

## **BEYOND THE FRONTIERS. THE CINEMA OF VILLI HERMANN**

**By Domenico Lucchini**

Hermann, who is German Swiss in origin, was born of a mother resident in Malcantone in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, and it was here that he grew up before heading to London to study cinema, although already directly involved in the Swiss cinema scene during the years of its greatest social involvement. Hermann returned to the Canton Ticino in the 1970s (in earlier years, he worked as a graphic designer, and produced a number of exhibitions) and in 1974 produced a medium-length film, *Cerchiamo per subito operai, offriamo...*, an investigation of the situation of workers commuting daily into Switzerland. *San Gottardo*, a 1977 documentary and fiction film was again based in the world of work. With his following films, *Matlosa* (1981) e *Innocenza* (1986) Hermann borrowed from literature of the Ticino (both films are based upon stories by Italian Swiss writers) to explore realities from the past which come increasingly close to us, culminating in his fiction film, *Bankomatt*, set in the present-day service sector. For Hermann, therefore, the Ticino formed not only a foundation but also a supplier of material for investigation and analysis.

One of the elements used for investigating and analysing, and which appears a constant in the cinema of the Ticino, appearing from the earliest days of Swiss film-making, is the use of drama and the dramatic together with the "frontier". Frontier as the utopia of an encounter on the one hand, therefore, but also frontier as an obstacle that is hard to overcome.

This is the concept of frontier that Hermann's later films, and his documentaries of the 1990s, would highlight; instead of sense of frontier, that of its permeability, of its continuous crossings, of the incongruity of its very existence, with a line traced absurdly across a similar, integrated social fabric on both sides that are thus nominally separated. After his films spoke of the concrete problems of the border workers (*Cerchiamo per subito operai, offriamo...*) or of the generations of workers who contributed sometimes with their lives to rendering that border permeable (*San Gottardo*), the aspect Hermann would now stress was the 'going' and not the 'staying' of his characters, whose point in common was not their nationality, dialect, habits, the need to work so much as by a wandering that takes them beyond their land of birth, towards the vaster possibilities offered by new horizons.

If a director like Hermann has been able to continue to make films in Italian-speaking Switzerland, the main problem seems not so much the question of living in the Ticino, rather than in Geneva or Zurich, or of claiming a shared specificity, as that of a creative continuity, of the organisation of an efficient production and distribution

circuit. But this is a problem that holds true not only for the local dimension, but which also concerns the promotion of cinema at a national level. “As there is no film industry in Switzerland, our cinema is shut out of the major commercial circuits from the outset. For this reason, a director is in most cases also the producer of his own films, and has to spend much of his time finding backers. The state, television and some foundations are the principal sources. However, we should not forget that state subsidies for the cinema would not enable even one film a year to be made in another country. Our cinema feels the burden of this situation all the more since it is an expression of the linguistic minority of Italian Switzerland.” (1) So said Villi Hermann, the most important of our directors, 25 years ago.

It was Hermann once more who, in an open letter in response to an article entitled “The limits of Swiss cinema” published in a newspaper of the Canton Ticino, which spoke of the difficulty of marketing Swiss films, mentioned some box office hits achieved by some recent films (such as Daniel Schmid’s *Beresina* and Silvio Soldini’s *Pane e tulipani*). Likewise, he recalled the qualitative and commercial success of “local” documentaries encountered in specific festivals around the world and in Swiss cinemas, in particular those of French and German-speaking Switzerland. Laying claim to a cultural approach to a subject rather than the commercial one that typifies the American industry above all, at the same time he mentioned some positive promotional actions such as the institution of the Swiss Film Award or the important role played by such an event as the Festival di Locarno in publicising Swiss cinema. “I believe that our cinema must talk about us and not ape Hollywood, where films are made solely to make money, and put together around a table by the so-called ‘audio-visual managers’ who refuse to consider a product if there is no profit to be made by selling it on the market. Swiss films are made because there is a small group of people who believe they have something to say, to communicate, to uncover, to reveal (with the complicity of cultural assessors and our television).” (2)

In this letter, Hermann often refers to his activity in “documentaries of creation” which at a local level is still evidenced and not sacrificed at the altars of the so-called “Ersatz”, the services or correspondences in which superficial information is often amassed. The Swiss documentary constitutes a form of cinema that recounts reality in its details, which seeks to communicate the sense and atmosphere of certain places, the character of certain figures, using time – often that of a full-length film – in a free manner, and always entering into the questions debated in detail, without the worry of having to sacrifice itself to the whims of the public. Is it perhaps coincidence that Hermann has in the past decade worked only with documentaries?

A form of documentary that takes the time and dignity of a narrative film and, frequently through the spontaneous voices of individuals interviewed, enables the spectator to enter an unknown context as a privileged interlocutor. With the inevitable unforeseen events of any cinema-vérité (even though the term is perhaps not appropriate to Villi Hermann): a soundtrack, like the images, which aims to be faithful to the spontaneity of sounds and noises, whose 'colour' contributes enormously to the interest of the subjects and setting. Films in which the characters, from Jean Mohr (*En voyage avec Jean Mohr*, 1992) to Maurice Bavaud (*Es ist kalt in Brandenburg - Hitler töten*, 1980), Mario Botta and Enzo Cucchi (*Tamaro. Pietre e angeli*, 1998), from Giovanni Orelli (*Matlosa*, 1981) to Luigi Einaudi (*Einaudi, diario dell'esilio*, 2000) and Christian Schiefer (*Mussolini, Churchill e cartoline*, 2002), and so on to the latest Renzo Ferrari (*Walker*, 2004) are fundamental. These are clearly not invented characters, but their stories dot the films with little narratives, recreating in the cinema a mythical relationship between narrator and listener which has been at the base of every narrative plot in cinema, even when at its most realistic.

In fact, the difference between the cinema of the real and fictional cinema is ill defined: the borders between the two are slender and fiction often appears in the documentary as documentary does in fiction. Such is also maintained by Villi Hermann who makes no distinction between the two genres. A little provocatively, one might affirm that "the documentary is cinema par excellence", thanks to the fact that it is not obliged to respect the dominant expressive codes, leaving free rein to the film-maker's point of view. Here, the "documented point of view" of Jean Vigo springs to mind, and this is a concept that runs through all of Hermann's cinema, and which will serve us as a starting point for our analysis of his films.

(1) See: HERMANN VILLI, "Le Tessin et le cinéma. Bilan pour l'année 1978", in *Information 1978*. Schweizerische Gesellschaft Solothurner Filmtage, Soletta, 1978.

(2) HERMANN VILLI, "L'apertura del cinema svizzero", the original of an article published with the title: "Bisogna evitare le critiche tacendo i pregi" in «Corriere del Ticino, Quotidiano della Svizzera italiana», 11 March 2000.