

Four Swiss filmmakers blowing in the Wind

By Ariel Schweitzer

Two names seem to inspire the project of *Bande à part*, an association of Swiss filmmakers bringing together Ursula Meier, Lionel Baier, Jean-Stéphane Bron and Frédéric Mermoud, who have brought a breath of fresh air into Swiss cinematography.

First of all, Jean-Luc Godard, from whom the association takes the title of one of the notable films of the *Nouvelle Vague* period, a Franco-Swiss filmmaker (like Ursula Meier), constantly travelling between French-speaking Switzerland and Paris (like Lionel Baier). Godard, however, is also the European filmmaker par excellence who knew better than anyone else how to leave Swiss provincialism behind and, without ever renouncing his origins, convey a reflection on European culture, its summits, its decline, its future. To be completely Swiss while loudly and clearly affirming their European and, more deeply, universal identity, seems to me one of the challenges raised by *Bande à part*.

The second name that comes to mind is that of Alain Tanner, the great Swiss filmmaker for whom Ursula Meier worked as an assistant and to whom certain films of *Bande à part* make explicit reference (*Un autre homme* by Lionel Baier, which ends in an encounter with the actress Bulle Ogier, is a direct tribute to Tanner's *La salamandre*). Alain Tanner was one of the icons of the 1968 generation, challenging social dogmas deeply entrenched in Swiss mentality. In fifty years of filmmaking he never stopped questioning and challenging the very foundations of a conservative and bourgeois society, while fully asserting his freedom as a man, citizen and filmmaker.

Finally, Tanner is also «le groupe des cinq», that collective of Swiss filmmakers formed at the end of the 1960s and which undoubtedly served as a model for *Bande à part*. «Le groupe des cinq», whose members were, besides Tanner, Claude Goretta, Jean-Louis Roy, Michel Soutter and Jean-Jacques Lagrange, was able to establish a good relationship with French-speaking television, which agreed to fund their films while according them total creative freedom (which seems unbelievable in the current context of the audiovisual industry). This is how some of the major works in the history of national cinema were produced, resulting from a solidarity and effective collaboration between all members of the group: *Charles mort ou vif* (1969) and *La salamandre* (1970) by Tanner, *L'invitation* (1973) by Goretta, *James ou pas* (1970), or *Black Out* (1970) by Roy. The highlight of the collective *Bande à part* in IndieLisboa's 2012 edition is also an implicit tribute to that 1970s generation, that near utopian moment in the history of Swiss cinema not yet ready to be forgotten.

Founded in 2009, *Bande à part* is not a traditional production company. Rather, it is a place to exchange and discuss ideas, an association of filmmakers who wish, according to their definition, to «produce, direct, distribute and promote films for cinema and television». Registered at Lausanne's Trade Office, *Bande à part* collaborates with Vega films, the company from Zurich managed by Ruth Waldburger, who is also Godard's producer. The group members don't all share either the same view of cinema or the same thematic or aesthetic aspirations. Their main motivation is to help one another so that each one can direct his/her own project, while always listening to each other's ideas. As Lionel Baier says, «we make very different films. Ursula's methods and mine are diametrically opposed. I am incapable of doing what she does, which doesn't keep us from discussing cinema. On the contrary, it is crucial for us to have a place in common, a protected place where we can present our projects and work together on very concrete things. Ursula has two projects. I have four. I don't know which one to show first. I'm happy that they are there to discuss it» (1). In practice, the first mission of *Bande à part* is to share the group's address books: «Jean-Stéphane, Frédéric and Ursula have contacts that I don't. They can now defend my next film

at the OFC (Federal Office for Culture) or abroad. On the other hand, I have very good contacts with Swiss television, I could go there to discuss funding for their next films» (2). Baier, in turn, recognises that one of the problems for the Swiss film industry, with which the members of the group are systematically confronted, is the visceral hatred for so-called auteur films: «the only Swiss films known abroad are auteur films. Nevertheless, public employees working within culture hate this type of cinema. Since we have producers among the 68ers – that terrifying, despised, detested word – we are seen as people tied to the past... We would also like to exist as auteurs and assure our French co-producers of a common platform that allows them to have real partners» (3).

Besides the declared will to defend a certain model of auteur cinema, what is it that unites and gives coherence to the set of films directed by *Bande à part*? Perhaps that latent question underpinning a great number of these works: what does it mean to be Swiss? Whether they deal with the Swiss landscape, the gap separating urban and rural areas, the education system, the world of science, of politics, or finally that of finance, these films question the identity of a country divided between archaism and modernity, a country that is inward-looking yet yearning for openness.

In the case of Lionel Baier, these questions raise other questions: how can someone be Swiss, the son of a pastor and homosexual? Perhaps precisely by moving away from Switzerland and crossing Europe in search of his Polish roots as in *Comme des voleurs*, that magnificent, strongly autobiographical road movie (where, by the way, Baier plays the main role). Or by hesitating between the countryside of la Vallée de Joux and the city of Lausanne, between the safety of an organised family life and the temptations of the world of cinema that the provincial hero discovers and is fascinated by in *Un autre homme*. However, this film following a Balzacian path ends with quite an ironic realisation: if la Vallée de Joux is the province of Lausanne, isn't the latter in turn a little province of Paris (where the initiatic journey of the protagonist actually ends)? For Baier these questions also raise cinematic issues. The filmmaker is constantly crossing the borders of genres, juggling between documentary and fiction, intimate journal and filmic essay, militant film and melodrama. This was how he directed one of his latest films, *Low cost* (*Claude Jutra*), in 2010, with a mobile phone. This charismatic auteur is also head of the cinema department of Ecal (University of art and design Lausanne). A selection of student films will be presented at this year's festival. Being the director of many documentaries, it is not surprising that one of the central aspects of Ursula Meier's films is the exploration of a place, of a territory. This is the starting point for her two fiction feature films: *Home* (2008) and *L'enfant d'en haut* (2012). However, in the case of Ursula Meier the place is more of a «non-place» according to the definition of the ethnologist Marc Augé: a barren, impersonal place lacking investment, where we never stop, where we only pass by (bus stations, airports, parking lots...) (4). Nevertheless, people live there, even in families as in *Home* where Isabelle Huppert and her children lead an apparently normal existence in an isolated house near a motorway in the middle of a deserted countryside. Or the sophisticated ski resort in *L'enfant d'en haut*, a place we are used to seeing in cinema as a high-class place (for tourists, for the bourgeoisie), but Meier chose precisely to reveal the normally hidden side of the setting: toilets, what lies underground mechanical installations, concrete corridors, back kitchens, and corners restaurants use for dumping leftovers. In fact, this normally hidden side of a rich country like Switzerland is what interests Ursula Meier whose fiction attains a social dimension for the first time through the portrait of a teenager detached from everything except his energy, his vitality and his thirst for life. Moving elegantly between a sometimes raw naturalism and the gentleness of a short story, her films deal with themes that are on occasion very difficult: demons hiding behind apparent normality, the invisible border separating normality and madness, or yet the relentless struggle, here again to the point of madness, for survival...

Institutions, administrations – the way they work and the human beings that hide behind them – are some of the themes that interest Jean-Stéphane Bron, a filmmaker also alternating between documentary and fiction. In *Le génie helvétique* (2003) he places his camera in front of the entrance door of room 87 of the Federal Palace in Bern, where a committee charged with drawing a law on genetic genius is debating. Transforming reality into a real thriller, the film invites the spectator to dive into the heart of influence peddling, showing an inside view of how the democratic machine works. A mosaic of perspectives, of views on the world and of faces is also at the heart of Bron's approach when he decides to face the world of finance. Giving an account of the globalised dimension of the contemporary economy, this time he decides to broaden his view by leaving Switzerland for the United States. He returns with two films: *Traders* (2009) where the law of the strongest that rules the economic world is symbolically portrayed in the boxing match, and *Cleveland contre Wall Street* (2010), an in-depth analysis of the reasons that might have led to the financial disaster in 2008. Imbuing his documentary approach with a dimension of fiction, in this film he organises the imaginary trial of international finance where the pain of some and the responsibility of others are clearly revealed. The success of *Cleveland contre Wall Street* lies in the fact that analytical rigour never masks human feelings: empathy towards the suffering of anonymous people who lost everything with the crisis thus makes his political message all the more striking. Proving the richness and variety of *Bande à part*'s productions is the film *Complices* (2009), Frédéric Mermoud's first feature film. In this film Mermoud ventures into genre cinema, the thriller, whose rules he masters completely. It is a film noir, which is also an existential drama portraying a shattered, idle youth: a youth of today...

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- 1) Quoted by Elisabeth Lequeret in her article «La bande de 4», *Les cahiers du cinéma*, no. 658, July August 2010, p. 63.
- 2) Ibid.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Marc Augé, *Non-Lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1992.

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