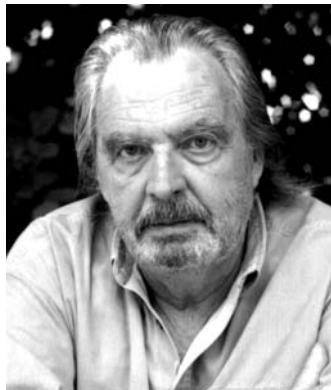


BIOGRAPHY

Born in Geneva in 1929, Alain Tanner studied socio-economics. At the age of 23 he enlisted in the merchant navy and was mustered by the West Africa Line in the port of Genoa. After this very formative experience on the high seas, he returned briefly to Switzerland, then set off for London, where he lived from 1955 to 1958. It was here that he fell in love with the cinema, frequenting the Cinéma-thèque and making friends with critics and members of the British "Free Cinema" movement, such as Lindsay Anderson and Karel Reisz. With them he shared an interest in the critical and political dimension of the cinema, inspired largely by Bertolt Brecht. In 1957, he made his first film in London with his friend Claude Goretta. This 16-mm short, entitled **Nice Time**, featured the night life of the Piccadilly district. In 1960, Alain Tanner returned permanently to Switzerland, where he was commissioned to make a number of documentaries in the cinéma vérité style of the time. This was the beginning of a long period of collaboration with Swiss television. From 1965 to 1968, Tanner made films on a wide range of subjects, including **Docteur B, médecin de campagne** (1968), on the daily life of a doctor in the Swiss countryside, and **Une ville à Chandigarh** (1966), on the work of the architect Le Corbusier in India. Tanner's work for Swiss television came to an end in 1968, when he embarked on his career as an independent director. In that year, he founded Groupe 5 in conjunction with four other Swiss film-makers: Claude Goretta, Michel Soutter, Jean-Louis Roy and Jean-Jacques Lagrange. Since 1969, Alain Tanner has made 20 full-length films, the most recent being **Paul s'en va** (2004).

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In an article on Alain Tanner's **No Man's Land**, a film made at the mid-point of a career which began in 1969 with **Charles Dead or Alive** and reached its (provisional?) conclusion in 2004 with **Paul s'en va**, the critic Serge Daney wrote: "I looked at the landscapes of **No Man's Land** and was not disorientated. I felt at home. I had seen it all before in an earlier life punctuated by the nine other films of Alain Tanner (...) I even knew what it consisted of: frontier posts with a French and a Swiss side, slow-moving bicycles and tidy little cafés, ruminating cows and drawling accents, roads into the mountains and paths leading nowhere; I knew the characters, too, having seen them come and go: they were flawed and bad in '68, then armchair idealists, then, in '85, embittered, dissatisfied hippies, that's all." Then, having expressed his deep sense of familiarity with the world of the film, the critic voices a doubt: "It struck me that all the things that – thanks to Tanner and other Swiss film-makers (Reusser, Soutter, Murer) – I had come to see as familiar, all this mildly clean, mildly sinister, mildly beautiful Swiss cinema, with its cows and its traffickers, its calculated slowness and vague storytelling, might be on the way out." (1).

In introducing the work of Alain Tanner, it is impossible to ignore this bitter but lucid comment from twenty years ago, impossible to grasp the meaning of his work except through an act of retrospection, looking back and realising that the body of ideas and the creative context which opened the way

"One of the principal merits of Alain Tanner's cinematographic work is no doubt that – in a nation drowsed by a facile ideology of neutrality – he has aroused and stimulated the dormant critical faculties and spirit of his audience." Domenico Lucchini, 2002

for the films of Alain Tanner – and indeed the emergence of the new Swiss cinema at the end of the 1960s – have been gradually buried since the 1980s. The cinematographic modernity embodied by Tanner, a tough and constant questioning of the nature and status of representation in film, has been superseded by the age of visual promiscuity and ad-industry rhetoric – with the inevitable effects. The result has been the slow but sure disappearance of the cinematographic memory and awareness which gave birth to Tanner's films.

From the 1980s, his films are increasingly influenced by a sense of loss and extinction. He is compelled to respond by concentrating on essentials, moving away from the discourse deriving from 1968 and striking out for more physical territory, exploring a sensual side of his creativity which, though it still says a great deal about the world, is concerned above all with recording it in

(1) Serge Daney, *Libération*, 30 August 1985, quoted in *Ciné-journal*, volume 2, Petite bibliothèque des Cahiers du cinéma, Paris, 1998.

FILMOGRAPHY

1957	Nice Time , Piccadilly la nuit
1961	Ramuz, Passage of a Poet Ramuz, passage d'un poete
1962	The School , L'école
1964	The Apprentices Les apprentis
1966	A City at Chandigarh Une ville à Chandigarh
1969	Charles Dead or Alive Charles mort ou vif
1971	The Salamander La Salamandre
1973	Return from Africa Le retour d'Afrique
1974	The Middle of the World Le milieu du monde
1976	Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000 , Jonas, qui aura vingt-cinq ans en l'an 2000
1977	Foot-Ball Dead Time , Temps mort
1978	Messidor
1981	Light Years Away Les Années-lumières
1983	In the White City Dans la ville blanche
1985	No Man's Land
1987	A Flame in My Heart Une flamme dans mon cœur The Ghost Valley La vallée fantôme
1989	The Woman from Rose Hill La femme de Rose Hill
1991	The Man Who Lost His Shadow , L'homme qui a perdu son ombre
1992	The Diary of Lady M. Le journal de lady M.
1995	Men of the Port Les hommes du port Fourbi
1998	Requiem
1999	Jonah and Lila, till tomorrow , Jonas et Lila, à demain
2002	Flowers of Blood Fleurs de sang (co-director)
2004	Paul s'en va

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its starkness. So we have Bruno Ganz's wanderings in Lisbon in **In the White City** (1982), the fragile, feral body of Myriam Mézières in **A Flame in My Heart** or **The Diary of Lady M...** It is therefore legitimate to note a progression from the political to the poetic – the two are never mutually exclusive in Tanner's work – and to make something of a distinction between the films that came out of 1968, with their concern for utopian illusions and disappointments – **Charles Dead or Alive**, **The Salamander**, **Return from Africa**, **The Middle of the World**, **Messidor** and of course **Jonas Who Will Be 25...** – and those that seem to have left that legacy behind: **Light Years Away**, **In the White City**, **A Flame in My Heart**.

Then there is a final period, reflecting Tanner's collaboration with the writer Bernard Comment. The resulting "trilogy" – **Fourbi**, **Jonah and Lila, till tomorrow** and **Paul s'en va** – is both ambitious and muddled.

These films reflect a renewed belief in the world, his experiences and the thinking which makes sense of it, almost a return to earlier years. In these three films, the enemy is more clearly identified and a strong desire expressed with a kind of

"It takes cosmopolitan cities and deserts to give new life to the film genre. I am imbued by place, and I don't mean stage settings, but place itself, the eroticism of landscape. I didn't invent this term, but it fits me."

Alain Tanner, 1996

gentle rage: to break free of the sad age in which we live, armed with poetry and sensitive to the beauty of the world. "If all I can do is speak, it is for you I will speak": this quotation from Aimé Césaire echoes through **Paul s'en va** as it did in **Return from Africa**, reconnecting with the past, re-establishing the cyclical, tribal sense of time so dear to Tanner, which stands in opposition to the "capitalist motorway of progress". Poetics and politics combined.

The name of Alain Tanner is inextricably linked with a particular historical moment. Politically, post-1968 is the space-time frame in which his films are set. Artistically, his work corresponds to the emergence, in the period 1965–1975, of the "new cinema" movements, which brought forth such notable film-makers as Glauber Rocha, Miklós Jancsó, Jerzy Skolimowski, Marco Bellochio and Alain Tanner himself. The common factor linking these directors, despite their widely differing styles and approaches, is that they build on the lessons taught by the "great modernists" of the post-war era (Rossellini, Bresson) – not to engage in a parodied form of post-modernity, which is now the dominant trend, but to work out connections between the language these great directors invented and the new world emerging in this post-post-war period. However, unlike the other directors mentioned, each of whom invented an imaginary world strongly influenced by their country of origin (the culturally mixed Brazil of Rocha, the highly politicised Hungary of Jancsó, the Italy of Bellochio...), in his films Alain Tanner created a world built on a defective foundation: Switzerland. The director once expressed the regret that, unlike the Taviani brothers on their travels, he could not take along a little of his native soil on his shoes. Switzerland as a non-place,

PRIZES

1957	Nice Time , Best Experimental Film, in the category Short Film, Venice International Film Festival and Locarno Film Festival
1968	Docteur B., Médecin de Campagne , Swiss TV Prize
1971	La Salamandre , Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film (Swiss entry)
1973	Le retour d'Afrique , International Film Festival Berlin, Ecumenical Jury Prize
1976	Jonas, qui aura vingt-cinq ans en l'an 2000 , Locarno International Film Festival, Critics' Prize; American Critics' Prize for Best Script, New York 1976
1978	Messidor , Festival of Lima 1980, Lama d'Or
1981	Les années lumières , Cannes International Film Festival, Special Jury Prize
1983	Dans la ville blanche , César (Best French-Language Film) 1983; Official Selection
1985	No Man's Land , Official Selection in Competition, Venice International Film Festival
1986	Une flamme dans mon cœur , Houston International Film Festival 1988, Special Jury Prize
1987	La vallée fantôme , Official Selection in Competition, Venice International Film Festival
1989	La femme de Rose Hill , Official Selection in Competition, Venice International Film Festival
1995	Fourbi , Official Selection in "Un Certain Regard", Cannes International Film Festival
1997	Requiem , Selection for "30th Directors' Fortnight", Cannes International Film Festival 1998
1999	Jonas et Lila, à demain , Official Selection, San Sebastian Film Festival

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a land "without history", fatally neutral, the country of the "cuckoo clock" made fun of in *The Third Man*, is the ever-present/absent figure in Tanner's cinema, the stateless state which supplies the poetic nourishment for each of his films. And this no-man's-land status and lack of national character call forth their opposite: the Utopia (etymologically: no place) of which Tanner draws a tender and accurate map.

Ultimately, the characters in Tanner's films always have three questions in mind, concerning a) their desires and b) the space in which they are to deploy them – Utopia being the term expressing the possibility of reconciliation between the two when "terra firma" (society, family, homeland) gives up on them. The first question – to whom or what am I attached? – is the question of desire. There are various responses: abandon one's bourgeois comfort (**Charles Dead or Alive**), quit one's job and take to the streets (**The Salamander**), run away and gamble everything (**Messidor**), get on a ship and go into exile (**In the White City**). This desire, which runs throughout Tanner's fiction, is stubborn and tenacious. Like that of the tick, an insect taken from the Deleuzian bestiary (no coincidence!), which Roger Jendly (the peasant farmer) praises in **Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000**: to survive, the tick needs only light, a tuft of hair and an extremity. A model of obstinate thrift.

The second question refers back to and depends on the first: to whom or what do I belong? This is the issue of territory, of defining boundaries: "My territory extends as far as I can see," says someone in **Jonah**... And often, we go off and look elsewhere. The distance and trajectory travelled fix the frontiers of the desire revealed in movement. Finally, the third question is practically an affirmation, a lucid impulse suggesting the pessimism of his work. It is a doubt (felt by the director, or the character himself) that undermines the enterprise of liberation, of escape from the person's territory. Tanner is one of those directors who is never satisfied with the mere appearance of truth. The indecisiveness of his characters is part of the genetic make-up of his cinema. In **A Flame in My Heart**, Pierre and Mercedes are on the balcony of their Cairo hotel. Fullness of joy, desire fulfilled, far from the grey grind of daily life? "With no clothes on, it is impossible to think," he says, looking at her. "It was Rodin who said that," she replies. Why, at this precise moment, does Pierre think about thinking? Here lies the doubt that eventually pushes Mercedes to run away and leads to her sublime plan of ultimate solitude.

Roland Barthes preferred the word "subversion" to "revolution" because – he said – the former is a "clearer word" denoting an "underhand way of cheating on things, turning them aside, taking them somewhere other than the place expected". Subversion as a way of shifting things,

"I never considered making films as work. It was never a conscious effort, it was always fun." Alain Tanner, 1996

FILMS ABOUT ALAIN TANNER

- 1978 **Cinema Mort ou Vif?**
Cinema Dead or Alive? Directed by: Urs Graf, Mathias Knauer, Hans Stürm. Produced by: Filmkollektiv Zürich. 16mm, colour, 105'
- 1981 **Tanner tourne Light Years Away**, Tanner's Making of Light Years Away. Directed by: Francis Reusser. Produced by: SSR. 16mm, colour, 15'

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- 1984 Jim Leach, *A Possible Cinema: the Films of Alain Tanner*, The Scarecrow Press Inc., Metuchen, and London
- 1985 Christian Dimitriu, *Alain Tanner*, Henri Veyrier, Paris
- 1987 Piera Detassis, *Alain Tanner, La Nouva Italia, Il castoro cinema*, Florence.
- 2002 Domenico Lucchini, *Alain Tanner, Tra realismo et utopia*, Centro Culturale Svizzero and Editrice Il Castoro, Milan

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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of imposing a deviation on the straight line, a subtle engine of war against the commonplace, is a possible key to the cinema of Alain Tanner. Taking into account the poetic and the political, it explains an approach which never tries too hard to grab the spectator's attention, but is careful to allow him some space, which "plays" with his expectations and avoids overwhelming him visually. Cultivating this visual vigilance so as not to err on the side of the panoramic, shattering the mirror effect of the screen, has always been Tanner's concern, his primary subversion on the aesthetic level. In the years after 1968, this was known as "the work of the spectator". At the time, making the camera movements obvious (the famous right-to-left shots in **Return from Africa**) or accentuating the diction of the actors was a way of subverting the transparency of the grand Hollywood manner so as to reconnect with the spectator and at last give him a place: the physical place from which he observes in the darkened auditorium, when he is alone facing the screen; not the "ticket place" sold at the box-office, when he is lost in the waiting queue. Nowadays, there is no such distinction. In his diary, the critic Serge Daney (again!) wrote that the "author's policy" should be matched by a "spectator's policy". Of the former, he said that it was not only "the recognition of a director's artistic autonomy", but also "the possibility of transfer (and therefore of love) between two people who use the film (whether already made or to be made) to get their bearings in the world, to find their place there". More than any other, Tanner's cinema enables us to feel our way to this place. Frédéric Bas