of European filmmakers, I could make a film every two or three years. Great.

But the masters I had all my life—Murnau, Stroheim, Sternberg, Ophuls, Fellini, Pasolini, Bergman, even Tarkovsky—are all dead. And the moviemakers today are mostly American or Canadian—like David Lynch, David Cronenberg, the Coen brothers. Now [Paul Thomas] Anderson, [Sam] Mendes. It's not my world, it's not my generation. And the Europeans complain, "The Americans are killing us." They turn out these movies, independent or ... I don't even know what "independent" means. In America if you are independent and successful, you get immediately bought. I didn't know that *American Beauty* was a Spielberg production.

In Europe when we do a movie and it's done, there is no money for public relations. In America there is a massive budget for PR. And it's not that I'm complaining, because as long as I can go on telling stories.... That's what I am, a story-teller.... European productions have to go through all these committees, German television, French television,

French pay, Swiss pay, Italian free television. You need about 20 of these bodies to make a movie. And the people on these committees, their lives consist of sitting there and reading scripts, it's sometimes frustrating to wait two years. Maybe it's better to have a studio behind you when the film goes to the theater, but we don't have it and any attempt to imitate America never actually succeeds.

Big European productions—that opportunity is already past, they missed the opportunity in 1914-15. Italy had this *Cabiria* and all these big productions, parallel to Hollywood. Then the war came. The same thing in Germany, with UFA. It lasted till shortly before Hitler came in. With the crash in '29, Hitler, it was over.

But I can't complain that I'm in a bad situation, I'm in my situation, which is ... I'm a European, with a Swiss passport, but I'm not a Swiss moviemaker, I'm a European moviemaker, who grew up in a country where you speak French, German, Italian and Romansh, and English you have to learn because of the tourists. Because I grew up in a hotel. So that wasn't my choice. I shot movies in all these languages, except English.

DW: You mentioned filmmakers dying. What did you think of Bresson?

DS: *Monsieur* Bresson. The only one on the set in all those years everybody called, "*Monsieur* Bresson." Everyone used "vous [the formal 'you' in French]," not "tu."

DW: What film did you see Bresson shooting?

DS: I was on the set of *L'Argent* [*Money*, 1983]. Yes, *Monsieur* Bresson. I was very impressed. And the last years were a bit sad. Many people thought he was dead already. So when he died many people went, "What, was he still alive?" And like all moviemakers he wanted to go on. I saw Billy Wilder. He was witty, bitter. At 92 he still had an office and he still went there every day. I remember 30 years ago when Josef von Sternberg came on a Ford Foundation cultural exchange program, and he came with a script he had for about 25 years. And then he badmouthed Marlene Dietrich.

DW: Really? What did he say?

DS: Nothing nice, not one nice thing. That she abused him, that she was unfaithful, which she really wasn't. She was too Prussian, too Berlin, for that. But he had to stop his filmmaking career, and she could go on. She started a new career.

These kind of people, you won't see them again. They don't produce them any more, they're "out of production."

DW: Why?

DS: I think we live in a time when it's very hard to defend your own personality, your own identity. And the child in yourself. It's Shakespeare. The dreams of your youth—will you forget them, will you betray them?

DW: How do you feel now about the German films of the 1970s?

DS: No doubt it was the most interesting period in German film history since the time before the Nazis came. We live in a time when everything becomes so interchangeable, everything is "punch the buttons," so to speak. Anything goes, and nothing at all. I think it's difficult for young people today to defend themselves against all this ocean of offers—you only have to choose.

I love people who when they talk, talk about something they know. Today most people talk about anything. Who knows about anything really? Maybe that's a kind of an answer as to why *Monsieur* Bresson will not be manufactured any more. But maybe I'm wrong. Maybe in another time...

DW: I think somehow everything is preserved.

DS: As long as there is one person alive still speaking.... Out of the seven wonders of the ancient world, from the hanging gardens of Babylon to the colossus of Rhodes, none of them are left.

DW: What about Fassbinder?

DS: This was the most interesting period in recent German film history. Fassbinder, Werner Schroeter...

DW: What is he doing now?

DS: A little bit of theater. But he was very important.

Germany lost its film culture when they kicked out the Jews. They lost it. Maybe forever. Now with all the money they have, they can't make it up.

DW: Do you think that there was an utopian element in the 1970s that's important to maintain?

DS: Yes, definitely. I belong to this generation.... They always say "'68," but '66, '67 was the best, before it became labeled. We started in film school to kick out all our teachers, at least formally. When I became a professor in Vienna I was so scared, the students must be like I was or worse, very brave. But it wasn't so. I must have been part of a generation...

We're in the sunset of ideology, except mercantilism, let's not call it capitalism—mercantilism, it's a medieval word. I belong to this group of middle and upper middle class, we never met working class people in those years. Strange. In all those communes, all these new forms, free love, free everything. "Free the workers," we didn't know any workers.

But we were Leninists, Trotskyists, Maoists, you name it, between Berkeley and Berlin, 1966, 1967. But it had a utopian moment. I think that doesn't exist with young people today. They seem much more black, much more "no way out." We had this feeling that we were going to change the world—today! I studied with Joschka Fischer for five years, he is the German foreign minister. The present interior minister was the lawyer for all the radicals, the terrorists. I was not a terrorist, but I knew some of them. I was too Swiss to get too extreme. There was this sweet smell of utopia, of a new, better world.

If you think of the Communist movement, in the twentieth century, the way it ended. I knew so many great people and who were very old already, in Spain, in Germany, in Italy, survivors. And in the '30s, you had no choice, there was fascism and the leftists. And these people were fighting for another life, a better life. And I met these people then. Like this old Communist lady, who had been in a concentration camp, she said after the end of the Berlin Wall, "Everything I was fighting for was for nothing." It's ridiculous. I don't think so.

DW: I don't think so either.

DS: Suddenly the whole world turns upside down, and they were all criminals. You asked me, there was this utopia, this kind of ... "Far away there is a light shimmering." It's Hölderlin. If you go through this when you're young, you are kind of responsible to *not* forget, to know that these things went on, that many risked their lives. So a little bit of this anarchist sentiment ... it was anarchistic. Dreaming. We really thought that everything was going to change. Really.

DW: I think that's right. It doesn't always happen when you want it to happen.

DS: It will be preserved. I say this because you said a thing before that touched me, that you think everything will be preserved.

DW: The best in people is somehow preserved. Sometimes the continuity is very tenuous. Like Trotsky in the 1930s. The world has not solved its problems.



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