

In the mountains

by Gertjan Zuilhof

Before I was able to investigate the hot-blooded new cinema of tropical Asia for the IFFR, for a decade I took an annual winter trip through the German-speaking centre of Europe.

It was the year of Michael Pilz' Feldberg when I first came to Austria for the Rotterdam Film Festival. I think the film was premièred at the Austrian Film Days in Wels, but a beautiful old cinema in Vienna was rented for this visitor from Rotterdam in order to do justice to the radiant 35mm image and to have the best experience of the minimal yet meticulous soundtrack. I was impressed by the craftsmanship and the visual and audio purism even though I couldn't know at the time that Pilz was about to abandon working with classical film techniques and become a pioneer in using handy video formats.

Maybe Pilz wanted to try it one more time: to make a film that recognizes the extremes of purism in cinema while also being state-of-the-art in its sound and vision. And so very expensive for an avant-garde film. A film that could measure up technically to mainstream cinema and which the maker and therefore only allowed to be screened in qualified cinema. This was a demanding if not impossible paradox and the beautiful, secretive and pure Feldberg remained as seldom screened exception to the rule that avant-garde is a poverty-stricken art.

Feldberg can be described as a drama film, because it has two actors, but it is above all a masterclass in cinematographically capturing a breathtaking mountain landscape. Pilz is himself a talented cameraman, but on this occasion he turned to Peter Schreiner. Only later, for instance after seeing Schreiner's own film *Blaue Ferne* (1994), is possible to see just how essential Schreiner's contribution was to Pilz' masterpiece.

This year, a film was presented that took me back to the early 1990s. To 1990 itself, to be precise. To the year of Feldberg. We're talking about the stunning *Bellavista* by Peter Schreiner indeed, cameraman on Feldberg. Beautiful, calm and self-assured in black and white and shot in one location, a forgotten German-speaking enclave in the Italian Alps, the kind I thought no longer existed. Schreiner deliberately allowed a lot to pass him by. He filmed his small archaic community as it were with archaic means. He has picked up where he left off in his closely related film *I Cimbri* (1991) after having not filmed for a long time. The power of his work has remained equally strong. Beautifully captured light in the endless grey tones between black and white may well have something timeless.

And they are not only beautiful shots of the mountain village Sappada/Pladen/Plodn (depending on which language you speak) in the sun or in the snow. We listen closely to the amazing old language and the occasionally dramatic life stories. Stories sometimes with angular philosophies of life and peasant poetry, but poetry it certainly is.

Schreiner would appear to have withdrawn for a long time in the landscape and among the people who populate his films. Chopping wood instead of making films. It seems to have had the desired result. Capturing the peace, the way of life and reasoning in the isolated mountain community is recorded with an incredible amount of respect and sensitivity. One season more or less seems less relevant.

During the absence of Schreiner, Pilz has built up an imposing video oeuvre, focusing on a personal perspective and lengthy meditations. Meditations that have occasionally led to extremely long films such as his travel diary from Siberia *Prisjádím Na Dorozhku/Let's Sit Down Before We Leave* (1995). Or the exhaustive portrait screened during the recent Holland Festival (Rotterdam, Holland) of the theatre maker Jack Garfein *That's all there is*

(2006).

Films lasting 10 hours in the case of Pilz. Films in black & white in which an incomprehensible mediaeval German is spoken in the case of Schreiner. They asked for it, you could say. To be admired for their courage, but also to be relegated to the fringe.

Pilz and Schreiner of course only form an exceptional fringe within Austrian documentary, that with names such as Ulrich Seidl, Michael Glawogger and Nicolas Geyrhalter is itself exceptional enough to have a clear profile in an international sense. Characteristic for the Austrian situation is that the exceptional fringe (Seidl, Glawogger and Geyhalter certainly don't make television) has its own fringe.

A fringe that is occasionally supported and cherished reluctantly, but apparently there's always some money to be found for real art in Austria. And that certainly makes the journey worthwhile every year.

And yes, the mountain comes to Mohammed. Bellavista is coming to Rotterdam.