

MAXI 2000

3RD CROSS-CULTURAL SEMINAR ON INTERNATIONAL FILM CRITICISM

Date : **Sunday, November 5, 2000**

Time : 11am - 5:45pm

Venue : Goethe Studio, Goethe-Institut Hong Kong, 14/F Arts Centre

Participating critics:

Austria : Ms Isabella Reicher

Germany : Mr Knut Elstermann

Hong Kong : Ms Winnie Fu, Ms Linda Lai, Mr Lam Kam-po, Mr Li Cheuk-to,
Mr Hector Rodriguez, Mr Shum Long Tin, Mr Geoffrey Wong

Programme:

11 - 12noon	Discussion and evaluation session of reviews on MAXI 2000 films. Divided into groups, each involving a European critic
12noon - 12:15pm	Tea Break
12:15- 1:15pm	an open exchange involving all critics
1:15 - 2:15pm	Lunch Break
2:15 - 3:15pm	Discussion and evaluation session of reviews on Hong Kong films. Divided into groups, each involving a European critic
3:15pm - 3:30pm	Tea Break
3:30 - 4:30pm	an open exchange involving all critics
4:30pm - 4:45pm	Tea Break
4:45 - 5:45pm	Question & Answer Session Presentation by 2 European and 1 local critics on their impressions on the lessons learnt from the seminar/tentative conclusions

MAXI 2000 Films

1. *ID Swiss* 瑞士不了情, Dir: Fulvio Bernasconi, Christian Davi, Nadia Fares, Wageh George, Kamal Musale, Thomas Thümena and Stina Werenfels
2. *No Place to Go* 走投無路 (Unberührbare) Dir: Oskar Roehler
3. *Northern Skirts* 女流 (Nordrand) Dir: Barbara Albert
4. *Night Shapes* 夜色奏鳴曲 (Nachtgestalten) Dir: Andreas Dresen
5. *Brighter than the Moon* 月光光, 照銀行 (Heller als der Mond) Dir: Virgil Widrich
6. *The Legends of Rita* 我要活多次 (Die Stille nach dem Schuss) Dir: Volker Schlöndorff
7. *Wanted* 夢裡不知身是客, Dir: Harald Sicheritz
8. *Oil Warning* 大報復, Dir: Dominik und Benjamin Reding

Hong Kong Films

1. *Spacked Out* 無人駕駛, Dir: Lawrence Ah Mon
2. *Little Cheung* 細路祥, Dir: Fruit Chan
3. *The Mission* 鎗火, Dir: Johnnie To
4. *The Island Tales* 有時舞跳, Dir: Stanley Kwan ?
5. *In the Mood for Love* 花樣年華, Dir: Wong Kar Wai

Jointly presented by:

Hong Kong Film Critics Society, Goethe-Institut Hong Kong, Consulate General of Austria,
Hong Kong Arts Centre

Brighter than the Moon (Dir. Virgil Widrich / 2000 / Austria)

By Linda Lai

Simplicity and schematic dualism. Maybe there's still hope.

Simplicity. Vienna is cleansed of its urban sounds, traces of high capitalism and cultured architectural exteriors. The freeways in the suburb are absolutely free of traffic -- to make way for just the main characters' three motor cars? There is a constantly emphatic sense of graphic composition within the frame -- geometrically calculated, streamlined, almost to the degree of abstraction. Characters and their movements are part of the larger scheme of a graphic design exercise, and images "distilled" to emphasize shape more than texture. Frame composition brings out either flatness, or an unmistakable sense of perspectivism with a sharp vanishing point, both giving new power to the single frame, the alphabet of cinematic art. The world of the story is baptized with sunlight, albeit via the use of a cool color scheme (of a predominantly blue and green tone) with one exception -- that of a hot red, the color of the dress of the female protagonist, Julie.

Schematic dualism. If there's a secret code to the film, it's the number "2". Two thieves, two detectives, two couples on the run. Symmetry in composition. Frequent use of two-shots. In editing, there's a pattern to juxtapose shots of complementary vision, of diametrically opposite POV. Many times the audience see frontal close-up shots or two-shots of the characters looking through a window or across a wall in the same direction while passing remarks on to each other. The audience is at once placed in a position where they are invited to study and contrast what's on the screen. Characters work as type and pairs of reciprocal/complimentary personality traits. Relational dynamic is single -- life is about implicating each other in one's own shitty problems. Good guys should be rewarded, bad guys punished -- in the end.

Unlike the US-based dominant cinematic style which calls for diegetic absorption of the viewers via the grammar of continuity, the basic visual grammar in this film sets the viewer at a distance and yet calls for attention to itself -- partly via a graphic vigor that exists in its own right, and partly via an editing style that creates truncated scenes and constant disruptions to the narrative comprehension of spatial unity and continuous flow of events. Paradoxically, the film exploits a Bazinian conviction in the photographic basis of the cinema, and in this case, emphasizing the lucidity of the singularity of each image reproduced by the camera. The single images linger with expressive quality each on their own, without turning into a functional preparatory unit for the next shots so together they present a message. It looks as if the camera loiters on each of the single shots, indulging in its lucidity. Thus comes the distanced gaze of the viewers, who is drawn more to the direct presentational power of each image/shot than to the overall narrativization process, or the representational treatment of the larger world of immigrant problems that the film invokes.

This is the basic cinematic dramaturgy of the story of three immigrants from outside Austria: abstract, surreal, free of any assembly of thick everyday details to culminate in any mimesis of the intra-continental racial/cultural difficulties in the actual world. *Brighter Than the Moon* proves that critical realism is not the only recipe for the portrayal of human conditions of a social nature. Instead, the film's visual and

narrative grammar is organically built to craft a comic book effect for a fairy tale marked by absurdity, (black) humor, light-heartedness, and almost magic -- all at one time. Guns don't shoot. No one is in real danger. No crisis really hurts. Luck is always just around the corner.

Have I overlooked the fact that the problems of immigrants is a hot topic and has incited many screen stories in Europe? Not really. In fact, it would have been much easier to slash the film's narrative strategy for sugar-coating actual sufferings or bracketing harsh social realities for analytical dissection in the holy name of ideological criticism. But at a point when the radical consciousness that the Leftist tradition once raised has often deteriorated into mere lip-service of political correctness, the form and effect of distancing in *Brighter Than the Moon* does save us from cheap, easy humanism, which after all only seats us in the armchair rather than moves us to action. From a foreigner's POV, dressing up the suffering victims in the guise of fairy tale characters does at least preserve their dignity by not turning their hardship into a "pornographic" performance of visual pleasure for the audience. For in my mind, no realism is sufficient to mark any radical difference.

The worth of narrative analysis is to beg that a familiar story idea, even when already told a thousand times, may still deserve attention. In response to American film scholar Kristin Thompson's demand for defamiliarization even of the most ordinary film, one may say Virgil Widrich has paid his dues. The formal configuration of his immigrant story discussed above at least puts us in a more or less unusual chair. But when it comes to cultural meanings, the foreigner-critic -- without any knowledge of the various discursive histories, social-cultural, textual or fictional, that cut through the film, plus the lacking of real life experiences in that part of the world -- would find herself almost incompetent. The critical options for me are limited, in the case of this film, to the level of deconstructing the magical parable construct -- to tease out either the traces of idealist-humanist sublimation of actual immigrant sufferings, or to suspect the film for its compromise of complexities for normative, comfortable, almost escapist, moralism. And I have chosen the former.

ID Swiss (Switzerland / 2000 / Fulvio Bernasconi, Thomas Thumena, Christian Davi, Nadia Fares, Wageh George, Kermal Musale, Stina Werenfels)

Linda Lai

Contemporary documentaries have taught viewers to loosen up their grip for the so-called objective truth to make room for the documentarian's subjective vision. The makers of *ID Swiss* here effectively juxtapose their subjects' interpretive accounts of their individual life experiences with hard-core facts of social scientific nature, leaving the viewers with an interesting gap to conquer: how does one compromise these two sets of reality?

An instance of visual anthropology of the postmodern, *ID Swiss* employs a rhetoric that prefers casual presentation of its subjects casually presenting themselves in their casual everyday life setting, without hiding the subjects' deliberately performing and modifying their appearance for the camera. Like most works of contemporary visual anthropology, the film's truth claim relies not so much on the indexical value of the images vis-a-vis the reality they signify, but on a rhetorical strategy that confesses the limitation of the documentary medium, such as the use of elliptical narrative, re-enactment of past events, inconclusive interpretation, reflexive strategy and so on. That is, a documentary seems to be truer than truthful if it leaves its inferred meaning less absolute, if it makes explicit its incompleteness, and if it stresses the individual over the type.

The heterogeneity of style, subject matters and documentary approach in *ID Swiss* then slays open the question of whether it is really not a paradigm of typification after all: i.e. whether each of the component-stories is actually not the sample for a type of local situation or civil figures in the multi-ethnic environment of Switzerland. Are these characters and their experiences typical and representative of larger groups? Or are they truthful only within the context of individual personal history?

The makers of *ID Swiss* apparently want to evade these questions. On one level, there is no bringing in of editorial lead lines (whether in voice or in the form of titles) throughout the film that would suggest anything like "here's one among many of them." In fact, the very fragmentary editing style overall also helps to create a kind of trivial everydayness that would draw viewers' attention to the characters as individuals. In "Raclette Curry," for example, one even finds the deliberate use of POV shots and close-ups to highlight the young Indian man's sexual fantasy – a grammar that is extensively used in mainstream story films to signify character subjectivity, but here turned a strategy for individuation. In the story of the young woman of Jewish decent, the narrative is continuously interrupted by segments of her and the hair-dresser's. While highlighting the episode's reflexive quality by intrusive editorializing, it is also an attempt to individuate the experience.

The overall assembly of the component-stories is more obvious of a rational selection than random sampling. Together they articulate the multiple facets of multi-ethnic urban co-habitation in today's Switzerland, and the different tropes to problematize multi-racial issues: there are the 2nd-generation young immigrants who are more Swiss than ethnic-native, the cultural syncretic practices of re-creating "ethnic dishes" to signify ethnic authenticity, religious syncretism especially of the Jewish and the Protestant, the geo-

linguistic root of separation and prejudice, and so on. Among other things, one repeated key note is: traditional boundaries have broken down.

Whether the discursive or informative aspects of a documentary dictates a viewer's reception is relative to how well informed the viewer already is about the subject before the documentary narrative unfolds. Although the conventions and grammar developed for the documentary have no intrinsic tie to a documentary's authority of its truth claim, there are occasions when there is no other handle but the text itself for the viewer to rely on. I absolutely find myself on this uncomfortable ground in the course of viewing *ID Swiss*: there's nothing but the narrative; or, yes, there are figures showing the marriage and divorce rate vis-à-vis foreigners versus the Swiss. But how do I make sense of these figures taken out of its context of original usage? Do I feel informed. (The problem is I apparently do.) Do I know more? What do I know? Do I manage to derive pleasure from the film? (The answer is positive: from the film's narrative design.) How do I make the uneasy jump from an overall postmodern rhetoric meant to relativize truth to social statistics? ...

I couldn't help but come back to the perennial questions of the production of cross-cultural knowledge -- a question that becomes more urgent when it comes to visual anthropology, the definition of which is to visually present the materiality of one culture to another. Or, is documentary at all a good vehicle to help cross-cultural understanding? Given that all narrative constructions by nature are moral persuasions in the end, what exactly is an ethical documentary?

I have been pushing things in the direction of the impossible. For me, the foreigner, the consolation of the film is that in the end it does know who it is primarily addressing and who are supposed to be the target audience. It was a great relief as I hear, at the closure of the film, the unmistakable proclamation of the pronoun "we" the Swiss: "The integration of the foreign population into the development of the Swiss multi-cultural society will be the great challenge of the 21st century. Switzerland has a long tradition of tackling and realizing social changes. Why not let this inspire us?"