



ALFONSO CUÁRON ON ALAIN TANNER

In the White City

In the White City (Dans la ville blanche)

Director: Alain Tanner

Production Companies: Metro Filme, Filmograph, WDR - Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Channel Four, SSR Télévision Suisse

Executive Producers: Paulo Branco, Alain Tanner

Producers: Paulo Branco, Alain Tanner, Antonio Vaz da Silva

Production Managers: José Maria Vaz da Silva, António Gonçalves

Production Manager (Rhine): Jean-Louis Porchet

Assistant Directors: Christiane Chenevière,

Pedro Ruivo, João Canijo

Screenplay: Alain Tanner

Director of Photography: Acácio de Almeida

Assistant Photographer: José Antonio Loureiro

Assistant Photography (Rhine): Hugues Ryffel

Editor: Laurent Uhler

Assistant Editor: Micheline Danielewicz

Art Director: Maria José Branco

Assistant Art Director: François Verrier

Music: Jean-Luc Barbier

Sound Recording: Jean-Paul Mugel

Sound Re-recording: Laurent Barbey

Cast:

Bruno Ganz (Paul)

Teresa Madruga (Rosa)

Julia Vonderlinn (Elisa)

José Carvalho (bar proprietor)

Victor Costa (bartender)

Francisco Baiao (thief with knife)

Jose Wallenstein (2nd thief)

Lidia Franco (woman in bar)

Pedro Efe (friend in bar-room)

Cecilia Guimarães (woman in train)

Joana Vicente (girl in train)

Portugal-Switzerland-UK 1983

109 mins

Digital 4K (restoration)

These films have been restored and digitized by the Association Alain Tanner in collaboration with Cinémathèque Suisse and Association Filmo

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

SIGHT AND SOUND

Alain Tanner is an endangered species: a European filmmaker fiercely resistant to the seductions of the Euro co-production in an age when that seems the only alternative to transatlantic funding. Tanner would rather stay hungry than stay alive on drip-feed finance from Hollywood or Gaumont. 'I have no ambitions to make American films and would only shoot there if the story required it,' he says. He's equally hostile to the style of art movie currently packaged by the French giant Gaumont. 'Serge Daney, film critic of *Libération*, has a brilliant description for Gaumont. He calls them the *voiture-balai** of European cinema – they scoop up the poor fellows who are exhausted and out of the race.'

Major European finance of this order leads, in Tanner's view, to compromised projects and bland product. Mounting his own productions is, consequently, a protracted business of 'raising a cheque here, a cheque there' which saps his creative energy. He has spent the past seven months trying to find backing for his next film and still nothing is secured. 'Sometimes things just fall lucky,' he admits. 'Paulo Branco invited me to make a movie in Portugal. I had no particular story in mind, but I felt sympathetic to the atmosphere and working conditions. Something about Lisbon intrigued me: it struck me as a distant city on the edge of a continent, facing the Atlantic and Africa and with its back turned towards Europe. A place to escape to and from.'

'Escape' has been a recurrent motif in Tanner's work of the last five years: *Messidor* described a series of futile parables within the circumference of Switzerland, *Light Years Away* explored the theme through myth, and *In the White City* follows a 'refugee' German-speaking Swiss as he cuts loose from his occupation, obligations and identity. Tanner says that there's a lot of his own ennui and wanderlust in Paul (Bruno Ganz), and the idea for the film came from his own sense of alienation ('Which I admit was pleasurable') in the far-off city of Lisbon. 'I suppose I was vaguely aware of the Carné/Duvivier echoes (*Pépé le Moko*, *Quai des brumes*, *Le Jour se lève*) though Ganz has found a contemporary parallel for [Jean] Gabin's fatalism. But in this very specific sense you could say that the film is *noir* – which may be why Paul describes the city subconsciously as "blanche".'

The light and shadow Tanner encountered in Lisbon figured significantly in his scenario, indicating the subtle shifts of mood in the central relationship between Paul and the chambermaid Rosa. Shady interiors contrast starkly with harsh sunlit exteriors, where light dances beckoningly on the waters when Paul returns to the quayside to contemplate the sea. In one lengthy, breathtaking shot, 'Exterior Day' obtrudes on the false 'interior night' of Paul's hotel room, as the breeze causes long red curtains to billow inwards. 'That was perhaps the toughest shot to edit: at three minutes it was too long and at 60 seconds it was also too long. The final cut seemed just right both for the mood of the scene and the overall pace of the film.'

Pictorial precision is uppermost in Tanner's mind during shooting: 'There was no script. I wrote the dialogue while the crew was lining up the shot. We'd photocopy it and pass it around for the actors to memorise moments before shooting. Where I spend my time is in fine-tuning the visual compositions, checking lenses and lighting levels until I'm 100 per-cent satisfied.' The tonal

ALFONSO CUÁRON ON ALAIN TANNER

Charles, Dead or Alive Charles mort ou vif

+ intro by Alfonso Cuarón

Sat 25 Jan 15:00

The Salamander La salamander

Sat 25 Jan 17:50

Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000

Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l'an 2000

+ intro by Alfonso Cuarón

Sun 26 Jan 15:40

In the White City Dans la ville blanche

Sun 26 Jan 18:35

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

25 & UNDER

We want to open up great independent and classic film and TV for all, making it as accessible as possible. If you are under the age of 26, you can get discounted tickets for BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. BFI Southbank cinema tickets are £3, with festival tickets £5, so you can enjoy the very best of cinema from around the world at an affordable price.

Sign up today and verify your age online, and you can start enjoying discounted tickets immediately.

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

contrasts between Lisbon and Basel (where Paul's wife lives on the banks of the Rhine) were largely a product of atmospheric differences, but it was essential that her world should appear drab and dull, in the same way that Paul's home-movie footage (shot on Super-8 and transferred to 35mm) should appear hallucinatory towards the end. 'Again Paul is like a filmmaker in this "white city", recording his actions and later his impressions in a process that distils the experience into imagery he hopes will explain his state of mind to his wife back home. It's appropriation through imagination: what he sees becomes part of a fiction, a fantasy eventually, so that in the final sequence when he sees an attractive woman in the homeward bound train, I mix from a 35mm shot to the Super-8 image even though in reality Paul no longer has his home-movie camera. Romantic perception has become totally subjective by this point.'

Earlier in the film, when the affair between Paul and Rosa is at its height, the couple take a weekend trip to a beach hut where they are seen in mid-shot making love in an old armchair. Here Tanner's own subjectivity was problematic: 'I wanted to strike a balance between eroticism and voyeurism, and I think it works. It's erotic because of the way they're making love and voyeuristic because of the camera position, shooting Ganz from behind, whereas in most other shots we see his face. I think it's so difficult to represent sex on the screen because we in the West have evolved strict puritanical conventions for sex scenes. There's one style for art films and another for porno. Only [Nagisa] Oshima has really resolved that problem. When I was on the Venice Film Festival jury with Peter Handke, we were judging the films on the basis of their love scenes. "If he can't do a love scene," we said, "He can't do anything else."'

Not surprisingly, Tanner feels stifled by the bourgeois morality and politics of his native Switzerland. 'I can't tolerate making another film there. *Messidor* was my last film on the subject of Switzerland.' Indeed, his libertarian conscience and Rabelaisian spirit have always seemed too large to be contained within an arbitrary national cinema. 'So I'm condemned to wander, like Paul, who knows the sea is his only true home, in search of new visions.'

Alain Tanner interviewed by Martyn Auty, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, November 1983

*In the Tour de France cycle race, the *voiture-balai* is the van that picks up the defeated backmarkers.