This portrait of a remarkable woman and her unusual environment seems to have a very profound effect on nearly everyone who sees it. The film further strengthens the reputation of veteran documentarian Schreiner, who's quietly and steadily established himself among Europe's most respected practitioners of non-fiction cinema. But the film is by no means an example of an 'auteur' imposing his individual vision upon the world. Instead it's a remarkable example of intense collaboration between artist and subject, one so close that such traditional distinctions and labels seem inappropriate.

Articulate and flintily intelligent - but often morose and clearly uncomfortable in her own (scarred) skin, Giuliana Pachner has clearly led a difficult, tragedy-punctuated life. Now middle-aged, she's finally returned home to Bellavista, her family's guest house - a grand, Swiss-style chalet - in Sappada, a picturesque corner of the Italian Alps. Sappada is a linguistic enclave where the older residents - including Pachner - converse in a German/Bavarian/Tyrolean dialect, though Italian is becoming increasingly dominant. This feeling of bygone isolation furthers Pachner's pessimism as she reflects on various painful interstices of guilt, grief and memory.

But while the tone of Bellavista is unambiguously downbeat and even mournful, Schreiner takes steps to ensure it's always a rich and rewarding experience for the viewer. Shot on austere, monochrome video, Bellavista is very aptly named: the selection of views, both exterior and interior, is consistently striking - and often breathtaking - while not always exactly what you would always call conventionally beautiful. As movie business magazine Variety put it, the "excellent" visuals are "especially notable for lovely effects of light." Schreiner thus takes us - literally and metaphorically - right into Giuliana's world, so that we gradually see as if through her eyes. This powerfully palpable evocation of empathy makes for a work of rare tact, sensitivity and grace.

Neil Young