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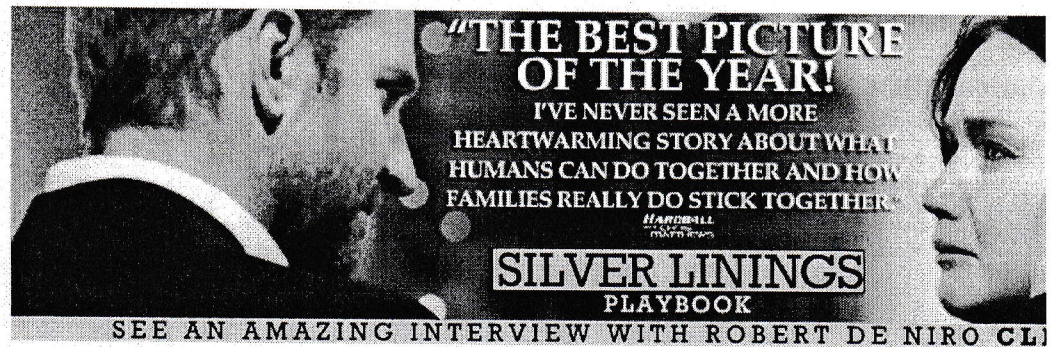
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Fata Morgana: Rotterdam Review

11:32 AM PST 2/12/2013 by Neil Young

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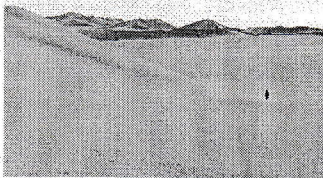
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The Bottom Line

A monumental and major new work from a key European filmmaker, albeit one likely destined for decidedly limited exposure.

Venue

Rotterdam Film Festival (Spectrum)

Director-screenwriter-
producer-director of
photography-editor

Peter Schreiner

Giuliana Pachner and Christian Schmidt appear in the latest unclassifiable opus from Austrian one-man-band experimentalist Peter Schreiner.

Austrian *auteurs* **Michael Haneke** and **Ulrich Seidl** may be enjoying unprecedented international acclaim just now, but on the evidence of *Fata Morgana*, their brilliantly talented countryman **Peter Schreiner** will remain the country's best-kept filmmaking secret for some time yet. Last in an unofficial trilogy of ambitiously challenging character-studies from Schreiner, who edits and shoots (on crystalline black-and-white digital video) as well as producing and directing, it's even more difficult than 2006's *Bellavista* and 2009's *Toto*, which proved too austere for most festivals.

But Schreiner is nevertheless now established as a significant, admirably uncompromising and necessary artist who happens to have chosen cinema as his mode of quiet expression. His intimate but epic statement on the human condition, shot in Germany and Libya and featuring two philosophically-minded "protagonists," dwarfed the other world premieres at Rotterdam this year. Delicate handling will be required in terms of the film's presentation: vast and stately it may be, but there's something perilously fragile and sensitive about a project that feels like a raw glimpse into its maker's tormented soul.

Running at 140 minutes, *Fata Morgana*, named after a mirage common to desert regions, makes few concessions to conventional narrative formats or editing rhythms, staking out a territory beyond traditional distinctions of fiction and documentary. We observe, sometimes in uncomfortably close close-up that reveals every pore and hair, middle-aged duo **Giuliana Pachner** and **Christian Schmidt**. Two locations are used: the Libyan Sahara, close to some unidentifiable industrial zone, and what look like abandoned buildings near countryside in Lausitz, Germany. The pair talk, or fall silent. Casual chat is *verboten*: "How heavy is lightness?" is about as straightforward as these

exchanges get

Pachner and Schmidt are shown apart and together -- in the desert, they are very occasionally joined by a guide, **Awad Elkish**. But this is no "travelogue:" stasis is the order of the day rather than movement, a Samuel Beckett vibe that suggests something dreadful or wonderful may have happened in the past and that something may happen again, but that the now is defined by inactivity and rumination. "We perceive different realities," as Giuliana -- chief focus of *Bellavista* -- notes. And *Fata Morgana* is best appreciated in its totality as a kind of colossal cinematic Rorschach test, one which will be understood differently by all those who embark upon and stay with this journey into forbiddingly complex interior terrain.

Many will undoubtedly escape long before the conclusion, frozen out by the arch atmosphere of deeply Teutonic gloom that hangs over these long, uneventful sequences. But from time to time, Schreiner delivers an image of such breathtaking splendor, finds some unique configuration of sand and sky, conjures some unique mood with his soundtrack, that he proves we're in the hands of a genuine master.

Fata Morgana is a matter of trust -- that which appears to be impenetrably slow and tedious will, in fact, ultimately prove worthwhile. A bracing antidote to just about every trend in contemporary cinema, the picture has about as much in common with painting and photography as cinema, and exerts a weirdly hypnotic spell that haunts long after the stunning final image -- a superb encapsulation of human transience -- has passed.

Venue: Rotterdam Film Festival (Spectrum)

Production company: echt.zeit.film

Director-screenwriter-producer-director of photography-editor: Peter Schreiner

Music: Johannes Schmelzer-Ziringer

Sales agent: sixpackfilm, Vienna

No MPAA rating, 140 minutes

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