



ERIK SCHMIDT

Wahlverwandtschaften



How well do you need to know an artist's life in order to properly understand his art? Looking at Erik Schmidt's haunting films—which I admire tremendously—I simply want to look and respond freely, using just my imagination, rather than what I know about the artist. I think this may be the best procedure when dealing with all art.

I am enchanted by the close-up scene of galloping horses and by the glamorous candlelit black tie dinner in *Hunting Grounds* (2006). I love the countryside seen from the balcony of a high-rise apartment in *Bogged Down* (2010), and am spellbound by the magnificently dignified library and dancing party in *Gatecrasher* (2010). There are so many gorgeous scenes in Schmidt's films, it is fun in writing just to catalogue them. Look at the riding-to-hounds near the conclusion of *Hunting Grounds*; the restaurant bar in *Bogged Down*; or the black boat at the end of *Gatecrasher*. I don't know if I understand Schmidt's narratives, but that doesn't matter, not when my attention is seized individually by each of these mesmerising scenes. Consider also what you don't see in his films: workers (except for servants—the waiters, the bartenders and the men helping with the hunt); physical labor; and city life. There are no children and no one very old. These films display the leisure life of a privileged elite. Seeing how many names are credited, I realise that these must be elaborate productions.

When responding to such dazzlingly original contemporary art, it's useful, sometimes, to be guided by historical associations. Not, I hasten to add, because we are seeking a literal recreation of former art forms, which would be merely academic; but, rather, because we want to identify a shared sensibility between works which look very different. We are concerned, then, with elective affinities, die *Wahlverwandtschaften* to use the German noun, which were the subject of Goethe's renowned novel with that title. In that spirit, as I watched Schmidt's films my mind wandered to one of the greatest essays about art of the old regime, Walter Pater's "A Prince of Court Painters" (1885). Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) is one of the most challengingly enigmatic artistic personalities. Short-lived, unlike most Renaissance or Baroque masters, he employs no esoteric iconography. Attempts to identify sources for his scenes have so far been unsuccessful.

Mostly Watteau-like Schmidt!—shows privileged people engaged in play-acting. One of his most famous pictures *Gilles* (or *Pierrot*) (1718-19), which is in the Louvre, for example, depicts the commedia dell'arte actor standing before his fellow actors, as if ready to go on stage. Watteau's art is about role-acting and its consequences—about the seeming superficiality of lives devoted to performing. He thus offers perfect images of life under the old regime, the world of carefree aristocratic luxury, which was destroyed by the French Revolution. After reviewing the documentation, the catalogue for the great 1984 exhibition in the National Gallery, Washington says: "all of these sources have helped to throw a cloak of mystery over the artist, which research has not always been able to lift." Because very little is known about him, Pater felt free to create an imaginary portrait, Watteau's life story as seen by a friend, a woman, a childhood friend of the artist, who in fact is Pater's fictional creation.

Let's look a moment at *Gatecrasher*. At the start we see the floating paper boats, and then at the end, as I've noted, we come back to see another boat, this one larger enough to contain the central figure. Why, I wonder, is he a gatecrasher? Maybe he is like Pater's Watteau, an outsider to the world of privilege which would have him seem to get accepted, only to then feel uneasy and wish to depart. Perhaps this speculation would explain why this man, who wears a white suit, descends down a rope ladder into the library, looks at the party from outside, and then joins in with the dancers. And it might also suggest why at the end, when again he is alone, we see him in the country, jacket discarded, walking along the edge of a pond. The danger of being a gatecrasher, I would think, is that inevitably you will end up outside, apart from the invited guests.

A great deal of visual art presents the worlds of privileged people. And so it's always a fair question to ask the artist's attitude towards these subjects. When Schmidt shows galloping horses, glamorous black tie dinners by candlelight and well-dressed people riding to hounds, how would he have us comprehend these materials? "If I understand anything of these matters," the narrator of Pater's imaginary portrait proposes,

Antony Watteau paints that delicate life of Paris so excellently, with so much spirit, partly because, after all, he looks down upon it or despises it. . . . These coteries, those vain and perishable graces, can be rendered so perfectly, only through an intimate understanding of them. For him, to understand must be to despise them; while . . . he nevertheless undergoes their fascination.

I wonder if the same can be said of Schmidt. His filmed world is certainly glamorous. But that, I expect, does not mean that he is not ambivalent about its attractions. Pater's essay concludes by describing Watteau as "always a seeker after something in the world that is there in no satisfying measure, or not at all." That, if I understand his films at all, is also what Schmidt seeks. His films show us this seductive world in order to reveal how, in the end, entering it can never be truly satisfying.

Opposite Page:

Bogged Down, 2010

Full HD (RED) on Blue Ray with colour and sound
15 Min, Edition 5 + 2a.p.
Carlier | Gebauer, Berlin; Gallery Krinzinger,
Vienna and the Artist

Cut/Uncut, 2016

Digital Video on Blue Ray with colour and sound
15 Min, Edition 5 + 2a.p.
Kamera/Photography: Yuichiro Otsuka



Gatecrasher, 2010

16mm, transferred to Blue Ray, colour, sound, 14.04
Min. looped
Edition of 5 + 2a.p.
Kamera/Photography: Thomas Frischhut



Hunting Grounds, 2006

16mm, transferred to Blue Ray, colour, sound, 14.15 Min. looped
Edition of 5 + 2a.p.



All works courtesy of Carlier | Gebauer, Berlin; Gallery
Krinzinger, Vienna and the Artist

