Taking Time: Peter Schreiner Returns
By Christoph Huber

"Making films," says Peter Schreiner, "is a means of talking. Maybe even a substitute for talking. I've always had—and still do—a problem with the imprecision of language." It is the summer of 2009, and we are sitting in the garden of his family's inherited house in Grinzing, Vienna's nice, green suburb famous for its Heurige, Austria's popular wine taverns. Amongst other things, I'm here to find out why this singular director had stopped talking for so long, at least through films. Before his comeback with his first video work Bellavista (2006), which won the main documentary prize at Austria's national film festival, the Diagonale, in 2007 and went on to garner some interest on the festival circuit, there was a decade-long gap in his filmography.

I'd been curious about this mystery man of Austrian cinema for years, having encountered his name sporadically, but enthusiastically, dropped in conversations, while his films and writing on them had remained frustratingly elusive. His best-known credits were as a DP on two pictures by other directors, whose places at opposite ends of the historical spectrum added another layer of mystery. The first was Niki List's Malaria (1982), a key film about Vienna's New Wave-era scene (and, by way of relative popularity, of an emerging younger generation of filmmakers). List was then a close friend and collaborator, whose career was defined by the subsequent one-hit wonder Müllers Büro (1986), a silly genre mix that remains one of the country's biggest commercial hits. On the other hand there's Feldberg (1990) by fellow Austrian sensibilist Michael Pilz, an amazing meditation on a man, a woman, and a landscape, whose troubled production history and reception sealed Pilz's disenchantment with Austria's national film funding, and led him to abandon celluloid for autonomous videomaking. Certainly, one can see a connection to Schreiner's contemplative aesthetic there, even as he recalls the eccentric circumstances of the shoot with a certain amusement: "We did incredible stuff like endless 35mm takes of grass blades moving ever so slightly!" Still, despite certain parallels, Schreiner's aesthetic and methods differ considerably from Pilz's, and while his prolific peer has remained an imposing presence on the margins, Schreiner for the most part has remained marginalized to the point of near invisibility.

Which made the stunning maturity on display in Bellavista even more of a shock. Schreiner's seventh feature—categorizations of documentary, fiction, or experimental fall woefully short—possesses a formal clarity, while dazzling with a mixture of hard-won worldly wisdom and still-youthful passion of expression. At first glance, Bellavista seems a documentary portrait of a town in Northern Italy, one of the last places where an old Tyrolean dialect is still spoken, focusing on the family operating the titular hotel—especially Giuliana, the youngest daughter, whose troubled memories account for her difficult relationship to the place and its culture. But quickly one realizes that Schreiner is after something different, more complex and elusive. His meticulous, yet often oddly framed black-and-white images hardly evoke the "beautiful view" evoked by the title, although the multifaceted textures of the shades of grey carry their own poetic charge, as do the unusual compositions, with their insistence on details and fragmentary glimpses, body parts protruding offscreen, or people placed mostly at the very edge of frame. Much remains unsaid in the conversations and reminiscences, asking the viewer for alert attention, which is rewarded not with the revelation of coherent biographies and stories, but with a deeper understanding of the situation (and, amongst other things, the way some things must remain unsaid). Schreiner's frugal frames and sensuous sounds invite careful watching and listening, creating complex results—which mirror the ambivalent nature of Giuliana, caught between her roots and rebelling against those very traditions. From that perspective, Bellavista also emerges as a near-surreal, philosophical antidote to the idyllic images of the traditional Heimatfilm.

Clearly, this was the work of a major filmmaker, as proven by his next work, the video-portrait Totó (2009) in Venice's Orrizonti section. Its title comes from the nickname of Antonio Cotroneo, born in the Calabrian coastal town of Tropea, who has been living in Vienna for a long time. Schreiner accompanies him on various visits home, intercutting the tours through the small settlement of medieval houses and rocky seaside territory with the marbled halls and corridors of the Wiener Konzerthaus, where Totó works as an usher. Schreiner treats this bulwark of civilization as a mindscape no less alienating than the most inhospitable nature: a labyrinth of mirror images, with oblique angles contributing to the disorientation. The protagonist emerges as a divided person—shortly after the beginning, in a trademark Schreiner train shot, the camera pointing forward at the tracks, he reminisces about his emigration: "Up to the curve, I always imagined I Totó. Having passed the curve I have not been Totó any longer." As his encounters in Tropea reveal, he has become a stranger, his ruminations expressing the disappointment about the impossibility of re-entering the world he inhabited as a young rebel. "I imagine what it's like to be dead," Totó muses, while Schreiner provides a breathtaking bird's eye view of the beach. "He is a prisoner," the filmmaker tells me, "but there is also another perspective." The major driving force behind Schreiner's work is a longing for freedom.

The rekindled interest in Schreiner from Totó helped to prompt a first, if not quite complete, retrospective at this

year's Diagonale, an occasion which will also mark the overdue first career considerations on Schreiner in German. This is a welcome change of pace for Schreiner, who was a bit nervous about Totó's premiere, even as his enthusiasm about the positive response to Bellavista was still palpable. After all, it had been mostly an uphill battle: Of his previous 16mm films (none have English titles of which I'm aware, so I'm giving literal translations)—Grelles Licht (Glaring Light, 1982), Erste Liebe (First Love, 1984), the short Adagio (1984), Kinderfilm (Children Film, 1985), Auf dem Weg (On the Way, 1990), I cimbri (The Cimbrians, 1991) and Blaue Ferne (Blue Distance, 1995)—only the second, Erste Liebe, had short-lived Austrian distribution. After I cimbri finally met considerable appreciation on the festival circuit, the lack of interest in Blaue Ferne proved devastating; Schreiner recalled a screening in Rotterdam of this "cursed project," whose soundtrack had to be painstakingly "reconstructed" because of a technical malfunction. Arriving near the end for a Q&A, he found the film playing to an empty theatre.

Since for Schreiner film is a means of communication and exploration, of getting in touch with other people and the world, this setback played a major role in his break from filmmaking. Health reasons also contributed: He had ruined his eyesight while editing. Selling or giving away his carefully assembled cameras and editing tables, he embarked on a pastoral education, even applied for a post as a deacon, but was ousted by intrigues from the fundamentalist quarter, then worked for several years with children and adolescents. But although direct contact with others proved fulfilling, a longing for that other way of touching, though cinema, remained. And once having encountered Schreiner, it is hard to see his movies as separate from the man: extremely modest, deeply committed and serious, but certainly not humourless and with an openness, patience, and undidactic exactitude. Over the course of hours he remembers, explicates, and explores, often returning to a previous point to elaborate, refine and softly, but diligently, correct earlier statements. At some point I stop changing the cassettes in my tape recorder: It's an encompassing immersive experience very much resembling a Schreiner film. And even as film culture seems to have branched out in areas that allow for a certain compatibility with his vision, that experience remains utterly unique.

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A young couple kissing joyfully at the breakfast table, playful, excited, re-embracing, postponing the goodbye for nearly two minutes, before she leaves and he pensively lights a cigarette as the title is superimposed on a blindingly white screen surrounded by a dark circle, suggesting the spot of a projection lamp: The astonishing first shot of Schreiner's debut Grelles Licht is an emblematic moment. Immediately, there's an abundance of this special feeling of natural spontaneity, yet also the insistence that things take time. "You can't chase after things," Schreiner declares categorically, "you have to let them become. You have to be long enough in a place for something lasting to emerge, even with the most banal things. It takes time. And it will be beautiful, if you take the time." Part of the disarming beauty of this first shot is that it both evokes vital ecstasy and hope, some unconscious, irretrievable happiness—in this case, of young love—but it applies to Schreiner's notion of living in general. Yet for all the time it takes, this potentially endless state of bliss eventually is over, making one painfully aware of the finiteness of things, felt in disappointments and alienation, something that is especially pronounced in the last two films with their protagonists who have come to realize, mostly, where they don't belong. In those films, Schreiner is offscreen, although his presence is still keenly felt (only in the final cut of Totó did Schreiner remove himself from the last two scenes). One thing that is so miraculous about his films is the ease of his subjects in front of the camera, "who seem to approach it (like a mirror image), and not the other way round," as Barbara Wurm has noted. Schreiner himself says that he tries "to let things happen, not watch them, which may be a provocation: as a filmmaker you seem doomed to watch. But you have to mobilize all mental strength to adjust your attitude to escape watching, to be able to approach the other and dive into him."

The strongly autobiographical nature of Schreiner's first career phase certainly helped to establish this inimitably self-evident rapport: Starting with Grelles Licht, he made rich collages centring on family and friends. "I began to live with the camera and to love the men and landscapes I film," Schreiner said, and it shows. Artists and lovers, children and colleagues, acquaintances and close friends are talking and thinking, philosophizing and performing, smoking and singing, drumming and dancing, filming and flirting and generally being themselves (or trying to), as if it were completely natural that Schreiner is recording them. The sense of freedom that is so astonishing about Schreiner's films here seems almost couched in a daydream. There's this feeling of amazement and discovery that seems so special about some rare early works—"not naïve, but knowing," as Olaf Möller has noted. "You could also say: There is an adult sensibility at work that has not forgotten its youthful part" (which applies, vice versa, to Schreiner's late phase). Grelles Licht is a first treasure-trove of unexpected Schreinerian moments. The director's dad suddenly reminisces that "I have never been lonesome, meaning: when I was lonesome, then it was because I wanted to be…When I'm lonely I feel as happy as a pig in muck." The incomparable Herr Francke, an elderly acquaintance, spouts aphorisms with the qualifying statement that he is a "poetically inclined moron," including: "A poem for the moral of the story: Look at the heart, not at the face" (it rhymes in German), a kind of mission statement. Similarly, when Francke says he prefers the term

Gedankensplitter (thought fragments) to aphorism, it evokes Schreiner's aesthetic, the fragmentary form of his features, whose omissions are not enigmatic, even as they can confound certain conventional expectations, but point to a spiritual dimension, what Wurm calls "an agitated intuition of an inner belief (and its intermittent loss)."

These notions stand out even stronger against the clear, hauntingly reduced images of Schreiner, with their long tripod-camera takes and uncluttered compositions delineated by a few clear lines (usually provided by windows, doors, corners). For him, "A shot is like a stage which you can enter and exit from." With the notable exceptions of Adagio and a few scenes in Auf dem Weg, Schreiner only uses black and white, achieving a remarkable visual purity, while the soundtracks quietly teem with figurative noises, sounds and words (often in dialect) and, in the case of I cimbri and Bellavista, even near-extinct idioms. "Film is 60 percent sound," Schreiner explains: "The image provides the frame, in which the sound can achieve appropriate resonance. It's also a psychological fact that hearing is closer to the subconscious. Looking, on the other hand, is in a way infinite, like when I am looking into somebody else's eyes." Ending with the huge close-up of an eye (resurfacing as a key image in Totó), the issue of looking is foregrounded most explicitly in Grelles Licht with its many self-reflexive moments: the lighting during the production of a stage play, "which changes the atmosphere," but can also "blind the camera"; the adjusting of the camera's light metre; the scenes in which Schreiner and his friend Hermann Krejcar film each other on their way to documenta—a journey that provides a kind of backbone for Schreiner's cross-cutting between various "plot strands." Except that plot is a mostly meaningless term in Schreiner's films, in which sensuality comes before sense, since they are experiences rather than narratives. Taking up his sentence about filmmaking as a substitute for talking, Grelles Licht is the first manifestation of his particular kind of filmic poetry as well as a meditation on its meaning. (The preoccupation with film itself, as well as the setting in an artistically inflected subculture and the spirit of freedom interestingly also recall Langsammer Sommer [1974-76], the Viennese classic by Canadian John Cook, for which none other than an aphorism-spouting Michael Pilz appears as a key collaborator.)

Erste Liebe is, together with Adagio and Blaue Ferne, one of the three Schreiner films I haven't seen, but an enthusiastic contemporary notice by Bodo Hell suggests a continuation, noting that "Erste Liebe does not leave the spectator alone, the way the camera won't leave the people standing and acting in front of it alone." In any case, Kinderfilm picks up on the structure and themes of Grelles Licht. Near the beginning of the collage Schreiner and his future wife Maria are sitting in an Italian landscape, and she's translating from the Divine Comedy (he's learning the language; Italy will subsequently evolve in to being a second important focus of interest); this is another scene emblematic for the time it takes to give this labour of love adequate room and resonance. The corresponding refusal to break up and condense the moment is characteristic of Schreiner's modest refusal of commercial conventions in the name of unmediated togetherness. It's a natural step on the path he embarked on when, in 1981, he quit his job as a cameraman for Austrian state television ORF. (There he was known for being "rather slow, but with original ideas and a knack for getting close to people.")
What one wants, however, is a key issue of Schreiner's human poetry. Kinderfilm mostly moves back and forth between two groups: Children of friends, for whom the Schreiners hosted a weekly afternoon, and his graduation classmates at their ten-year reunion. Over schnitzel and beer, these average men without qualities smugly remark on their wisdom, successes, and career developments, content with being cogs in the machine and without any individual dreams left. An incredulous Schreiner looks on speechlessly, while in between, in one of his jaw-dropping interludes, there's a mesmerizing shot of a low-flying plane crossing the heavily overcast sky. These confrontations with a lifeless status quo illuminate Schreiner's understanding of alienation and his fascination for outsiders, while the marvelous children scenes serve as counterpoint, bringing back a time of endless possibilities, a time when (as Schreiner's father recalls) even the days seemed to be longer.

However, the most magnificent expression of Schreiner's longings and the culmination of his first period comes with Auf dem Weg. In this transcendental travelogue, the camera takes off and glides over volcanic landscapes, encompassing colour glimpses of Fra Angelico's Pala dell'Annunciazione, children's paintings and painting children, dedicated rehearsals of Elio Vittorini's Conversazione in Sicila, (an important text for various Schreiner films: Straubians take note!), and a calmly riveting shot of a pregnant belly heaving, accompanied by the sound of breathing. It's a quintessential motif in all Schreiner works: the sound of life itself spreading through the filmic space.
With I cimbri, Schreiner recedes from the frame, and it's his one film that could be comfortably classified as an ethnographic documentary (whereas Blaue Ferne, I'm told, hews closest to being a fiction feature): At the request of language researchers, Schreiner went to the small titular community, located in the Alps near Verona. The dialect used there, a mixture of Italian and German influences, goes back to the middle ages, but by the time Schreiner arrived, only a few of the town elders were still able to speak it. In Schreiner's hands, the imminent end of their culture becomes another essay on time, finding the last pockets of its presence, the echoes of its dissolution and the traces left behind. Another rare dialect, Plodarisch, is still spoken in the mountain town Sappada, the setting of Bellavista, to which Giuliana has returned after running from a desperate existence,

whose marks are visible on her face and body, while her biographical details—including the suicides of her two brothers—are treated only elliptically. What becomes clear, however, is that she, like Totó, will never be able to quite come home.

Although the touching, respectful intimacy and humble curiosity, not to mention the audiovisual acumen haven't changed, the switch to video with Bellavista entailed a remarkable stylistic shift: The early works were mostly long, unbroken sequences in long or medium shots, a reduction to essentials, clearly corresponding to Schreiner's search for simplicity. "No matter how complicated things are, my experience is that things are simple at their core," says Schreiner, immediately adding: "By simple, I mean the opposite of that dangerous tendency to simplify, which is so pronounced in politics and media. And it's not a simple issue: You have to be able to look very far to recognize something simple. But the essence of all experience is simple, and thus communicable: That is the challenge for art. Everybody can convey something of himself, in a unique, original way. And simple formal means very good at capturing that simplicity. They are worth looking for, but you do not always find them. Often, all you get is a lump of chaos." Video technology, by now good enough to have "real blacks," has proven not only an economical relief—Schreiner shot about 160 hours for Totó—but also made it simpler to organize and edit, helping to create more montage-based, modernist mosaics, whose arrangement Schreiner likens to "sculpting, with the carving away getting more difficult and painful with each subsequent edit: But you also feel a structure growing, the creation of something new, and that is one of the most beautiful experiences there is."

"I've become a lot less dogmatic when I reduce the material. In Grelles Licht there are 100 shots at most, Totó has nearly 500," Schreiner states casually, but there's an even more noticeable change: "If Schreiner's earlier cinema has the feeling of a journey, time stands still in the contemporary films," Möller has noted. "They are attempts not just to look at time at work, but to give it an audiovisual form. You no longer enter them and find your place, you encounter them, opening up yourself." Both Bellavista and Totó are characterized by throwing a series of striking close-ups into the Schreiner mix (bringing to mind that his favourite director has always been Bergman). Their repeated canted compositions and other decentralized images, combined with sharp jumps in the shots' field size, make palpable the alienation of the protagonists, the conflicting emotions raging inside their tempestuous souls. But beyond those torrents is also hope: After the final stretch of Totó is literally shaken up by an immense storm, the moving final image shows a life-size boat model hovering high above town against a clear horizon. "Film is not about catching something, about nailing it down," Schreiner summarizes, "but about reshaping and creating something. That applies to the viewer as well. This future aspect of film is very important to me. I often suffer with still photography, because that dimension is gone. But film has a mobility, also when projected: what was dead comes back to life. When you look at the reel unspooling, the top is the future and the bottom is the past. Which will become future again. That is what makes film unique." Sometimes the essence of things can be that simple. You just need to take the time.

(Christoph Huber, cinema-scope, 2010)