Directed by Götz Spielmann
Produced by Sandra Bohle, Mathias Forberg, Götz Spielmann, and Heinz Stussak
Cinematography by Martin Gschlacht
Film Editing by Karina Ressler
Screenplay by Götz Spielmann

Johannes Krisch...Alex
Irina Potapenko...Tamara
Andreas Lust...Robert
Ursula Strauss...Susanne
Johannes Thanheiser...Grandfather Hausner (as Hannes Thanheiser)


*Armond White: Revival of the Fittest (Criterion notes)*

*Revanche* begins with a reflection of trees in a lake at twilight. They’re seen upside down— an image of nature reversed— yet the earth is eerily calm. This almost otherworldly illusion arouses a viewer’s awareness of perspective, which is then disturbed by the splash of an object tossed into the middle of the lake. Widening ripples shatter the impression of stillness, and a genuine sense of mystery sets in. Such an intimation of the supernatural typifies Austrian writer-director Götz Spielmann’s unique vision in this film.

Although *Revanche* is Spielmann’s first film to be released in the United States, it is actually his fifth overall, so his style and tone come to us fully developed. He began his career as a playwright, yet *Revanche* is thoroughly cinematic in story, look, and pace. Its chronicle of underworld desperation and domestic localities observes a plain, uncontrived natural universe whose immanence and splendor are depicted realistically, mysteriously, classically. This is the story of several seemingly unrelated characters whose interconnectedness evokes the quizzical, unknowable facts of existence and announces the potential of faith.

Spielmann’s arrival on the American film scene is exciting for the way *Revanche* opposes the contemporary trend toward dark pessimism with a vision that contemplates light and, conditionally, belief. At one point, a repentant character is asked, “What would your God say?” and she answers, “He’d understand.” *Revanche*’s plot resembles classic film noir yet ultimately renovates it: Alex (Johannes Krisch), a strapping ex-convict working as a bouncer at the Cinderella, a bar/prostitution in Vienna, schemes to escape that mean world, along with Tamara (Irina Potapenko), a Ukrainian immigrant working there as a stripper and prostitute, by robbing a bank and investing the money in a friend’s bar. An unforeseen turn of events reconnects Alex to his estranged grandfather, Hausner (Hannes Thanheiser), an elderly farmer in a small village, and to the rural life Alex escaped. These events also irrevocably tie Alex’s and Tamara’s fates to those of a couple living near Hausner’s farm, policeman Robert (Andreas Lust) and housewife Susanne (Ursula Strauss). Moving from city to country allows Spielmann to poignantly contrast the experiences of the two couples.

But these characters’ relationships go deeper than dramatic coincidence. By giving both couples equal narrative weight, Spielmann shows striking commonalities among seemingly different people. When Robert complains of being cursed with bad luck, he echoes Alex’s earlier cry of desperation. Each of the four main characters becomes involved in a form of retaliation against life’s unfairness (*Revanche* is German for “revenge,” as well as “second chance,” as in a rematch). Spielmann’s classical unities and timeless storytelling verities avoid sentimentality and thus seem fresh.

Like that disturbing image of an upside-down lakefront, Spielmann’s characters change our perspective on the world and life as movies conventionally present them. The spiritual conflicts of the dead-end urban underground, where gangsters and hookers deceive and exploit one another, extend to the peaceful-looking countryside, where people live in neat houses and work in respectable professions. Bringing together urban and rural struggle, Spielmann balances mankind’s philosophical quandaries and daily strife, searching for meaning in our shared fate.

Through sharp, clear comparisons—observing the different professional and domestic occupations of Alex and Robert, Tamara and Susanne—Spielmann links the demimonde and upright society. The characters are seen not simply in their lowest, most desperate moments but at moral crossroads. Each person is depicted as physically primed for life’s struggles, evident in the way Spielmann focuses on their bodies, whether agile or tense. (The director doesn’t shy away from frank nudity; there’s a realistic sense of male and female sexual and psychological intimacy.) But though these are hardy, fit characters, depression visits them: details of physical and spiritual endurance show on Alex’s face and torso, in Susanne’s casual strength, Robert’s athleticism, Tamara’s erotic poise, and old Hausner’s joy at playing the accordion. This focus on bodily stress and effort, however, stands in contrast to these characters’ inability to control their destinies.

This existential condition is exemplified by Spielmann’s astounding formal control. In one superb shot, the camera follows behind Robert and Susanne as they drive down a wooded road: when the car veers off onto a tangent, the camera keeps going forward into the mystery of the natural environment. This happens twice in *Revanche*, conveying the inevitable, if not the otherworldly—a sense of a greater power or unseen force that
Spielmann’s characters do not perceive but to which he makes the audience privy. The quality of immanence, not often featured in contemporary movies, enlarges this film’s bank heist concept and pushes it into the realm of art. It almost feels new.

Spielmann favors propulsive movement and precise placement for his camera, with mostly medium shots that do not sway the audience’s reaction or engagement. His formal exactitude allows an intellectual as well as empathetic response—a method that works especially well on a slow dolly-in to a hostile confrontation between Alex and Susanne. The mystery of their personalities and unpredictable fortune is given respectful distance; it’s melodramatic but without a pushy director’s coercion. Spielmann rejects obvious narrative tricks to focus on life as it’s lived.

Working with cinematographer Martin Gschlacht, Spielmann bestows upon Revanche a ravishing serenity keyed to everyday splendor. The story starts out recognizably in the realm of noir, but it gradually embraces the sublime. Spielmann’s evocation of enigmatic phenomena recalls Carl Theodor Dreyer and the early films of Ingmar Bergman. Gschlacht photographs nature’s presence as profound, but it’s never made indifferent or a source of apathy; there’s a felt connection between mankind and the cosmos. This is apparent when Alex hauls cords of firewood and the camera, panning left, catches a glare from the sun, as if verifying the reality of his toil. Spielmann choreographs action to camera movement in ways that sharpen our perception but also unite different genres. When the camera pans right to see Alex standing in the woods, watching Robert and Susanne converse outside their home, it’s a classic noir scenario, in all its pessimism. But a later scene contains an elegant reversal of this shot, starting with Alex again spying but quickly panning left to Robert and Susanne, who take their quarrel to the back porch: settling on their pain, the camera’s gaze is now empathetic, transcending the earlier generic parameters. There’s another repetition in Revanche: late in the film, Spielmann again shows images from the opening lakefront scene, but from a different angle, and with a spectacular flourish not unlike a David Lean epiphany, in which human efforts are swallowed up by nature.

Spielmann is interested in aspects of life that exceed simple comprehension. Fathoming the interconnections between disparate people, he emphasizes realistic perception and spiritual discovery. He told an interviewer: “Loneliness is probably an inextricable part of our modern lives, and yet I consider it an illusion. We always think of ourselves as being separate from the world, and in this way we deceive ourselves. This separation is just an invention of our imagination; in many ways, we are constantly and directly interwoven in a larger whole. Loneliness is an attribute of our limited awareness, not of life itself.”

In Revanche, Spielmann uses his camera as a witness to the larger whole, to narrate our social and spiritual commonality—his animated camera movements and numinous imagery open up our limited awareness. An amazing aspect of Spielmann’s storytelling is the way it lets each character’s effort to control her or his own life reflect and speak for another’s—Susanne’s religious devotion recalls Tamara’s last-minute prayer, Alex’s grief parallels Robert’s regret. The emotional resonance of these depictions of perseverance and faithful nurturing suggests a godlike point of view. Revanche brings back to cinema a long-missing sense of belief.

Götz Spielmann: Director’s Notes (Janus)

The Movie’s Theme
I keep going back and forth: Is it about revenge? Is it about reconciliation? The search for identity? These are all just catch phrases that don't really say anything. That's not the way I work. Revanche is a story - not theory enhanced by images. Maybe what my films are trying to do is to get to the bottom of life by focusing not on a social context but on existential questions. That's my passion, what sparks my curiosity, impels me: tracking down the substance of life, its essence deep down inside. There is, behind all the conflicts and painful things I show in my films, a fundamental spark of optimism - the conviction that life isn't a mistake, that it all somehow makes sense.

Emotions
Revanche is an emotional piece, like all my movies. The characters are searching, are infused with subconscious feelings of love, grief, revenge, longing, loneliness, affection, and compassion. I like emotional movies, and I loathe kitsch and sentimentality. They are manipulation, escapism. Emotions are not the opposite of lucid thought and formal precision.

The Red-light District, Prostitution
Behind the scenes in the red-light district everything is about making a profit, about making a little money here, a lot of money there, or maybe even about making really big money. Just about everything else takes a backseat. That's the essence of our society, the society we have created and in which we live. And it's also the basic problem. The red-light district is just a condensed version of our civilization. Prostitutes sell their bodies; many so-called successful people sell their consciences. They are respected figures in society, when in fact they are the bigger prostitutes because they act out of greed rather than need. Instead of abusing themselves, they abuse others, the environment, and the world.

Nature in *Revanche*

This is my first film in a long time where nature plays a key role. The woods, the trails, the secluded lake, but also the light, the weather - all these things are important elements in the film. *Revanche* starts out with momentum, with a strong plot, and gradually flows into a kind of silence: a powerful silence, I hope. In my mind, nature represents the silence behind the conflicts. Not as an idyllic refuge one can run to for relief, but as a force, an energy with its own almighty intelligence.

The Loneliness of the Characters

Loneliness is probably an inextricable part of our modern lives, and yet I consider it an illusion. We always think of ourselves as being separate from the world, and in this way we deceive ourselves. This separation is just an invention of our imagination; in many ways we are constantly and directly interwoven in a larger whole. Loneliness is an attribute of our limited awareness, not of life itself. From the outside, the old man appears to be the loneliest character, but I think he is the least lonely of all. He has a clear identity, even if outwardly this makes his life difficult. It is an identity nevertheless. And he has his faith. And he isn't afraid of death. He may be alone, yes. But he isn't lonely.

The Fateful Incident/Coincidence

I don't believe in coincidences. Coincidence is just something our intellect can't understand. We only see pieces of the whole, never the entire picture. That is the crucial challenge in narration: to take the "coincidence" that sets the story in motion and embed it in such a way, condense it in such a way that it emerges in a deeper context in the end. Ancient mythology is a great source to draw from.

The Movie's Form

Working with cinematographer Martin Gschlacht is very intuitive, very precise, without a lot of talk or discussion. Before getting started, we don't really go into resolution, concrete scenes, technical stuff, etc.; instead we talk a lot about the story, its hidden meaning, about the formal basic conception of the film, about rhythm, about style. We think these things out in detail before we start, then when we shoot, we can work intuitively and precisely. I want to make movies that don't manipulate the viewer with effects. My style, the form of my films, which is something I am constantly working on, aims at simplicity and clarity. That may not sound spectacular, but it is difficult to do and I think that ultimately it has the greatest power. I believe that the form of the film is where its individuality lies, and this individuality is where true beauty comes from. Not in the "moral" or the "criticism" or in vain demonstrations of "abilities."

Working with the Actors

I believe that acting is best when it combines vitality with precision. I try to help actors with this, to guide them in that direction. All actors are different, each has his or her own approach. That's why I don't have any one method either, but various ones. It all depends.

Preparations

Irina Potapenko spent a few nights "incognito" in a brothel, drank champagne with the customers, pole danced, familiarized herself with the job. Andreas Lust spent almost a week at the police station in Göhl, did alcohol testing, received training at the shooting range, got to know the police officers and their lives. Johannes Krisch spent several nights driving around the city with a brothel driver. The actors incorporate this knowledge into the story, into their parts. The result is a different kind of self-assurance and naturalness in their acting: true-to-life, authentic.

A "Happy Ending"

My movie doesn't have a happy ending. Why should it? That's just kitsch, something that might make you feel giddy today, but tomorrow everything is back to normal again. Despite all the terrible things that happen in the world, despite all the problems and conflicts, I believe that life is right the way it is. That's why I'm only interested in art that is life-affirming. This gives it force and urgency. And in this way it goes beyond mere reason.
Revanche, a review by Roger Ebert

"Revanche" involves a rare coming together of a male’s criminal nature and a female’s deep needs, entwined with a first-rate thriller. It is also perceptive in observing characters, including a proud old man. Rare is the thriller that is more about the reasons of people instead of the needs of the plot.

Alex and Tamara are a sad couple. In a trashy Vienna brothel, she is a prostitute from the Ukraine, he is an ex-con who works as a bouncer for the reprehensible pimp Konceny. They are having a secret affair. Neither has the nerve to cross the pimp, the ruler of their world. Konceny has his eye on Tamara, and at one point, visits her for sexual purposes while Alex hides humiliatingly under her bed.

Both Alex (Johannes Krisch) and Tamara (Irina Potapenko) are pitiful. They steal moments of love in their grubby rooms, and Alex plots a bank robbery. He brings her along in the getaway car. It will be easy, he says. Nobody will get hurt. Look — his gun isn’t even loaded. But it does go wrong, and a cop turns up just as they’re driving away.

Alex takes refuge at the only place he can think of, his grandfather’s humble farm. And it is here that the story transcends crooks and hookers and bank jobs and becomes so surprisingly human. The catalyst, I think, is the character of the grandfather, played by Hannes Thanheiser.

He’s a proud old man, living alone, mourning his wife, feeding his friends the cows, resisting well-meaning attempts to move him into a “home.” When he dies, he wants to be carried out of his farmhouse. He has seen little of his grandson. Alex goes to work, chopping a mountain of firewood for the winter. They eat simple meals of sausage, cheese, and bread. I liked the old man and wanted to give him some mustard.

Susanne (Ursula Strauss), a neighbor’s wife, visits Alex with offers of assistance. He appreciates her friendliness but not her help. Alex is distant and unfriendly. She takes good notice of him, and out of the blue, asks him to visit her that night, when her husband is away. He does. No formalities. They have sex on her kitchen table. Of course she is the wife of the cop who happened upon the bank robbery, but none of them can know this. We do. We also know that the cop cannot give her a child, and she wants to become pregnant. In this limited world, the old man’s son is the only eligible father; she loves the old man and sees the son working hard for him. The suspense at first involves whether the cop will happen upon them having sex.

Then “Revanche,” nominated this year for the best foreign film Oscar, begins to involve a great deal more. It’s here that the film’s power resides. It seamlessly brings together the possibility of violence, of Alex’s exposure, of threats to Susanne’s marriage, of harm to the old man’s well-being, in a way that doesn’t seem to manipulate these things for advantage. Instead, it simply tells a good story, very well. Susanne becomes the protagonist. She is taking dangerous risks. All three of the men are unhappy and touchy. In a way, she represents their only hope.

As I watched “Revanche,” I became grateful that I didn’t know the actors. American films often involve actors well known to me, which is fine — but also sometimes stars chosen primarily because they’re “bankable.” Few bankable stars could work in this material. The Austrian actors look normal. Unglamorous. Plausible. Ursula Strauss, as Susanne, looks sweet and pleasant but is care-worn and not a great beauty. As Alex, Johannes Krisch looks like a loser marginalized by crime and prison. As the prostitute Tamara, Irina Potapenko retails what beauty she has in a buyer’s market.

All of these actors create characters who are above all people, not performances. That’s why the film is peculiarly effective; it’s about their lives, not their dilemmas. And the bedrock is old Hannes Thanheiser, born in 1925, as a strong, stubborn,
weathered old man who doesn’t live through his grandson, his neighbors or anyone else, but on his own terms, in daily mourning of the wife who shared his long life. That harm or loss could come to him would be a great misfortune.

How often, after seeing a thriller, do you continue to think about the lives of its characters? If you open up most of them, it’s like looking inside a wristwatch. Opening this one is like heart surgery.

JUST ONE MORE IN THE FALL 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIII:
December 6 My Fair Lady, George Cukor (1964)

SPRING 2012 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XXIV (TENTATIVE)

Jan 17 Victor Sjöström, The Phantom Carriage 1921
Jan 24 William A. Wellman, The Public Enemy 1931
Jan 31 Merian C. Cooper, King Kong 1933
Feb 7 Ernst Lubitsch, To Be or Not to Be, 1942
Feb 14 Luchino Visconti, Senso 1954
Feb 21 Stanley Kubrick, Paths of Glory 1957
Feb 29 Sidney Lumet, 12 Angry Men 1957
Mar 13 spring break
Mar 20 Clint Eastwood, The Outlaw Josey Wales 1975
Mar 27 John Woo, The Killer 1989
Apr 3 Krzysztof Kieslowski, Kieslowski, Red 1994
Apr 10 Terrence Malick, Thin Red Line 1998
Apr 17 Fernando Meirelles City of God, 2003
Apr 24 Christopher Nolan, The Dark Knight 2008

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