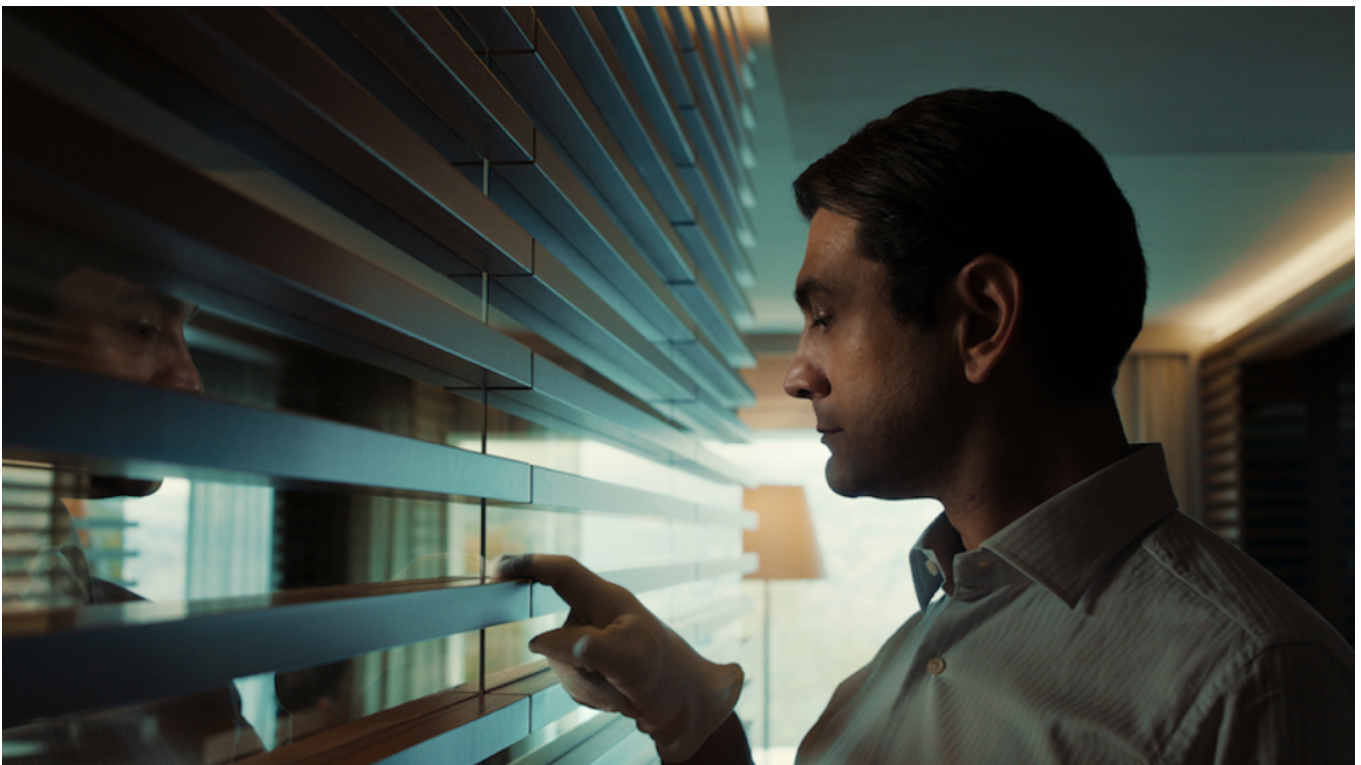


## Film Review: 'Cronofobia'

Improbable connections and shifting identities abound in this enigmatic, intimate, impressively slick Swiss debut.

By [JESSICA KIANG](#)



**Director:** Francesco Rizzi

**With:** Vinicio Marchioni, Sabine Timoteo, Leonardo Nigro, Giorgia Salari, Maruska Manea.  
(Italian dialogue)

1 hour 30 minutes

“...the curious feeling swam through him that everything was beautiful there, that it would always stay beautiful there...” At one point in [Francesco Rizzi](#)’s coolly assured, impressive debut “Cronofobia,” which picked up a first feature competition jury prize in the [Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival](#), a raspy but sonorous voice reads out Charles Bukowski’s poem “Nirvana” in full.

The images are of an overlit, garishly clean 24-hour restaurant off an anonymous motorway in the south of Switzerland, a world away in geography and period from Bukowski’s scuzzy milieu of drifters and fry cooks and Greyhound buses. And yet the mood is magnificently similar: this is a story, told in enigmatic miniature, of a moment of against-the-odds connection that brings fleeting comfort to characters who are, like Bukowski’s lonely bus rider, “completely cut loose from purpose.”

The poem is the boldest of several bold choices that Rizzi makes with his elegant two-hander. He also sets it up as a bait-and-switch, establishing a noirish, semi-surreal sense of mystery and menace. By the time the solution presents itself, its banality doesn’t matter anymore; the human dynamics have taken over.

DP Simon Guy Faessler’s slick, ergonomic images take almost perverse pleasure in anonymizing the Ticino locations into a kind of modernist anywheresville. It’s here we meet Michael (Vinicio Marchioni), a handsome, well-turned-out man in early middle age. He has the impassive, capable air of a professional hitman, an impression borne out when he checks into an upscale hotel suite, and is later seen staking out a house in which a widow, Anna (the always excellent Sabine Timoteo) has shut herself away, and further compounded by his facility for disguises — fake mustaches and so on — and his violent, bloody dreams. Michael’s actual job is both stranger and less dramatic than that, but it has taken an existential toll on him nonetheless, and when Anna makes sudden contact with him, for a time we are not sure if we should fear for her.

Actually, in his taciturn company, the insomniac Anna finally gets some sleep. And so the relationship that springs up between the grieving woman and the watchful man, despite all the deceptions and secrets on which it is founded, sparks something honest; as Michael knits himself further into her life, playing a mutually-agreed-upon role, the simulation of intimacy becomes a convincing substitute for the real thing.

Rizzi’s vision of contemporary life is so icily dehumanized as to be borderline dystopian. Under the discordant buzzing of Zeno Gabaglio’s sinister electronic score, Faessler’s dispassionate camera records the slicing lines of Georg Bringolf’s sharp production design to create an angular world of gas station forecourts and minimalist office buildings, through which Michael moves frictionlessly, as though coated in Teflon.

In imagining today’s Switzerland as such an unfriendly, transactional place, where ratable metrics of customer service and corporate loyalty have replaced human interaction and professional courtesy, “Cronofobia” has a certain kinship with another recent Swiss debut, Cyril Schäublin’s “Those Who Are Fine.” Rizzi’s critique of affluent, alienated Swiss society, however, is leavened with the tiniest glimmer of hope.

That slender thread of optimism exists mostly in the low-key chemistry between the two excellent leads, who negotiate the script’s more jagged bends with complete conviction, allowing us to believe that even amid pretense — and sometimes maybe because of it — mutual understanding is possible, be it ever so brief. The Bukowski poem ends with the young man back on the bus, feigning sleep because there’s nothing else to do, saddened but also perhaps sustained by the knowledge that only he noticed the magic of that moment now past. Similarly, “chronophobia” means “fear of the passage of time,” but as suffocating as that fear might be, stasis is worse and transience really the only truth.

Some rest stops on the journey — whether they're roadside diners or relationships — are only "beautiful forever" because they are not forever, and some identities only help you get to something real because they are fake.

Film Review: 'Cronofobia'

Reviewed at Tallinn Black Nights Film Festival (First Feature Competition), Nov. 27, 2018. Running Time: 90 MIN.

PRODUCTION: (Switzerland) An Imagofilm Lugano production in association with RSI-Radiotelevisione Svizzera, 8horses, Teleclub AG and SRG SSR Idée Suisse, with the support of Office Fédéral de la Culture, Ticino Film Commission. (Int'l Sales: Imagofilm, Lugano.) Producers: Villi Hermann, Michela Pini.

CREW: Director: Francesco Rizzi. Screenplay: Daniela Gambaro, Rizzi. Camera (Color, widescreen): Simon Guy Faessler. Editor: Giuseppe Trepiccione. Music: Zeno Gabaglio.

WITH: Vinicio Marchioni, Sabine Timoteo, Leonardo Nigro, Giorgia Salari, Maruska Manea. (Italian dialogue)



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