

The loneliness of the S.G.

A Conversation with the Zurich Film Author Steff Gruber

June 1984

A first question, Steff Gruber...

...I'd like to start by saying that we were editing my new film «Fetish & Dreams» until three this morning. By the time I fell asleep it was even later, so I'm not quite in shape...

After all, I gather from your answer that you have devoted body and soul to the film medium. What was the first movie you saw?

Walt Disney's «Mary Poppins». I was 10 years old. I was fascinated by the magical arts of Mary Poppins, and I was really enraptured by this film. But a completely different film had a big influence on my later development. At the age of 15 our priest showed us Roman Polanski's «The Fat And The Lean» in the teenager organization of the local church. It was about the repressive tolerance...

Somewhat abstract, that term. What happens in this film?

A fat man lives in a hut and hires a thin man to work for him. One day the thin man sees the Eiffel Tower from afar and runs away. The fat man catches him, ties a goat to his leg and forces the man to work for him again. But again the thin man sees the Eiffel Tower and runs away once more, with the goat on his leg. The fat man catches him quickly and frees him from the goat. Now the skinny man stops grumbling, keeps working and doesn't run away anymore

And what affected you so much about this film?

On the one hand the way the film is made - not a single word is spoken, it lives entirely from the message of the images; on the other hand the way Polanski has translated a complicated topic into a visual language that everyone can understand: the person freed from fake bonds forgets his true oppression... I walked out of this screening having seen this film and told a friend who was with me that now I knew what I wanted to be. He replied that he had known for a long time that I wanted to become a pilot. But I explained to him that I wanted to become a filmmaker.

So your friend was not completely wrong. - Now let's make a «flashback»: tell me something about your childhood and youth...

I grew up in Oberrieden on Lake Zurich in a family of artists. I attended secondary school, then grammar school, but I ran away...

Then what did you do?

I entered the «F+F», Farb+Form, the school for design. And there I made my first short films around 1972. One, which later won an award, I titled «Portrait». I had a woman sitting on a red square cloth in the middle of the main station to record the reaction of the bypassers with a hidden camera: Some shook their heads, some laughed, some made remarks...

And after finishing the F+F apprenticeship?

...I started another «apprenticeship» as it were. Because the «Portrait» success encouraged me to finally become a filmmaker. So I became a camera assistant for commercials, a job that at the same time offered me a technically outstanding education, because in advertising perfection was the top priority and I always worked with the latest technical achievements. I learned to work with light, lenses, filters, all of which I would later take advantage when making my own films.

So how did it come to start your own agency?

The recession put an end to my work as a camera assistant for commercials, as there were no big budgets anymore. But since I didn't want to take a steady job - I don't like subordination to a boss - I founded a small advertising agency. Start-up capital: my grandmother's typewriter and 300 francs credit from my mother...

But today you live off it?

Yes, because my art films, if I want to call them that, cost more than they bring in. So I do poster advertising, gallery calendars, occasionally even an advertising film...

In 1978 you produced the feature film «Moon In Taurus», with yourself in one of the two leading roles, a pictorially convincing examination of the triangle of themes human relationship - love - loneliness. Did you actually experience reactions from the audience?

There was agreement, but also rejection. Once I went to a pub. There a stranger suddenly came and said that I was the one who played the leading role in «Moon in Taurus» and even shot the film. I nodded, whereupon he wanted me to reimburse his 8.80 francs. But I was also asked on the street by a complete stranger when I would shoot my next film.

How do you finance your films?

As you know, state film funding is very modest in terms of money. So I have to put my own money into it, but above all I have to send hundreds of personal applications to individuals and foundations, which is of course an insane effort, even if until now it has always been a successful one.

To your latest opus with the title «Fetish & Dreams»: this is also a film about loneliness and the attempt to overcome it...

Yes, in the beginning I wanted to shoot a reportage, a documentary about the loneliness of the generation between 25 and 35 years. The research on this topic showed that in no other city in the world is this problem so obvious, but also in no other city is it so much written about as in New York. So my cameraman Rainer Klausmann, other co-workers and I moved to New York. But the more I followed my topic, the more I realized that loneliness was also my own problem... In addition, I had met a jazz pianist from Boston named Michèle Rusconi on the plane to America. And the more I broke my head about the subject of loneliness, the more urgent my wish to go and find this woman, although all I knew about her is that she lived in Boston... My cameraman moved with me, and so this search for her became part of the film «Fetish & Dreams».

Interview: H. P. Häberli

Die Einsamkeit des S.G. – Ein Gespräch mit dem Zürcher Filmautor Steff Gruber, *Der junge Kaufmann*, June 1984.