

# THOMAS IMBACH

Thomas Imbach was born in Lucerne in 1962 and studied history and philosophy in Basle from 1982 to 1984. A self-taught film-maker, he has been directing, producing and editing films in Zurich since 1986. Imbach's work has consistently explored the boundaries between fiction and documentary, film and video, traditional cinematic techniques and new technologies. He was one of the first film-makers to use consumer camcorders (Hi8, DV) for the big screen, linking electronic images with classic 35mm film.

Initial short films were followed by a mid-length docudrama about the Battle of Sempach (**Schlachtzeichen**) and a full-length feature film (**Restlessness**) with documentary touches. He then chose the documentary mode for **Well Done**. In this film and later in **Ghetto**, Imbach developed his own unmistakable style, a unique blend of cinéma vérité camera shots and rapid, computer-controlled cuts. Since **Happiness Is a Warm Gun**, he has continued to use the methods he developed for documentaries, transposing them to fictional material and working with professional actors.

## THOMAS IMBACH



### Exploring Filmic Realities

Thomas Imbach likes taking risks. With each new film project, he moves into uncharted territory and consciously seeks a complex cinematographic challenge. How else could one explain his idea of making a film out of unspectacular day-to-day office activities in a Swiss financial institution (**Well Done**, 1994)? Or tracking some of Zurich's well-heeled youths with a small video camera (**Ghetto**, 1997)? Or staging the mysterious murder/suicide drama of Petra Kelly and Gert Bastian as a suggestive 90

minutes of sudden death (**Happiness Is a Warm Gun**, 2001)? Asked about his motivation for making specific films, Imbach once replied that he never planned his film topics in advance. "They always came to me in a flash. It's like being in love; you can't really explain why."

Zurich-based Thomas Imbach has been making films with admirable consistency since the 1980s. He is a writer-director par excellence who produces a new film every two to three years and has never wavered from his insistence on total artistic autonomy and control. Imbach also regularly reflects on the conditions of film-making. Twice he has published theoretical works on the art, and once supplemented a feature film with some highly informative documentation. So it is no coincidence that his films often relate to topics that determine our political and media reality. Time and again, Imbach's films deal with concepts such as authenticity, communication and the public sphere. And the relationship between private life and political content in films becomes almost an obsession.

**"My advantage is possibly that I'm something of an outsider in the Swiss film scene. I've never been rooted there. This helps create the necessary distance for artistic independence."**

Thomas Imbach

Imbach's films are conceived as experiments right from the start. The aim is not a straightforward, well-balanced narrative, but rather a field for experimenting with the interfaces and reflective potential of cinema as a medium. Film is understood to be a constructed reality; no mere mirror image of social realities, but also a multi-faceted merging of epistemological techniques, ideological debates and image creation.

Such an understanding of the role of film is already visible in Imbach's debut, **Schlachtzeichen** (Battle Signs) (1988), which at first sight seems to follow the pattern of traditional Swiss documentaries. This 16mm film essay, just under one hour in length, documents the festivities around the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Sempach. It focuses particularly on the Swiss army's patriotic rituals and the popularisation of the nation's collective myths, taking a critical, distanced view. Imbach, however, wants to provide more than social criticism or polemics, composing **Schlachtzeichen** as filmic deconstruction. Much of what critics were to call the "typical Imbach style" in later years is already visible here: the complex combination of fiction and documen-

## FILMOGRAPHY

1988	<b>Schlachtzeichen</b>
1991	<b>Maifeiern</b>
1991	<b>Restlessness</b>
1992	<b>Shopville-Platzspitz</b> (Video/Film-Installation)
1994	<b>Well Done</b>
1997	<b>Ghetto</b>
1998	<b>Nano-Babies</b>
2001	<b>Happiness Is a Warm Gun</b>
2002	<b>happy too</b>
2006	<b>Lenz</b>
2007	<b>I Was a Swiss Banker</b>
2011	<b>Day Is Done</b>

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tation, the conscious juxtaposition of images in the classical film style and in raw video mode, the significance of montage, and the multi-layered narrative perspectives.

Whereas **Schlachtzeichen** was still indebted to the spirit of documentary subversion, Imbach extended his stylistic reach in the following one-hour feature film called **Restlessness** (1991). The three “restless” protagonists of his film journey are Nina the singer, Max, who has just been released from prison, and Anne, a student. A dense network of high-intensity travel images, precise observation of everyday minutiae, looks and gestures combines with an independent, pumped-up soundtrack to give audio-visual expression to the characters’ inner turmoil. Innumerable trips by train, shot on the major Zurich-Berne-Basle lines, form the narrative backbone of the film. The scenes are obviously assembled according to musical, in particular rhythmic, principles (for a long while, the film’s working title was “Rondo”).

“With Thomas Imbach’s English or English-sounding film titles, we don’t get the impression that he is putting on airs or following a fashion, but that he is trying to reflect the attitude towards life portrayed in his films.”

Christoph Egger, NZZ, 9 January 2001

**Restlessness** was, at the time of its release, interpreted as a portrait of the protagonists’ generation. The interesting aspect of this “diagnosis” is that Imbach expressed this attitude towards life less by narrative means or the creation of representative characters than by entirely cinematographic means. In **Well Done** and, soon after, in **Ghetto**, Imbach demonstrates how sequenced cuts and high-intensity camera angles can be used to bring to the fore the bigger picture of economic conditions and complex social structures. These two films laid the basis for his international reputation.

**Well Done** portrays a Swiss telebanking firm as a typical example of a post-industrial work environment. Day-to-day work is performed by computer and in particular by telephone, the language used is full of business English, the interior office design and the empty corridors are reminiscent of futuristic landscapes. **Well Done** exemplifies how the dominant factors of the working world have encroached on private life to such an extent that utilitarian and efficiency criteria are now applied there no less than in the world of business.

In **Ghetto** Imbach intensifies his exploration of post-industrial reality, taking as an example a group of youths from Zurich. He tracks the youngsters, who are about to graduate from high school, with an extremely mobile video camera. With great sympathy, **Ghetto** observes their final school days and then their initial ventures into the “adult” world. In radically edited sequences, their conversations are condensed so as to reflect a whole range of social realities. Calm, “fictional” 35mm shots of landscapes around the Lake of Zurich provide a marked contrast, a seemingly unreal ideal, whose spooky potential is revealed in its juxtaposition with the intense video material.

## AWARDS

- 2007 **I was A Swiss Banker**,  
Zürcher Filmpreis
- 
- 2001 **Happiness Is a Warm Gun**,  
Nominiert für den *Pardo d'Oro*  
2001. Nominiert für Bester  
Schweizer Spielfilm 2002.  
Zürcher Filmpreis, Qualitäts-  
prämie (Bundesamt für Kultur)
- 
- 1997 **Ghetto**, Best Documentary,  
Internationales Filmfestival  
Mannheim-Heidelberg,  
Premio Giampaolo Paoli,  
Internationales Filmfestival  
Florenz, Filmpreis der Stadt  
Zürich, Qualitätsprämie  
(Bundesamt für Kultur)
- 
- 1994 **Well done**, Fipresci-Preis  
der Internationalen Filmkritik,  
Filmfestival Leipzig,  
Filmpreis der Stadt Zürich,  
Anerkennungspreis der Stadt  
Luzern, Qualitätsprämie  
(Bundesamt für Kultur)
- 
- 1991 **Restlessness**, Nominiert für  
den Max-Ophüls-Preis 1991,  
Qualitätsprämie (Bundesamt für  
Kultur)
- 
- 1988 **Schlachtzeichen**,  
Studienprämie (Bundesamt für  
Kultur)

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**Nano-Babies** (1998) is constructed in a similar way. Imbach created this film in collaboration with Jürg Hassler (who has been his 'partner in crime' ever since **Well Done** and **Ghetto** and exerts a major influence on Imbach's work). **Nano-Babies**, a 45-minute feature produced for Swiss television, shows small children in a crèche. As in **Ghetto**, detailed fragments of the children's experience alternate with a large number of (cold, rejecting) outside shots of the building and surroundings and artful sounds (the crèche belongs to a university, the building also contains the offices and laboratories of the children's parents, most of whom are high-tech scientists and engineers). Imbach and Hassler have called **Nano-Babies**, shot in Cinemascope, a "science fiction essay", which frankly expresses the thrust of the film's message.

Imbach's fundamental interest in constructing media realities is also apparent in **Happiness Is a Warm Gun** (2001), his first full-length feature film. The film focuses on the life and death of two unusual lovers, Petra Kelly and Gert Bastian, two political icons of the peace and ecology movement in Germany in the 1980s. As in his previous films, Imbach combines a stunning array of materials and techniques: emotional, character-focused sequences with some extremely high-speed takes, quasi-documentary scenes performed by lay actors, and historic archive material. Imbach's complex collage, which is based on documents and footage of the two media stars Kelly and Bastian themselves, approaches the love story from its ending, and interprets it, from a constantly changing point of view, as an example of people increasingly losing touch with reality. In **happy too** (2002), a kind of practical, cinematographic comment on **Happiness Is a Warm Gun**, Imbach docu-

"Searching is always a creative process. There is this tension between the documentary and the fictional. I find both of them rather boring in their pure form. It's either a case of l'art pour l'art or purity for purity's sake. Only when both forces come together do things become interesting. Every good film is documentary in the sense that it is, in its good moments, authentic. Documentary for me means that the moment is true to life."

Thomas Imbach, 1997

ments in essay form how his two lead actors acquainted themselves with their respective roles in the course of the project – and how they regularly fell back into their own natural characters. In his latest feature film, **Lenz** (2006), Imbach somewhat surprisingly found inspiration in an almost mythical piece of German literature. Georg Büchner's fragmentary novella "Lenz" has established itself as a classic of subjective, deviant thought in German culture, as evidenced by the countless studies, adaptations and references in literature, the theatre and the cinema since the work appeared in 1838. Imbach adopts a multiple-narrator approach. His **Lenz** is an eponymous filmmaker who has fallen into a deep personal and artistic crisis. Frequently shown wearing a historical wig (signifying both a burden and a fool's cap), the film-maker is working on a film version of "Lenz" – which only seems to deepen his sense of alienation – and is suffering from his separation



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from wife and son. The drama of the man's psychological deterioration is shown in parallel with an intensive relationship study and "magical" winter landscapes interspersed with images of commercialised ski tourism. Thomas Imbach's **Lenz**, a chamber piece embedded in a dark alpine world (the Matterhorn!), is brilliantly conceived as an idiosyncratic play of symbols and emotions.

Constantin Wulff, 2006

Thomas Imbach talks to Constantin Wulff

## INTERVIEW

**"A film can be shackled by the written word."**

**What made you choose *LENZ*, the legendary novella by Georg Büchner, as a film topic?** TI:

Actually, I never thought that I would turn *Lenz* into a film. True, I've been carrying the little "Reclam" edition around with me ever since I was 19 and regularly read bits of it, for instance once at a rock concert, before the sound began booming out of the speakers and my friends lit up their joints. I've always been impressed by it, but thought of it more as a typical piece of literature that wasn't really suitable for film adaptation, that any film project was bound to fail in view of the inimitable language.

On the other hand, the very reason that it seemed impossible turned it into a challenge for me. I spent a long time wondering how it might be possible to adapt it and whether such an adaptation could be successful. In a way, *Lenz* was a logical follow-on to *Happiness Is a Warm Gun*. The protagonists are somehow soulmates. And so I got more and more taken up by the idea and started devising solutions that would work on the screen. To tell the truth, I began working on *Lenz* the day after the premiere of *Happiness...*

**This has happened before in your career, that one film inspired the next. *WELL DONE* follows on naturally from your early travelogue, *RESTLESSNESS*, which in turn leads on almost inevitably to *GHETTO*, and the latter bears a close visual relationship to *HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN*. How did *HAPPINESS...* inspire *LENZ*?** TI:

In my view, there are parallels between Petra Kelly coming undone in *Happiness...* and *Lenz* fighting a losing battle. Just as Petra's political commitment was triggered by her sister Grace's death by cancer, so too is *Lenz* struggling against the death of the soul.

The figure of *Lenz* strikes a personal chord with me for several reasons. Here there are no outward, historic links as in *Happiness...*, where the love story and the tragic outcome, which in a way is also romantic, remain puzzling to the end. In *Lenz* the ending is starker, seen through much less of a romantic haze. At the end, it is said "und so lebte er hin" (and so his life continued). This is in a way more drastic than death or suicide, which are solutions of a sort. Therefore, *Happiness...* was probably a necessary step in the direction of *Lenz*, the making of which took a lot out of me personally. I knew from the start that it would, and that's why there was such inner resistance for so long. I felt that by confronting *Lenz* I would risk a personal crisis. As a safeguard, I also began working on another film (*I Was a Swiss Banker*), something less weighty, but *Lenz*, as it turned out, was the first of the two to be completed.

**In the context of literary history, Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz is a typical representative of the 'Sturm-und-Drang' period. To this day, Büchner's figure has an enormous impact**

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> **"A film can be shackled by the written word."**

***on cultural life in the German-speaking world. There have been a host of adaptations that grapple with the Lenz theme from an artistic and political perspective...*** TI: I wasn't really concerned with the literary history side of things while making the film. I read *Lenz* in relation to aspects of my personal life, and my approach to the theme is a contemporary one. The only bit that I researched minutely was the geographic location in the Vosges region. I wanted to know exactly where the real-life *Lenz* had been and see the landscape with my own eyes. I was particularly fascinated by the way Büchner constructed his story as a re-write of Pastor Oberlin's diary text. How in parts he adopted whole sentences and yet made them his very own without completely re-working the original material. I based my film on Büchner's text; that was the material I wanted to translate into the language of film. Initially, I was unsure as to where the story was to be set and how I could give the characters a contemporary feel.

***Your LENZ plays in Zermatt in winter, which links it to the Matterhorn, the ultimate symbol of the Swiss Alpine world. What made you choose that location?*** TI: It was a very personal choice, because I have childhood memories of Zermatt and a kind of love-hate relationship with the place. For many years, I avoided the region, as I was simply put off by the development of the ski tourism industry and the ensuing commercialisation. I would never have thought that the Matterhorn would ever feature in one of my films. But when I read one of Büchner's letters to his parents, where he describes a walk he had taken in the Vosges mountains with a view of the snow-capped Alps on the horizon, I suddenly knew where *Lenz* was leading me. A more film-related motive was my preference for closed-in locations. Zermatt is a cul-de-sac at the end of a valley. If the valley is hit by an avalanche, you're cut off from the rest of the world. For me, Zermatt is a self-contained microcosm, just as the airport was in *Happiness*... In the village itself, there are no cars, only electromobles, and the place functions according to rules of its own. All this convinced me that Zermatt was the right location for *Lenz*.

***Based on HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN, you developed several theories on feature films that can be interpreted as an attempt to describe the transition from documentary to fictional films. Concerning the work with the actors, you wrote: "Actors have to become infected by a character from the first moment of the first encounter. After that, there is no more retreating into a private life", and "Every single emotion communicated by the actors is an emotion experienced by the character they are portraying. There are no breaks in filming." Did such 'rules' also apply when shooting LENZ?*** TI: In the case of

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*Happiness...* the ideas behind these theories were part of my concept for the film. My aim was to remove any possibility of distinguishing between the 'real' and the 'unreal', between what belonged to this Kelly-Bastian story and what was actually going on between the actors. In the case of *Lenz* only a part of this concept still applied, the "from the first moment of the first encounter" part, and that there was no turning back after that. But the bit about "no more retreating into a private life" was no longer valid. My work with actors has evolved, I want them to put their own personalities at the service of the story to a greater extent. The key to successful film-making is that the actors are really experiencing what they're portraying. That everything, as it were, goes through them. I'm never satisfied if they just act out certain scenes, go through the motions. Only if they really embody the character in question, if they have really internalised the figure, can I use the material. Only if the audience have the feeling they're watching authentic figures can the film make an impact. I also believe it's important that viewers get the impression that the actors somehow really belong together, that their emotions can't be entirely acted.

***A key motif in all your films is something one could refer to as an illustration of the seepage between the invented and the found. You set up situations that could develop in almost any direction. How did you go about this in LENZ?*** TI: I approached the individual scenes in a very open fashion. I had a script of roughly 30 pages. Some of the scenes were no more than outlined in keywords, others were formulated in detail. I gave this script to the actors as an introduction, telling them to take it merely as a starting point. Rehearsals and shoots merged with one another; nothing else would have been possible the way the production was organised. There were a lot of scenes where we tried out different possibilities together, which left us with a wealth of material for editing.

***Why is it that LENZ is calmer compared to other films of yours, which were often characterised by their rapid cuts?*** TI: I believe that the story of Lenz and his undoing needs to be told at a more leisurely pace, so that a feeling for the abyss he is facing can grow on the viewer. *Happiness...* had a hellish beat to it, which was related to the theme of the film. Every story has to find its own pace and its own rhythm. And we mustn't forget that Lenz is someone who *walks!*

***Was the process of gathering material comparable to your documentaries WELL DONE and GHETTO, in the sense that the structure of the film evolved only after the actual shooting?*** TI: No, not quite. In a film like *Lenz*, it's not as if you have to reinvent everything at

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### > **"A film can be shackled by the written word."**

the editing stage, or make the material fit an entirely new structure. I took the key decisions before the actual shooting and then put them into practice on set in collaboration with the actors and my cameraman. One of the big differences to working on films like *Well Done* or *Ghetto* is that in the latter cases I was working with lay actors, which gave me little opportunity to set up scenes or figures in advance in any great detail. All I could do was to shoot and thereby get my material together. I was never able to intervene directly in what was going on, otherwise I would have destroyed something essential. That is why after these two films I felt an urge to work with professional actors. I wanted to become more pro-active from behind the camera. *LENZ* was shot in stages, which gave me time for reflection between the shooting sessions and gave the actors a chance to grow into their roles. Starting from a given content, we developed each scene step by step on the set. I tend to avoid the word 'improvisation', because it gives the impression of an "OK, do something and let's see what it turns out like" attitude. It was never a question of "what should we do?" The content of each scene was determined in advance.

For instance, it's vital for me to integrate as much as I can of what the location offers. This has something to do with my earlier films. When Natalie goes away to the station, it's important that she does actually go away. When she then comes back with Noah, we organised it so that she really went off to Zurich for two weeks while Lenz stayed in Zermatt, alone in his hut, provoking tourists. Then he puts on his suit and goes down to meet the two at the station and they get off the train... all in one take. This was as close to real life as possible, and that's why the scene comes across as far more natural than if we had had them arrive on the train a dozen times and still looking fresh... Even after a hundred takes we would probably not have got it quite right, and as it was, it all came off the first time. Naturally, things don't always work out that easily. There are lots of scenes and details you think will come out right as a matter of course, and then they don't and you have to bend over backwards to get them shot the way you imagined them.

***What is very noticeable in your films is how closely they stick to everyday speech. In LENZ the mix of styles, dialects and foreign languages is very prominent. It's hardly possible to lay all this down in advance in a script, is it?*** TI: That's right. It has to do with the fact that

I don't work by literary rules. For me, films are fundamentally different from theatre or literature. In my opinion, films are taken more or less directly from life and are therefore always based on documentary observation. I try to employ language in my films like I employ music or sound. I distrust written language in a film context. A film can be shackled by the written word. That's why, from my early film-making days onwards, I've tried to stay free from such shackles. To this day,

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I believe that by writing I can only reproduce what I see in my imagination, and that imagination is automatically limited once it has been cast in writing. I thrive on living dialogue, the chance to create something directly from a live source. This could never happen if I pre-composed a film entirely in written form.

For me, language in films emanates primarily from a spoken, not a written, source. It has to go through the trials of life, so to speak, and be created out of necessity.

That's why I always compile a great deal of language material from a variety of sources, which never has the coherence or unity of form of a fully fledged script. Translating a film of mine into a script in the traditional sense would render it utterly incomprehensible.

### ***In LENZ, as in many of your other films, not only language but landscape, too, plays a key role...***

TI: In *Lenz* this is almost unavoidable. One of the most fascinating things about Büchner is the way he connects outer and inner landscapes. I began the film in the Vosges mountains, the authentic surroundings of the real Lenz. I long believed I had to set the entire Lenz film in the story's original landscape. Then one day I realised that it might look wonderful, with its mists and all, but that the landscape there never really came alive for me. I was simply unable to fill the landscape with people. I couldn't imagine characters I know or have created living out lives and relationships in those surroundings. It took the step from the Vosges region to the Swiss Alps, which are so much more familiar to me, to trigger my imagination.

But landscapes were also one of the aspects that kept sending me back to the original Büchner text. Landscapes are indeed central to my work, and in every location I've chosen for a film, whether a bank as in *Well Done*, Zurich's affluent 'gold coast' for *Ghetto* or the airport in *Happiness...*, I've always tried to turn it into a little universe unto itself. Since I don't have the means to go to a studio and build the settings I have in mind, I have to construct my world in a real-life context, creating a powerful setting without using up too much of my precious production budget.

### ***In LENZ the landscape scenes are shot in 35mm, the indoor scenes by video camera...***

TI: Our concept was to use traditional film stock for all the outdoor scenes and to shoot all the scenes in the hut and the homes, the story of the relationship, by handheld video camera.

The landscape images on celluloid in *Lenz* are like breathing spaces between the video sequences. In *Ghetto* we applied this concept pretty rigidly, but after that I tried to shoot more in 35mm to add greater nuances to my visual language. But this is always subject to financial limitations.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Constantin Wulff is a writer, journalist, curator and film practitioner. He was a member of the Selection Committee of the Duisburg Film Week from 1995 to 1997 and director of DIAGONALE – Festival of Austrian Films in Graz (with Christine Dollhofer) from 1997 to 2003. He lives in Vienna.

# INTERVIEW

## > "A film can be shackled by the written word."

*You are a writer-director par excellence. You always insist on total artistic control and not only direct your films, but also edit and produce them yourself. In an age where film-promoting bodies and television companies want to take ever greater influence and are guided by success and popularity criteria, this is unusual to say the least.* TI: Since *Schlachtzeichen* I've been making 'debut' films, where I exploit myself and others to see the project through. This worked well enough for *Well Done* and *Ghetto* because I had a certain measure of financial support and they were made on a documentary-film budget that I could work with. Things got more difficult once I started making feature films. The last time I received financial support from the Swiss Federal Office of Culture was over 10 years ago. Since I always produce my own films, I've learnt to achieve maximum effect with the means at my disposal. Learning this from experience was my film schooling.

*Looking at your filmography, Switzerland has, in different ways, been a recurring point of reference. But your œuvre does not fit comfortably into the 'Swiss films' category, nor is it easy to relate it to other contemporary Swiss films...* TI: There aren't many film-makers in Switzerland today who work the way I do, particularly when it comes to feature films. But that's no great tragedy. Switzerland is a small country in film-making terms and, as such, doesn't represent a challenge for me. What would be a challenge, on the other hand, would be to finally find an acceptable way of working with Swiss institutions, production-wise. A greater amount of exchange among film-makers in Switzerland would also be something positive, but this is not happening at present. January 2006

Script: Thomas Imbach, Patrizia Stotz  
Camera: Thomas Imbach  
Editing: Gion-Reto Killias, Tom La Belle  
Score & Sound Design: Peter Bräker

Songs: Bill Callahan, Bob Dylan, Conor Oberst, Syd Barrett, Alphaville, Jason Molina, John Frusciante, George Vaine  
Song Producer: Balz Bachmann

Production: Okofilm Productions, Zürich; Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen; ARTE

World Rights: Okofilm Productions, Zürich  
Original Version: Swiss-German (german & english subtitles)

**"Day Is Done becomes a poetic but also wryly humorous study of the selfish artist trying to play the indifferent God, but ending up revealing himself as all too human. Day Is Done contains images of ravishing though unconventional urban beauty."** Lee Marshall, *Screen Daily*, 14.02.2011

**"In his film Imbach looks out of the window - and sees the world. An evocative maelstrom of great power emerges in the course of nearly two hours."** Patrick Wildermann, *Der Tagesspiegel*, 15.02.2011

**"A captivating movie of tantalizing visual appeal that transcends the personal and embraces the universal flow of time."** Irene Genhart, *Zürcher Landzeitung*, 16.02.2011

**"Imbach has set the world on fire in Day is Done; constantly shifting between closeness and distance, his personal approach transforms the banalities of everyday life into a larger-than-life picture of his protagonist."** Christian Alt, *negativ-film.de*, 13.02.2011

**"Thomas Imbach invites viewers to rethink their perspective of the mundane - there is certainly more than meets the eye here. The film is an object of mysterious charm whose pleasures are derived from the deliberate discovery of the profound from what is ostensibly a visual and aural barrage of the mundane."** Francis Joseph Cruz, *Fipresci Berlinale Talent Press*, February 2011



| 2011 | DCP | colour | 111'

**A** smokestack stubbornly pierces the sky. Trains rumble by down below. Lights come on in the buildings as night falls. There is a man behind the camera, looking for an image – of himself? Of the world? Of society? By day and night, in rain and snow, he stands filming at the window of his studio. Periodically we hear people leaving messages on his answering machine. They talk about the weather while on vacation and congratulate him on his birthday. His father dies, a child is born, the young family begins to fall apart. Time passes. Slowly the cityscape morphs into the inner landscape of the man behind the camera.

"From the very beginning, I was captivated by the fantastic panoramas outside my window, and the 24-hour cinema offered by the ever-changing effects of light and weather conditions. With the film camera on hand, filming those views became a compulsion. I do, of course, go through phases when I am absorbed in my work and pay little attention to what is going on in front of the window. But at other times I succumb to the temptation of the view and, with my camera, enter into it as if I were stepping into a landscape painting." Thomas Imbach

Script: Thomas Imbach, Eva Kammerer, Jürg Hassler  
Camera: Jürg Hassler, Thomas Imbach

Editing: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler, Patrizia Stotz  
Music: Peter Bräker, Balz Bachmann

Cast: Beat Marti, Laura Drasbaek, Anne-Grethe Bjarup Riis, Sandra Medina, Helena Af Sandeberg, Mellika Melani, Lale Yavas, Angelica Biert

Production: Bachim Film, Pandora Film  
World Rights: Bachim Film, Zurich  
Original Version: Swiss Germn/English/  
Danish/Swedish

Thomas Imbach dares to tackle unusual topics each time. In *I Was A Swiss Banker*, which according to Imbach evolved as a light-hearted twin brother of *Lenz*, the director ventures on the reformation of a stressed banker in a paradise-like, magical Switzerland inhabited exclusively by beautiful women. *I Was A Swiss Banker* is a film about Switzerland without false nostalgia or a sense of home. [...] Marvellous as always is the camera work of Jürg Hassler and Thomas Imbach: poetic and artful, yet never tacky; the underwater photography is of spherical magic. Sarah Stähli, *Der Bund*, August 30th, 2007

Thomas Imbach has an unparalleled sense of subtle moods; his sense of visual harmony and dissonance, his eye for unknown beauty and the threat of the familiar as well as his courage to address the metaphysical make him a great lyrical talent among Swiss film directors. Christoph Schneider, *Tages-Anzeiger*, August 29th, 2007

Thomas Imbach stage-manages Swiss landscapes in a way hardly ever seen in films before. Not simply beautiful, but archaic, mystic, sensuous, foreign and fascinating. *Art-tv*, 08/2007



| 2007 | 35mm | colour | 75'

**R**oger is a young, dashing banker full of boyish self-confidence. He has a highly successful business, smuggling black money across the border for reinvestment. But then a split second reaction changes his entire life. Flagged down one day by a customs officers, Roger loses his cool and makes a run for it. His only means of escape: diving headlong into Lake Constance, thereby catapulting himself out of his life as a banker and into a totally new universe, populated with shy mermaids decked out in Lara Croft gear, and cunning magpie witches in helicopters. As in a Grimm Brothers fairy tale, Roger has to pass three tests to cast off the witch's curse and find happiness. His underwater journey through an intoxicatingly beautiful Switzerland is enhanced by the enchanting songs of sirens – a fable full of lust for life and love.

Script: Thomas Imbach  
Camera: Jürg Hassler

Editing: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler  
Music: Peter Bräker, Balz Bachmann

Cast: Milan Peschel, Barbara Maurer,  
Noah Gsell, Barbara Heynen  
Production: Bachim Film, Zurich

World Rights: Bachim Film  
Original Version: German/Swiss  
German

“Imbach weaves the tale of a driven explorer of life, an in all likelihood doomed love and a tender father-son relationship. He also highlights the absurdities of modern, mundane tourism and presents a stereotype symbol of Switzerland in a new light. The Matterhorn takes on a mystic quality, becomes a protagonist in its own right, telling of nature and the difficult nature of mankind. And this tragicomic drama set in the mountains is also one of the most sensuous Swiss-based films in recent years.”

*Berner Zeitung*, 23 January 2006, (Madeleine Corbat)

“Form and content mutually drive each other on. Each frame seems to imply something more, with Lenz (a Swiss variant of the Cobain-like suicidal character in *Last Days*) getting stuck in the snow time and again, and at the same time showing himself capable of all sorts of pranks in his snowy surroundings. Imbach applies all the tricks of the trade: moments of self-reflection, chronological shifts, documentary passages and a gripping soundtrack. Interspersed are intensely comical moments and witty dialogues, and the Matterhorn, shown in unfamiliar fashion, exerts a powerful allure, comparable to the sea in Andrej Tarkovsky’s film *Solaris*.”

*Aargauer Zeitung*, 23 January 2006, (Hans Jürg Zinsli)



| 2006 | 35mm | colour | 96'

The film-maker Lenz has left his native Berlin for the Vosges to research the story behind Georg Büchner’s novel fragment Lenz. But he soon trades the Alsatian landscape for higher altitudes: the urge to see his nine-year-old son Noah takes him to the Swiss ski resort of Zermatt. With Noah’s help, Lenz stages a reunion with his ex-wife Natalie, whom he still loves. The newfound closeness to his son and the rekindled love for Natalie form a brief idyll. But the fantasy of a happy family life is short-lived, overshadowed by Lenz’s increasingly erratic behaviour. Noah and Natalie return to Zurich, and Lenz remains in the mountains, alone. Just as Büchner based his novel on a real episode from the life of the German poet Lenz (1751–1805), Thomas Imbach freely mixes fact and fiction. Like his literary counterpart, the modern-day Lenz is a tortured visionary caught between euphoria and desperation. Imbach’s film captures these mood swings with its eclectic visual and aural style. Lenz’s turbulent inner states are mirrored by the elemental beauty of the natural landscape. The emotional drama of the main characters plays against a background of kitsch global tourism – provided by the authentic Zermatt locations and real people appearing in the village scenes. The intimately filmed scenes of romantic and family life provide a telling glimpse into the realities of contemporary relationships.

An unconventional, stormy portrait of a man whose life motto echoes the Romantic poets: Genius writes its own rules.

Script: Thomas Imbach  
Camera: Jürg Hassler, Thomas Imbach  
Sound: Peter Bräker

Editing: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler  
Music: Peter Bräker

Cast: Linda Olsansky, Herbert Fritsch,  
Angelika Waller, Stefan-Hyun Wanner,

Production: Bachim Film, Zurich  
World Rights: First Hand Films, Zurich  
Original Version: German

"In *happy too* there is no casting off masks after the shooting is over. Or, as Herbert puts it: 'In such a state there can be no break!' The interaction between the actors themselves and between actors and director starts out on a rational, communicative level. Gradually, however, fictional and real-life emotional levels get mixed in, which leads to intriguing exchanges and occasionally to blank refusals. Out of the fray there gradually emerges a possible relationship constellation for the couple, simmering and enticing, which serves as a model for the film. This 'by-product' not only evolved into a film in its own right and an illuminating showcase of acting in progress, but also a captivating reflection on film character, historic reference and actor personality."

*CINEMA 48*, 2003 (Doris Senn)

"*happy too* by Thomas Imbach is marvellous! Rarely have I seen a documentary that presents an actor's identity problems vis-à-vis a film role in such an impressive fashion."

*Schweizer Fernsehen*, 10/2003 (Iso Camartin),



| 2002 | Digi-Beta | colour | 60'

A raw, honest look at the relationship between film-makers, actors, and the characters they create together. Sometimes comical, sometimes infuriating, always fascinating. *happy too* takes us behind the scenes of the tour-de-force performances of **Happiness Is a Warm Gun** (Locarno Competition 2001). While the first film focused on the stormy, ultimately fatal relationship between Petra Kelly and Gert Bastian, **happy too** looks at the dangers of a different kind of shooting: independent fiction film-making. **happy too** is not a "making-of" documentary in the conventional sense. Its focus is the flip side of the world portrayed in **Happiness Is a Warm Gun**. With the same penetrating gaze, irony and courage that Thomas Imbach used to probe the fantasy of activist romance, this time he takes aim at the myth of glamorous film acting. **happy too** parallels the Kelly-Bastian relationship with the struggles of actors Linda Olsansky and Herbert Fritsch. How to merge with the characters they play, without falling into the same patterns of self-destruction?

Script: Thomas Imbach, Peter Purtschert, Jürg Hassler  
Camera: Jürg Hassler, Thomas Imbach

Sound: Peter Bräker  
Editing: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler  
Music: Sir Henry, Peter Bräker

Cast: Linda Olsansky, Herbert Fritsch, Angelika Waller, Sir Henry, Ingrid Sattes, Stefan-Hyun Wanner, a.o.

Production: Bachim Film, Zurich  
World Rights: First Hand Films, Zurich  
Original Version: German

“The bullet’, says the Petra Kelly figure in this film, ‘manages with one intensely warm sensation to dislodge everything in a single moment. It makes its home inside me – that must have been the moment I briefly lifted off.’ Likewise, the images of Thomas Imbach’s film seem to thrust aside everything you thought you knew about this historic and mythical couple. The film observes death from the inside. In this long moment of death, the I starts to wonder. Not about death, but about the inability to live. Not about futility, but about the fact that all these exhausting efforts have not brought the world and this I one inch closer to one another. In these sequences, too, as in the documentary episodes and the fragmentary reminiscences, *Happiness Is A Warm Gun* is as radically political as it is radically physical.” *epd-Film*, 10/2002, (Georg Seesslen)

“Imbach’s film is essentially an interpretation, a variation on a true story, as he himself says in the introduction, and thus a vehicle conveying a specific view. He is not afraid to show the ugly side of his subject, but it is something else that is important. His film is also a declaration of love: the two protagonists, especially Petra, are wonderful. In his typically detailed shots, which draw attention to things that are normally taken so much for granted that they go unnoticed, he marvels at Petra’s lips, the hollow at the bottom of her neck, her gentleness as she carefully and silently washes the exhausted Gert who stands naked before her.”

*Tages-Anzeiger*, 12 November 2001, (Mathias Heybrock)



| 2001 | 35mm | colour | 95'

**P**etra Kelly, the Green-Party freedom fighter of the 1980s, is shot by her partner, former army general Gert Bastian, while she sleeps. Shortly afterwards he shoots himself. Was it murder or did she want this to happen?

What happens in Petra’s mind from the moment Gert’s bullet enters her skull until the moment it lodges there and she dies? She experiences a flash forward to the present day and awakens in the glassy transit zone of an international airport. As she passes through this modern purgatory, Petra struggles with Gert and other people from her life to understand the meaning of the gunshot. Eventually, she recognizes the power of her own absolute, over-the-top desires.

#### Director’s comments

On 20 October 1992 I read in the paper that Gert Bastian had shot Petra Kelly. It hit me like a bolt of lightning, even though I was no great admirer of Kelly. It was the gunshot that fascinated me; I wanted to find out more. I was not satisfied by the wild speculation in the media – rumours of a nuclear mafia, the Chinese secret service, jealousy, etc. – or by the general outcry about an ex-general shooting her while she was asleep. It was clear to me from the start that the shooting was a consequence of her own love story, that Petra herself had been partly responsible for his pulling the trigger. I wanted to resurrect her in a film and, as it were, give her a chance to understand her own death. After a long period of hesitation, I finally decided to embark on this experiment in 1998.

Script: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler  
Camera: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler  
Sound: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler

Editing: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler  
Music: Peter Bräker

Production: Bachim Film, Zurich  
World Rights: Bachim Film, SRG/SSR

Original Version: Swiss German,  
French, English, Turkish, Chinese

## NANO BABIES

"*Nano-Babies* is another film that moves beyond the pure documentary, confronting us with over-sized images of reality. The fragmented authenticity of the situations is highlighted by an intense soundtrack, which is as fundamental to the film as the distinctive staccato cuts cultivated by Imbach/Hassler."

Roland Erne, 16 January 1998



| 1998 | 35mm | colour | 45'

Imbach turns his attention from the teenagers featured in his previous film to infants placed in a crèche at the Swiss Institute of Technology in Zurich while their parents spend their days investigating physical phenomena or engaged in neurobiological research. The film explores the spontaneous experience of these children who are too young to express their "findings" in words. They are growing up in a universe dominated by ultra-modern technologies that they (still) encounter with playful ease. As in **Ghetto**, scriptwriters Imbach and Hassler provide open and unbiased access to their protagonists.

While the setting is pure reality, various techniques are used to combine sound and images to produce an almost magical rearrangement of that reality: buildings and laboratories where virtual worlds are created amid physical construction work on a new wing.

Perception alternating between and merging solid, physical reality and the world of the imagination is probably inherent to children as they embark on their discovery of the world. And no doubt there are many similarities between this form of learning and the approach of a research scientist. **Nano-Babies** is a science-fiction essay based on documentary techniques.

Script: Thomas Imbach, Monka Gsell  
Camera: Jürg Hassler, Thomas Imbach

Sound: Thomas Imbach  
Editing: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler

Music: Peter Bräker  
Production: Bachim Film

World Rights: Bachim Film, Zurich  
Original Version: Swiss German

“Scenes range from anarchy in the classroom, deafening techno music in basements and nights on the prowl to the problems of finding a job as an apprentice or trainee. The result is a fast-moving, perceptive and touching film. Despite all the failures, barriers and reproaches they have to cope with, the kids remain charged with energy.”

*Weltwoche*, 30 January 1997 (Nina Toepfer)

“*Ghetto* gives us an exceptionally lively, truthful and moving insight into this generation growing up in an age of unprecedented liberalism and equally unprecedented economic pressure and constraints.”

*Tages-Anzeiger*, 26 September 1997



| 1997 | 35mm | colour | 122'

**G**hetto invites us into a classroom, where we are confronted with a group of disoriented teenagers facing a number of important decisions as their school days come to an end. Devoid of any focus or guidelines and still trying to find their feet in many ways, they are by turns ironic, spontaneous and subversive. The film is divided into six chapters (Ghetto, Cars, Sex, Drugs, Techno, Chestnuts), each with its own characters and distinctive visual features. We follow Xhumi and her friends into the supermarket as they talk about sexuality, accompany Müke to techno parties and listen to Aki, an eighteen-year-old roast chestnut seller who is waiting for better times. This is a film that refrains from using “loud” stereotypes: it approaches the kids in concentric circles, a technique that gives great narrative freedom.

Script: Thomas Imbach, Monika Gsell  
Camera: Jürg Hassler  
Sound: Thomas Imbach, Peter Bräker  
Editing: Thomas Imbach, Jürg Hassler

Cast: Gold Card expert, Product Manager, Head of Department, PC supporter, Key Account Manager, Director

Production: Bachim Film, Zurich, Filmkollektiv Zürich AG, SF DRS, Teleclub

World Rights: Bachim Film, Zurich  
Original Version: Swiss-German

**"Well Done reminds us how long it has taken for the realities of the post-industrial work world in Switzerland, dominated by data flows that are hardly less monotonous than the conveyor belts of yore, to be represented in film form. (...) The images created here are exemplary in many ways, thanks also to an artistic approach that is more concerned with gaining distance, with establishing abstraction, than with a simple exercise in unmasking."**

*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 8/9 October 1994  
(Christoph Egger)

**"Well Done is an absurdly humorous look at the total dominance exerted by our economic system, without descending into pathos. A telephone operator uses the same jargon when talking about private matters with her colleagues as she uses for customers, managers who perform calculations as they jog, or an office worker who conducts a sort of performance appraisal with his teenage son. This is a film about life – not just office life – and one of the best in a long while."**

*Tages-Anzeiger*, 22 January 1994 (Andreas Furler)



| 1994 | 35 mm | colour | 75'

**W**hat is the best way of portraying day-to-day work in a massive computer centre serving the financial community of Zurich? The answer is: to spend months actually being there, observing it from inside, compiling and classifying 60 hours of film and then editing this material into seemingly unrelated components – without the slightest commentary – by means of hectic montage, cutting and slashing until the whole grand system dissipates to dust. The result is an absurd serial ballet à la Jacques Tati, presented in staccato format. This method highlights the stress, alien-ation, materialism to which the modern world of the almighty computer exposes us. Thomas Imbach and his cameraman Jürg Hassler set themselves the mammoth task of doing just that: producing fragmented images of phone calls, nervous fingers gliding across keyboards, side-long glances, briefings, data, banking jargon and automatic gestures – all in order to highlight (not without bitterness) the loss of humanity inherent in the reign of marketing and electronics.

Catalogue: Locarno International Film Festival

Script: Thomas Imbach  
Camera: Peter Liechti  
Sound: Rolf Büttikofer

Editing: Dominique Freiburghaus  
Music: Koch-Schütz-Studer-  
Lauterburg, So Nicht

Cast: Christine Lauterburg, Roger  
Nydegger, Sylvia Wetz, Roland  
Amstutz, Sibylle Courvoisier, Brigitta  
Javurek a.o.

Production: Bachim Film, Zurich  
World Rights: Bachim Film, Filmkollektiv  
Original Version: Swiss German, French

"The anonymity of the big city operates as an atmospheric space. In *Restlessness*, the almost indistinguishable urban, station and track landscapes and the way the film is edited suggest possible relationships between the protagonists. Conceivable that they might meet in the course of time, the course of the film. To the contrary: we are the ones to come across the jazz singer several times, at rehearsals, at recording sessions, or to encounter Anne, the young French-Swiss woman who travels back and forth between cities, or Max, who has just left prison and is loath immediately to start marking time by taking a job. All of them are constantly on the go, constantly restless. Children of a mobile society. Always on the move, but with no arrival ending in permanence. The train is in motion. The landscape flies by. The destination stations are interchangeable. Interchangeable but authentic. Imbach's film was shot in the Berne-Basle-Zurich triangle. It is not the characters who hold the story together, but the places and locations. The protagonists move through them."

*Basler Zeitung*, 26 January 1991

"The way the film is made, the interwoven story of the restlessness and helplessness of Anne, Nina and Max in the golden railway triangle of Zurich-Berne-Basle, recalls Godard but it is very personal in communicating today's mood of purposeful lack of orientation: this is also a means for Thomas Imbach to allow surface perfection to reflect the present day."

*Der Bund*, 25 January 1991

## RESTLESSNESS



| 1991 | 16 mm | colour | 56'

Anne, Nina and Max are three individuals constantly shown on train journeys – independently of one another – in the "golden triangle" between Zurich, Berne and Basle. Their existence is a sort of permanent limbo between these cities, always on the move without ever arriving. Arrival at their destination merely signals the start of the next trip. Cities are reduced to stations, places of restlessness and constant motion, whose *raison d'être* is to justify the sense of going somewhere and being nowhere. Three lives lived somewhere between three cities.

"Thomas Imbach's second longish film seems, at first sight, to convey a visual fascination with the phenomenon of railways. The restlessness expressed by the title no doubt refers to the main characters' everyday lives, fragments of which are introduced in the course of the film. And yet it is the trains that symbolise this restlessness most forcefully, constantly rushing, without clearly stated aim or purpose, through anonymous landscapes. (...) One of the qualities of this film is that it shows the anonymity of the Swiss 'Mittelland' landscape along the main rail axes, and yet give viewers momentary glimpses of identification and verification."

Christoph Egger, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6 September 1991

Script: Thomas Imbach  
Camera: Peter Liechti  
Sound: Gido Dietrich

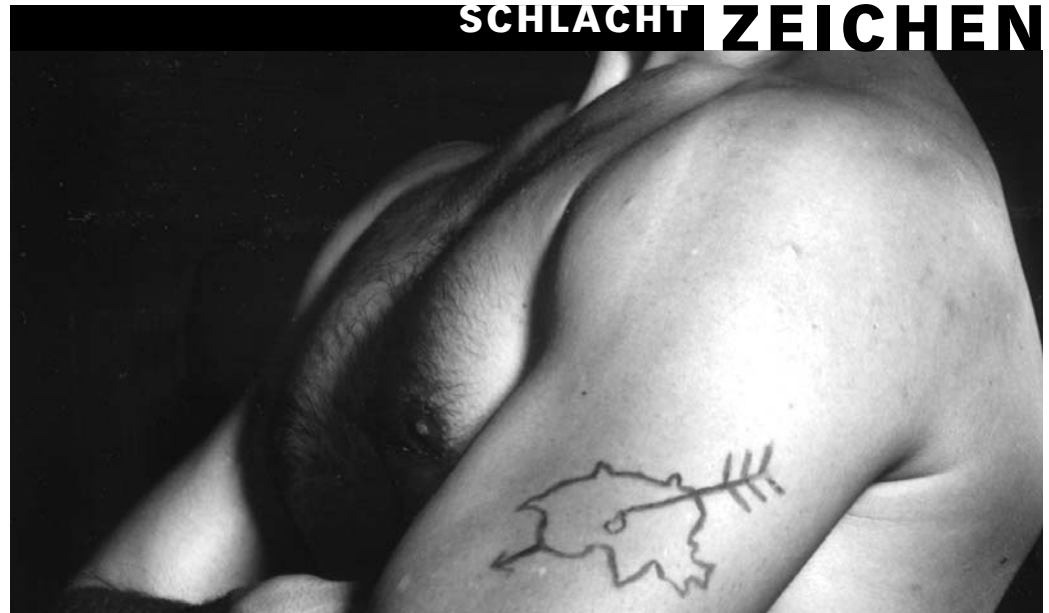
Editing: Thomas Imbach  
Music: Richard Wagner, Johann  
Sebastian Bach

Cast: Judith Bürgin, Hans Eggemann,  
Simon Meyer, Werner Meyer, Melchior  
Morger, Rémi Odermatt, Tschuli  
Portmann, Peach Reichlin

Production: Bachim Film, Zurich  
World Rights: Thomas Imbach  
Original Version: German

“Crowds in a festive mood, patriotic swaggering, the masses dancing with abandon pass in front of our eyes, placed in context with excerpts from war films and play-acted scenes showing a group of soldiers ordered to attend the celebrations commemorating the Battle of Sempach. The ‘found’ footage is combined in an imaginative collage, not exactly a ‘hymn to the fatherland’, but a work that rouses the viewer by sanctioning criticism of myths and heroes, armies and motorways.”

*Der Bund*, 1988 (Fred Zaugg)



| 1988 | 16 mm | colour/bw | 56' | Instructions on Handling Sunday Myths

**W**hen Roger Felder, 30, a successful Swiss banker, is given one million Euros to be smuggled into Switzerland he ends up on the run from the police. The best place to hide is underwater, where he is saved by a kiss of pure oxygen from a mermaid. Roger gets stranded on an island, where Heli, a witch in disguise as a magpie, casts a spell on him and makes him want to fall in love. Thus Roger's adventurous journey to meet various women begins. Each woman brings him closer to his destination and at the same time further from his former purpose in life – a fable full of lust for life and love.