

WELL DONE

THOMAS IMBACH FILM

Rhythmic pumping, reminiscent of steamboat pistons, accompanies the huge mechanical glass doors as they swing open and shut to accommodate a steady stream of people. Welcome to the machine! – the words beat the same rhythm in my head. And indeed, the world we have just been invited to enter does in fact resemble a futurist machine. It is a colossus of concrete and glass, with a heart deep inside, a computer heart pulsating with an endless stream of data, while hundreds of beings in its labyrinthine veins are busy or trying to keep the coursing data under control, the effort – invoking a curious language: cis, Cas, keeping and – in ocs, Tkna...

What starts out like a science fiction flick proves to be a merciless documentary. The pictures we are shown come from a world that has become everyday reality the employed in Switzerland. It is the electronically linked service industries, of ultra-computerized office work. The film material was for the majority of world of "collected" from a company that processes Switzerland's billions of francs in circulation as an endless stream of data. With its 1800 employees, it is also one of the largest service industries in Switzerland.

But don't expect to see a conventional portrait of a major company, because if you The portrait is not served up is no commentary to point images and endless scraps to do is to sit back, let the do, you will only be disappointed. on a didactic platter; there the way through the flood of of speech. The only thing for us colossus swallow us up, keep eyes and ears open, leave the tried-and-tested logic of our everyday lives on the other side of the swinging door and entrust ourselves to the law of the labyrinth. It is a world that has been taken apart, atomized, reduced to tiny units: glances and gestures are detached from their owners, sentences are chopped up and reassembled.

out from under this fragmentation of the familiar sequence of things, a different order gradually emerges, another logic surfaces--and it actually looks as if this is the order that secretly determines our lives, that organizes our movements, the little tasks of daily life, that assigns a precisely defined place to what we thought were words of casual and random use in a system that does not seem to have anything to do with us.

But what kind of an order, what kind of a system, is it that evidently monitors our daily lives like a control center? The film conveys this order with an impact that is almost physical. For one thing, we have the architecture of the colossus that looks as if it had been inspired by George Orwell: control center, surveillance machines, monitors, subterranean bunkers, endless empty echoing corridors. Then we have the computer system, its binary logic, and the mangled mixture of colloquial German and English computerese: "...dass wir die richtige current balance haben beim statement run, dass aber der Kunde...wenn er VESR zahlt, problemlos riskiert, dass er trotzdem eine late charge brennen muss...." Finally, we are victimized by time: the data processing center dictates the tempo, day and night, Saturday and Sunday, forcing us to beat the tattoo in order to ward off

the perpetual threat of a crash. The supervisor sums it up very neatly: "The system's under pressure, not only us, but the system, too." [609] (Incidentally, we encounter her and five other employees several times throughout the film like a red thread that guides us through the labyrinth.) Moreover, the film makes it quite plain that the stress suffered by the system is of greater concern than the stress suffered by the employees who have work with it. No wonder that the race against an

impending crash elicits a vocabulary of war in which problems are "killed" rather than solved.

The subtle violence of electronic technology is illustrated through montage based on the logic of the phenomena: it is the principle of seriality, of variations on a theme – a method of startlingly effective simplicity. Scenes are divided into series of visual, acoustic and verbal bites on money, time, people walking, fiddling with their hands – and, of course, sequences of sound bites. We see acts in sequence that are ordinarily separate. Acts that do not make sense in isolation acquire meaning through uncommon sequencing. What surfaces is the language of the director, the language of the troublesnooter or the gold card specialist on the telephone, the language of fatigue, of boredom... The serial method is also a means of narrative condensation that yields insight into the problems these people actually face, without the need for explanation or commentary.

The principle of seriality is not only effective in depicting routine office work; it also destroys – once and for all – the illusion of a clean distinction between working world and private life, the illusion of our homes as a cozy refuge of individuality. Seamlessly, the film shifts from bumper-to-bumper monitors at the office to bumper-to-bumper traffic on the way home; from in-house evaluations of performance to a father's concern about his son's performance in school: "C+ is OK, B's the target, got it?" The colossus does not loosen its grip at home either.

But WELL DONE is not merely a gloomy vision of inescapable, postmodern Kafkaesque doom. The staccato-like sequences are broken by something that escapes the system, an intractable something that refuses to fall in line. We hear the voice of irony that consists of the most varied of elements: asides and grimaces, bold pictorial associations that border on the absurd and reveal a potential playfulness; exclamations like 17-year-old Sandra's "What!?" that explodes the money series for a moment; but all the longer passages as well, in which people have room to reflect on themselves and their work. Finally, JÜRIG HASSLER's sensitive camera work rests on compelling details with an intimacy that successfully portrays people without subjecting them to the detached observation of the outsider.

Nor does the film as a whole take a detached, ideologically judgemental attitude towards the world it deconstructs: the critical tones, voiced by the employees themselves, are part and parcel of this world.

WELL DONE is a restless film, too, in keeping with THOMAS IMBACH's ongoing pursuit of a cinematographic idiom that lends adequate expression to our daily lives. SCHLACHTZEICHEN (1987) experiments with a mixture of

documentary footage and fictional scenes, RESTLESSNESS (1990) is a feature film with a documentary feel, but WELL DONE is Imbach's first pure documentary – a film in which a radical approximation of subject matter and form has been found that is exceptional to this genre.

Martina Clerici
(Translation: Catherine Schelbert)