

## FILM-PHILOSOPHY

Now Wait for Last Year:  
A Report from the  
65<sup>th</sup> Venice International Film Festival 2008

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The 65<sup>th</sup> Venice film festival suffered a great deal from not being the 64<sup>th</sup> Venice film festival. Last year saw the premieres of *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (Andrew Dominik), *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy), *Lust, Caution* (*Se, Jie*, Ang Lee), *Atonement* (Joe Wright), *I'm Not There* (Todd Haynes), *Mad Detective* (Johnny To), *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis) and *The Darjeeling Limited* (Wes Anderson), all of which were in competition. Quentin Tarantino hosted a retrospective of Spaghetti Westerns and sex comedies from the sixties and seventies and Ridley Scott premiered his *Blade Runner: the Final Cut* (the final tinker might have been a better title) boosting the sense that the oldest international film festival in the world was still able to attract fresh perspectives. This year's festival couldn't hope to compete. Film festivals everywhere are prey to the vagaries of the harvest and with the writers' strike causing something of a

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drought, it was perhaps no surprise that the line up seemed by comparison lacklustre and uninspiring. Before the festival even began *Variety* was calling into question the continuing validity of Venice as a major film festival. Up and coming festivals such as Toronto were being proposed as more aggressive and, in terms of the industry, more relevant. *Variety* also made the point that in the face of a global recession, Venice offers extremely expensive facilities without any guaranteed commercial gain.

However, Venice presents itself as the 'Mostra internazionale dell'arte cinematografica', taking place under the auspices of the Biennale, which comprises contemporary art and architecture. As much as business is undoubtedly important, commercial factors are by no means the only way of gauging the success or otherwise of the festival. The festival this year showcased a broader swathe of experimental work and with less US product and almost no British films, the 'internazionale' aspect became more pronounced; the gaps left in the programme being filled by a diverse roster of Russian, European, Asian and Third World cinema. I overheard one festival-goer choosing films on the basis of language: 'Ooh, Amharic, let's go and see that', which led her to the magnificent *Teza* (Haile Gerima). It was pleasant to reflect on cinema as a means of transport. Days at the festival were spent travelling from one corner of the globe to the other: from Kabul to China, from Kashmir to Ethiopia.

It could also transport us from one extreme of the social scale to the other. This was particularly true of the documentaries on show. *Valentino: the Last Emperor* (Matt Tyranaeur) gives an insider's view of a luxurious lifestyle that almost beggars belief. The pampered pets and the private jets, the extraordinary wealth, the parties and the famous faces are all predictably there: 'The Countess has brought her own vodka'. As are those moments that a documentary of this behind-the-scenes genre thrives on, the bitchy sotto voce comments, the tantrums and the inevitable irate request to turn the camera off. The film wavers between *Hello* hagiography and *Spinal Tap*, a parody so accurate as to provide almost a blueprint for documentary portraiture. A stock technique used throughout the film is to have an interviewee reveal something only to have that observation immediately contradicted by an apposite moment.

Giancarlo Giametti, Valentino's long time romantic and business partner, describes Valentino as a master of control who rarely gives others credit. This is immediately followed by Valentino's acceptance speech for the Legion of Honour in which he breaks down and weeps as he expresses his appreciation of Giancarlo Giametti. Whether or not we discover the true Valentino is moot as there is no evidence that there is a 'real' Valentino per se. He is a collection of poses and attitudes, constantly performing. At one point, he is angry with the camera crew for following other people and not concentrating enough on him. The fascination is in revealing the world in which Valentino moves and in which he bizarrely makes sense.

From the splendour and spectacle of haute couture to worlds of desperate poverty, for the most part the documentaries on show were more interested in grit than glamour. Filmed in Mexico, *Los Herederos* (Eugenio Polgovsky) follows several groups of children throughout their day's dirty, backbreaking and often dangerous work. The children don't speak to camera, although they occasionally glance to see if it is watching them. There is no narration; no one explains the context, the history; no names are given, no back story and music is used sparingly. The camera simply documents in long takes the tasks as they are done: fruit picking, brick making, collecting firewood or water from a distant river, tending animals, the weaving of cloth and the carving of a wooden mask. Despite its stated political purpose, the film does not present a flat denunciation of child exploitation. The children working in the film are not seen to be maltreated or abused, and neither are they shown as miserable. In fact, they take pride in their work and there are moments where it is evident that they enjoy, albeit stoically, their labours. The one moment when the filmmaker's editorial commentary becomes somewhat ham-fisted is in the cutting together of a young girl's gaze with that of an old woman literally bent double by a lifetime of hard work. The inference is obvious, but this moment is all the more startling as the children themselves are seen as uncomplaining and perhaps even unaware of their plight. This is not to assert a patronising joy-in-poverty argument, the jolly flip-side of affluenza, incidentally a view posited in Ross McElwee's *In Paraguay*, but rather to recognise the complex ambiguities of

everyday life, that even in tasks of drudgery there are moments of excitement, not least of which is the ride home when the day's work is done. Unfairness is seen in the detail: the overseer who consistently under weighs the fruit picked, or the boy who cuts his thumb with a knife and without flinching sellotapes the wound and cleans the wood he is carving.

Ross McElwee's video diary of an American family's travails in adopting a Paraguayan baby (*In Paraguay*) swings from the winningly naïve to the downright ignorant. His ho-hum ponderings on Paraguayan history and the culpability of the US jar with the frustration the family increasingly feel at the crawling pace of bureaucracy in expediting their application to adopt a small baby girl. Any validity these criticisms might have are undermined by the family's willingness to bend the rules whenever they can, inviting the judge in charge of their case to dinner and wanting to take the baby out of the country for a weekend trip to see some waterfalls. 'It's only a few miles over the border,' the peeved Ross complains. There is a First World arrogance mixed in with their understandable vexation.

McElwee explicitly asks questions which hover over every documentary, a version of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle: how do I know that I haven't changed what I'm observing by observing it? It is a question that could have been asked of *Los Herederos*. Perhaps the children were being beaten when the camera was not there. Perhaps what could be seen as stoicism was an attitude of bravura adopted solely for the benefit of the camera. Does documentary end up having a similar distrusted status as social realism in novels: a genre which falsifies by pretending not to be a genre, by posing itself as a transparent record of the 'real'? It was a question I asked Samuel Collardey the director of the French documentary *L'Apprenti*, which won the Critic's Award this year. He admitted absolutely to proactively changing what was being shown. He saw his film as an experiment, deliberately creating a situation the results of which were then recorded. The documentary maker initiated the relationship which forms the topic of his film. The apprentice of the title is a student at an agricultural college who is sent to a farm as part of his work experience. Eschewing narration and to-camera interviews, the film strives for a non-

documentary aesthetic, using establishing shots for instance, the way a conventional fiction movie might. The day to day jobs on the farm are placed side by side with the growing pains of the boy as he struggles at school and with the dilemma of retaining a relationship with his absent father. By divesting itself of the generic trappings of documentary and by taking as its subject a relatively uncontroversial portrait of an adolescent, the film sidesteps the documentary's usual claim to 'truth' and the collateral questions that raises. The film's slide into fiction was underlined in the question and answer session that followed the screening, when the boy who was the subject of the documentary was introduced as the 'actor' and was asked by a member of the audience if he had previous theatrical experience.

Just as *L'Apprenti* was a documentary which borrowed the trappings and high production values of a conventional fictional narrative so there were many fictional films which borrowed the style of the documentary. 'Based on a true story' was a phrase that headed many a synopsis. *Pa-Ra-Da* (Marco Pontecorvo), *Machan* (Uberto Pasolini) and *La Fabbrica dei Tedeschi* (Mimmo Calopresti) which was shown in conjunction with the documentary *ThyssenKrupp Blues* (Pietro Balla and Monica Repetto) all ostensibly took their storylines from the headlines many with a self-proclaimed political intent, the highlighting of the plight of Romanian street children or illegal immigrants, or documenting the deaths caused by industrial accidents. The worthiness of some of these issues has a tendency to stymie critical consideration. The ovation that followed *Pa-Ra-Da* was targeted more at the charity organisation, the origins of which are delineated in the film, as for the film itself.

*Birdwatchers* (Marco Bechis), an Italian-Argentinean co-production, charts the lives of a group of Guarani Indians who decide to leave their reservation to go back to their ancestral lands. The film opens with a boatload of tourists travelling down a river past a group of seemingly hostile indigenous Indians. Once the tourists are out of sight the Indos go back to the pick up truck, replace their traditional costume with t-shirts and jeans and are paid by the tour operator for their time. This deconstruction of Indian identity based not only on what the tourists expect but what the cinema audience want to see bodes well

for a film which seeks to break our preconceptions and the mould of cinema representations by foregrounding the Indians, rather than using them as a background to European figures as has been the case in films such as Werner Herzog's *Fitzcaraldo* and Joffè's *The Mission*. The film is unflinching in its pessimism. It is the portrait of a people who simply have nowhere left to go. There are few decorous shots of the forest, principally because the forest is no longer there. However, the film takes on too many narrative strings, which results in the characters lacking depth and the story, focus. A Romeo and Juliet romance between the daughter of the rich white farmer and one of the young Indians is sketched all too briefly and unconvincingly. Characters such as the old shaman, the chief, the matriarch and a Judas figure seem like cut outs, performing functions. In fairness, this is even more the case with the 'European' characters. A further niggle regards the music. The soundtrack is dominated by eighteenth century choral work by the Indos composer Domenico Zipoli. The missionary context of the music grates in a film which noticeably privileges the shamanistic indos religion and barely mentions Christianity. As such it succeeds only in reminding the viewer that *Birdwatchers* isn't *The Mission*.

Documentary as a stylistic choice is also evident in both Jonathan Demme's *Rachel Getting Married*, a successful Altman-esque ensemble piece with a strong central performance by Anne Hathaway, *The Wrestler* and, to a lesser extent, Kathryn Bigelow's Iraq action movie, *Hurt Locker*. The latter offers a thrill-ride version of the Iraq conflict with the Iraqis themselves glancingly portrayed as untrustworthy and potentially murderous. Any misguided attempt by the soldiers to treat them as human beings results in betrayal and violent death. This could be the first Vietnam movie made about the Iraq war: the American soldiers are now the victims, brutalised by having invaded an ungrateful country. This said, the manic masculinity of its main characters, a team of bomb defusal experts, is well played and the vicarious excitement of the set pieces will be a pleasure to anyone who remembers the old BBC television series *Danger UXB*. The film provides little by the way of exposition or explanation as to what the characters are doing, content to show them

performing their dangerous tasks with speed and competence. The film's tag line 'Cut the Red One' has to go down as one of the best in recent times.

Both *Rachel Getting Married* and *Hurt Locker* were in competition along with the patchy *The Burning Plain* (Guillermo Arriaga). Starring Charlize Theron, this elaborate soap opera could not hide its essential banality with its cut up anti-chronological narrative. Although his directing debut, Guillermo Arriaga has screenwriting credits for *21 Grams* and *Babel* (2003, 2006, both directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu) which employed similar narrative techniques to much greater effect. With *The Burning Plain* what was once fresh and genuinely disconcerting has become shop worn and as familiar as a signature. I found myself guessing all too successfully who was the younger version of who and which part of the story we were in.

Other films in competition were the Ethiopian epic *Teza*, the return to form of 'Beat' Takeshi Kitano with *Achilles and the Tortoise* and Alexey German Jr's wonderful cornucopia, *Paper Soldier* (*Bumazhny Soldat*). *Teza* won a prize for its screenplay and *Paper Soldier* received a prize for the director. The major disappointments in competition came from the four Italian entries. After the success at Cannes of *Gomorra* (Matteo Garrone) and *Il Divo* (Paolo Sorrentino), there has been a buzz about a genuine renaissance in Italian film. However, *Il Papà di Giovanna* (Pupi Avati) and *The Perfect Day* (Ferzan Özpetek) return us to the familiar territory of family melodrama and so-so performances. With *Il Seme della Discordia*, director Pappi Corsicato aims to be the Italian answer to Pedro Almodovar, presenting a glossy female world of shopping and sex, but manages only to recreate a superficial and careless misogyny. Particularly crass is the knockabout comedy of a woman being assaulted, later to be presumably raped, followed by a sexy shower scene.

The most prestigious prize of the festival, the Golden Lion, was won by Darren Aronofsky's *The Wrestler*. The film carries the plot of the kind of B-wrestling picture that Barton Fink might be coerced into writing: Randy 'The Ram' Robinson is a struggling and aging wrestler, well past his prime, who is forced to reassess his life when warned by his doctor that another fight might kill him. A physically unrecognisable Mickey Rourke turns Randy from a tired

cliché to a character of real depth and humour. The physicality of his performance is caught by Aronofsky's fly on the wall documentary style, the hand held camera follows Randy as he huffs and puffs from the ring to his trailer, from his trailer to the supermarket where he works during the day. This is a raw and intimate performance of an American living on the very edge of poverty and the camera is intent on stripping away the last tatters of glamour from the aging strongman. The camera records him sleeping, snoring in bed, having his hair dyed and injecting himself in the buttock with steroids. Randy struggles ultimately with the banality of everyday existence (reading glasses, hearing aid, supermarket, being locked out of his trailer by his landlord) from which professional wrestling serves as an escape. Wrestling is portrayed as perhaps the last form of popular circus; a masochistic defiance of physical limitations and a battle of cartoonish moralities: Randy's most famous victory is against the brilliantly named Ayatollah. Behind the scenes, the wrestlers enjoy a camaraderie, which tacitly admits their carnivalesque fraud, pitting them against the audience rather than against each other.

In a wonderful scene, Randy reluctantly accepts the job of working the delicatessen counter of the supermarket. His bleached lion's mane in a hair net and his tag giving away his real name (Robin) this is about as banal as life can become and yet by degrees the showman triumphs and turns what could have been the ultimate degradation into another performance. If this was a by-the-numbers Hollywood comedy the customers would crowd round, hooting and cheering, but Aronofsky doesn't need to inscribe the audience; Randy is simply enjoying himself.

*The Wrestler* represents a dual comeback: first of all for the director who, as Rourke amusingly put it in the acceptance speech 'came to Venice last year [with *The Fountain*] and fell on his ass.' However, it is the re-emergence of Mickey Rourke, after fifteen years of cultish bit parts, as a serious actor which adds an autobiographical edge to *The Wrestler*. Rourke, having famously blown up his own career by (among other things) becoming a professional boxer, seems at time at one with the self-destructive instincts of Randy. Perhaps this only of passing media interest, something to fill magazine interviews and what

not but it certainly adds a frisson for a viewer who has grown up on films such as *Rumblefish* (Francis Ford Coppola), *Diner* (Barry Levinson) and *Angel Heart* (Alan Parker) to see this once great actor return from the wilderness.

## Filmography

*Achilles and the Tortoise* ('Beat' Takeshi Kitano)

*Birdwatchers* (Marco Bechis)

*Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow)

*Il Papà di Giovanna* (Pupi Avati)

*Il Seme della Discordia*, (Pappi Corsicato)

*L'Apprenti* (Samuel Collardey)

*La Fabbrica dei Tedeschi* (Mimmo Calopresti)

*Los Herederos* (Eugenio Polgovsky)

*Machan* (Uberto Pasolini)

*Pa-Ra-Da* (Marco Pontecorvo)

*Paper Soldier* (*Bumažhny Soldat*) (Alexey German Jr's)

*Rachel Getting Married* (Jonathan Demme)

*Teza* (Haile Gerima)

*The Perfect Day* (Ferzan Özpetek)

*The Wrestler* (Darren Aronofsky)

*ThyssenKrupp Blues* (Pietro Balla and Monica Repetto)

*Valentino: the Last Emperor* (Matt Tyranauer)