



FILM-PHILOSOPHY

New York Film Festival 2008

Part I: Of Time, Memory, and the 'I'

Martha P. Nochimson

Associate Editor, *Cineaste*

Is it Amero-centric of me to contend that the world veered sharply into the light on November 4, 2008 when Barack Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States? From the flood of emotion that came pouring from everywhere in America and the world, it's a plausible statement. But what has this to do with the 46th New York Film Festival? Perhaps this is pure whimsy on my part, but the vigour and rebirth that attended the American elections, the refusal of ordinary people to sink into the hysteria of hatred and their determination to shuck the cerements of decaying non-ideas that have run rampant in my country for eight years also seemed to emanate from the most exciting entries at NYFF 2008. Art always precedes politics. Note that in *Bolt*,

99

made significantly before the election, a (cartoon) dog who plays a wonder hero on television and is completely white, spends his movie learning that his superpowers are not real. Is a cinematic tide, as well as a political tide, turning from self-delusion? Possibly, but if so, the filmic waves are not being made in the United States. Let's face it, America. If Obama is the primary shining international light of our time, *Bolt* simply doesn't measure up to the three major events of the Festival - *24 City* (Dir. Jia Zhanke, China) *Tony Manero* (Dir. Pablo Larrain, Chile) and *Ashes of Time Redux* (Dir. Wong Kar-Wai, Hong Kong) - the featured films in part one of my yearly umbrella review of NYFF, which pierce the illusions generated within systems. Part I of my review also pays homage to two other significant entries *The Wrestler* (Dir. Darren Aronofsky, United States) and *The Class* (Dir. Laurent Cantet, France), which assess where their cultures are going. In neither part of this report will I review two films presented as major events at NYFF, which do not deserve space here despite much hype: *Changeling* directed by Clint Eastwood and *Che*, directed by Steven Soderbergh. The first is simply meretricious, though it does feature a good performance by Angelina Jolie, and the second is a muddle, a film to which its director was passionately committed but during the process of which he made one fatal mistake after another. Regrets about the Soderbergh; he clearly had his heart in it. May his next work fare better. Now, the good news.

Tony Manero

Directed by Pablo Larrain; written by Pablo Larrain, Alfredo Castro, Iribarren; edited by Andrea Chignoli; cinematographer Sergio Armstrong; produced by Juan de Dios Larrain; starring Alfredo Castro, Amparo Noguero, Paola Lattus, Hector Morales, Elsa Poblete. Color, 98 mins. CHILE/BRAZIL

24 City

Directed by Jia Zhangke; written by Jia Zhanke, Zhai Yongming; edited by Li Haiyang; cinematographer Yu Likwai; produced by Masayuki Mori et. al; starring

Joan Chen, Zhao Tao, Li Liping; Chen Jianbin. Color. 112 mins
CHINA/JAPAN/HONG KONG

Ashes of Time Redux

Directed and written by Wong Kar Wai; edited by William Chang Suk Ping,
Patrick Tam; cinematographer Christopher Doyle; produced by Wong Kar Wai et.
al.; starring Leslie Cheung, Brigitte Lin, Tony Leung Chiu Wai,
Carina Lau, Tony Leung Ka Fai. Color 93 mins. HONG KONG/CHINA

The Wrestler

Directed by Darren Aronofsky; written by Rob Siegal; cinematographer Maryse
Alberti; producer Scott Franklin; starring Mickey Rourke, Marisa Tomei,
Evan Rachel Wood. Color. 109 mins. USA

The Class

Directed by Laurent Cantet; written by Laurent Cantet,
Francois Begaudeau, Robin Campillo; edited by Robin Campillo,
Stephanie Leger; Color. 128 mins. FRANCE

To refuse hatred and viciousness on a grand governmental scale and unmask it can mean to willingly pass through darkness in order to reach light. Such is the project of Pablo Larrain's *Tony Manero* set during the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. It is a slice of life during the Pinochet era, a bitter memory filtered through the unlikely lens of a cult-like obsession for the American musical film *Saturday Night Fever*. Only in retrospect, having seen Larrain's film, does the "fever" in the title of Travolta's breakthrough success emerge with an altered significance. Take a breath; there's a lot to absorb here. Just in case you have not made the necessary leap, Tony Manero is the name of the protagonist, played by John Travolta in *SNF*, a fun fact not much on the mind of most people with whom I spoke about this film. First reactions were that the name was vaguely familiar. A pizza and ribs place on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, perhaps? The "aha!" moment came only after I made the connection for them. When it was first

released, *Fever* was thought to have re-invented the American musical genre. Larrain re-imagines it as a fevered disease transmitted by the United States and, although no link is ever explicitly brought forward, associated with the CIA inspired murder of Salvador Allende, which paved the way for the unspeakable cruelty and brutality of Pinochet. The aura of a malign infection emanating from the United States is ever-present, as Larrain creates an equation between the way American politics revealed a monstrous face lurking behind the facade of its stated ideals when it casually destroyed the fledgling Chilean democracy and psychic toxins in its exported cinematic fantasies. *Saturday Night Fever*, generally received and remembered as a charming ode to freedom and individuality, is not here understood to be in itself vicious, but rather as an exported poison (only) because of its cultural connection with our foreign policy of the time.

The conceptual design of *Tony Manero* is brilliant. It focuses on Raul Peralta, a 52 year old man, with a fixation on Tony Manero, who fancies himself a dancer and choreographer. When the film opens, we see him appear at the stage door of the theatre from which a popular television show modeled after innumerable American television game shows is broadcast. Here the object is to emulate American entertainers as closely as possible. Raul is a week too early. The film charts his life during the days leading up to the contest, climaxing in his television appearance.

Subsequent scenes reveal Peralta, who seems only to be pathetic when we meet him, to be not only the leader of a talentless troop of dancers who perform in a seedy bar, spends his time creating a simulation of a dance from *SNF* and going to screenings of the film, but one of the more dire consequences of political tyranny. As the days pass, references to Pinochet float on the edge of his (and our) consciousness, punctuated by the serial appearances of two violent thugs working for the government, who come ever closer to impinging vividly on Peralta's dismal life and the colourless lives of the people around him. To be Chilean is unbearable within the Pinochet context imagined by Larrain. While some of the people around Peralta passively submit to the Pinochet reality, and some struggle to fight the dictatorship, he escapes mentally into a hallucinatory

America of bright lights and dancing with such a totality of absorption that the importance of actual human life diminishes to zero. To feed his Manero dream life, Peralta sucks the life out of the living mercilessly, haphazardly killing with such a peculiar, automaton-like compulsion that murder, seen from his point of view, is transformed into a first resort attended by nothing but the measure of his progress toward his goal of being Tony Manero. His victims expire as if they never existed to begin with. What America exports is anything but democracy. Peralta and Chile both live a toxic American fever dream. Larrain has captured the reality behind the American sins of the time in a way that reflects on the degenerate lies and greed of the current Bush administration so precisely that I am not aware of anything remotely as good in either fiction or documentary film.

What powers Larrain's portrait of the dark side of the United States - to which it is to be hoped Obama's victory is the cure - is this filmmaker's evocation of the sensory deprivation of Peralta's existence, which is the natural result when organic life is eclipsed by hallucination. The colour in *Tony Manero* is desaturated and the scenes are only dimly illuminated; everything looks grimy, from the rooms and business places that form the context of Peralta's 'life,' to the bodies of the characters, which are frequently and depressingly displayed in full nudity or semi-clothed in underwear that looks as if it were washed past the life of the fabric, draining it of any recognisable colour. The taint and hue of faint rot is everywhere except in the scenes from *Saturday Night Fever* which appear in *Tony Manero* when Peralta is watching it and the scenes at the end when Peralta finally makes it to a place in front of the cameras at the contest, which is ablaze with light and thus more colourful than anything else in the film.

In Peralta's world, intensity is reserved so completely for the image of Tony Manero that Peralta is emotionally and sexually blank with the women around him, all of whom hopelessly crave his attention. He satisfies none of them and achieves sexual climax only when he and one of the women lie on a bed next to each other, each masturbating in demi-solitary isolation to a climax. The protagonist's disconnection from reality produces disconnection in the flesh. Unwilling as I am to give away so much that my readers will feel no need

to see the film, let me say only that no human bond is left standing by the end of the film, a consequence of the impossibility of satisfaction for anyone, including Manero, for all his insane self-absorption. Larrain presents us with a revelation that the paradigmatic situation of humanity under tyranny is a swollen 'I' is so cut off from the 'we' that it empties itself. He indelibly marks us with a fresh understanding of the interpenetration of the political and the personal, defying any wishful hope to the contrary. *Tony Manero* is a unique, disturbing, but ultimately thrilling film.

Jia Zhanke's *24 City*, also remembers. Zhanke is also explicitly concerned with the 'I,' but from a very different perspective. Make that: Zhanke allows China to remember. His subject is the renovation of Factory 420, once a secret installation for producing weapons for the government, into a luxury apartment complex called 24 City. Like Zhanke's previous films - *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasure*, *The World*, and *Still Life* - *24 City* is about the quiet brutality of a regime that inculcates its population with the belief that the responsibility of each person is to the larger society, and then the family. Little is left for individuality. Zhangke, a member of the sixth generation filmmakers, young directors born after the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), considers himself and his cohort crucial instruments of recovery from the horrors of the recent past in the People's Republic of China. Many, like Zhangke, received their wake-up call from the Tian'enmen Square 'incident,' as Zhangke calls the demonstration for increased civil liberties in 1989. In the hour and a half interview I had with Zhangke at the NYFF, he spoke intensely, re-iterating the urgency he feels to preserve memories of the 'lost' years when the only representation of life in China was controlled by official propaganda. *24 City* is such an effort.

Jia Zhangke and his colleagues follow in the footsteps of the fifth generation filmmakers, of whom Zhang Yimou (of recent Olympics extravaganza fame) and Chen Kaige (whose *Farewell My Concubine* made his reputation in the West) are the most famous representatives and Jia feels that he is indebted to them and their struggle against the repressions and barbarity of the Cultural Revolution. However, he dislikes the way they have recently moved into a melodramatic mode, making quasi-orientalist cinema of Old China in brilliant

colours, for example in *Hero* and *The House of Flying Daggers*. Rather, Zhangke trains his camera on the bleak landscapes of today's China and the lives of hardship and deprivation of today's Chinese. Sounds drab, but because Jia is an extraordinary artist, his work is indescribably compelling and beautiful, also intensely moving. I will try, however, to describe it.

24 City begins with masses of workers entering Factory 420 and continues with a montage of them at their machines. Jia's camera captures the poetry of their decent, self-effacement at their jobs as he shows us small figures dwarfed by the dimensions of the factory and the machines. Everything at the beginning of the film conspires to dwarf the individual. A mass meeting of the 420 employees celebrates the changes that are coming when the factory is demolished to make way for luxury private living spaces. This is the moment that sparks Jia's anxiety. What will commemorate the lives poured into the factory? We are impressed with his concerns not by a boilerplate melodramatic story about loss that any reader can rough out in his/her imagination, but by a sudden visual transition to small details of the empty factory: empty stairs, a piece of broken glass at an open factory window, and finally a single man, now old, who has lost his hearing, speaking of his experiences with 420.

There is nothing exotic or conventionally thrilling about the words of this man. Yet it is impossible to turn away from the screen as he speaks with a simplicity and openness that Jia, to his immense credit, was able to elicit from him. At the press conference after the NYFF screening, the director spoke of the difficulty of conducting the 120 interviews that comprise the substance of the film (needless to say only a fraction of them were included in the finished product; the rest served to guide Jia's choices). At first, the people he spoke with were reluctant to reveal themselves, not for fear of reprisal which you may be assuming, but rather because no one had ever spoken to them about their lives. They could not believe that anyone would find them significant enough to listen to. But once Jia, who is himself a quiet and very unassuming person, convinced them of his interest and explained his desire to preserve their memories, they did open up.

The stories vary greatly and include a mother who was torn away from her

child during the chaos of war, an unmarried career woman who unsentimentally ponders the way she was sidetracked by her success in the system from finding personal intimacy with a man, and a young man who rejected the system and is gradually becoming a successful part of the new market economy of China. The interviews are not all documentary. Some of them, notably the unmarried career woman played by Joan Chen, are composite, fictional figures, inspired by the real interviews. There is no indication inside the film - unless recognition of Chen counts - that a shift has occurred between the documentary and the fictional. To those who object to the potential confusion of making such an unmarked fusion of life and art, Jia replies that it is impossible to represent history unless both fiction and documentary are combined. It is a fascinating contention and produces an unusual cinematic experience that is not to be missed. Because of the independence of Jia's vision, *24 City* has had only five screenings in China. It will be distributed in the United States beginning in February, 2009.

Ashes of Time Redux is another home run from Asia. Those familiar with the work of Wong Kar Wai will recognise the title; it is not a new film but rather a re-edited, color-corrected version of his 1994 martial arts film, with a new soundtrack and improved subtitles. It is a poetic masterpiece. Unlike any of Wong's other films, which are both structurally and visually modern with a vengeance, *Ashes of Time* is steeped in the literary and poetic traditions of ancient China that were the object of attack during the Cultural Revolution in China. Wong, born in Shanghai, early in his life moved to Hong Kong where he was able to make the film without political interference. Now, however, Wong finds increasing support for his art in China.

The story of *Ashes* is complex, and although it is clearly a 'martial arts film', it bears little resemblance to the Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan sagas of how warriors become champions - which focus almost exclusively on combat and obsess about strategy. Indeed *Ashes of Time* is about warriors haunted by memories and historical baggage and patrons who hire them equally saddled with the past and about the seasons of life embodied by the colours, shapes, and textures of nature. It is a symphony of emotion and a pageant of landscape. At

its centre is Ouyang Feng (Leslie Cheung) an agent, living alone in a kind of exile in the western desert of China, who hires martial artists for clients who wish enemies killed or revenge extracted. His clients and his stable of killers-for-hire all have odd, convoluted stories of their own, primarily love stories. Ouyang's is the central saga, a confection of lost love and its intensely bittersweet regrets and only remembered ecstasies. Because of Ouyang's commitment to being a warrior, he lost the woman of his dreams to his elder brother, a sore that has festered for years. All the stories similarly gnaw at the guts of their protagonists, the most arcane being a woman, Murong Yin/Murong Yang (Brigitte Lin) who lives a double life as both herself and her brother. As her brother, she wants Ouyang to find a warrior to kill the man who insulted 'his' sister. As herself, she asks Ouyang to find a warrior to kill her 'brother,' for trying to kill the man she loves. That's right. Just sink into it and let the stunning images and heart stopping music wash over your eyes and ears, as you watch the characters go through their distraught paces.

The swirl of stories of love and death were inspired by an ancient myth cycle called *The Eagle-Shooting Heroes*, which has not been translated into English but which is now available in China in a set of comic book serialisations. However, the primary structure is not narrative, rather derives from the Chinese Almanac. *Ashes of Time* has five parts, each corresponding to one of the 24 terms of the year according to the Almanac: *Jingzhe*, the third solar term (part of spring when the peach blossom flowers and the insects come back to life); *Xiashi*, the tenth solar term, (part of summer when the 'yang' loses influence and the 'yin' gains); *Bailu*, the fifteenth solar term, part of the autumn when the northern birds begin to migrate to the south); *Lichun*, the first solar term, (the end of winter and beginning of spring); and *Jingzhe* again (a day auspicious for moving West). When *Jingzhe* comes round again, Ouyang has begun to understand the mystery of his emotional isolation and that understanding, we are told, leads to great success. There is personal trauma involved in facing the ashes *temps perdu* over the terms pictured by Wong, but ultimately the 'I' is richer for its tenacious breasting of the waves of time.

Still with me? The other thing you need to know is the entire saga takes

place within the Jianghu, which literally means 'Rivers and Lakes,' but the connotation of which is that it is the universe parallel to ours within which martial arts fiction is set - but which sometimes intersects with ours and incorporates historical figures. Clearly, Bruce Lee and Jacky Chan have not heard about this aspect of martial arts stories. Nor has the generation that worshipped them. But Wong introduces audience to Jianghu in its fullest and richest incarnation, revealing that cinema is the natural medium for the adult version of the martial arts fantasy. In a press conference, Wong declined to detail what changes he had made. It would be worth the time of any Wong fan to make the comparison for him/herself. On the other hand, the Redux version of *Ashes of Time* need not be compared point for point to its predecessor. It is like a polished form of a raw gem, everything that was always in it shone to its best advantage.

The Wrestler is built on the foundation of a tour de force acting performance by Mickey Rourke as Randy 'The Ram' Robinson, a played-out wrestler with a heart condition. Combining Ram's long, bottle blonde, Viking-like mop of hair and his Captain America costume (his trademarks as a wrestling personality); his baffled inability to understand what has gone wrong with his life emotionally; and his personification of the drama of violence that masquerades as the preferred masculine identity in America, Rourke and director Darren Aronofsky not only create a moving male melodrama, but also document the end of something in the United States.

This is not the clichéd genre wrestling picture summoned up by the Coen brothers in *Barton Fink*, when the Cliffor Odets-type hero (John Turturro) is told by the crass head of the studio he works for to write a wrestling picture: 'you know men in tights.' The title of *The Wrestler* is a pun, ultimately obvious as a sign that Aronofsky's film is about personal discovery. Randy is by profession a wrestler, but he also is involved in ongoing wrestling with himself in order to find the 'I' that has been hidden under his macho mystique, lost in the adulation of his fans, and poisoned by the steroids he takes to achieve the right look, the body type that creates wrestling box office. Randy's struggle is facilitated by two women who he hopes will give him a second chance at life, Cassidy (Marissa

Tomei) a lap dancer who is reluctant to cross the line between customer and lover with him, and Stephanie (Evan Rachel Wood) his estranged daughter, who he believes is a lesbian because she is living with a possessive woman - and she may be - but whether she is or not is immaterial to his relationship to her, and so we never really know. I will not spoil the film by revealing the outcome of Randy's attempts to win his daughter back and to have a real partnership with a woman that includes sexuality but is not restricted to that. It all hinges on whether there has been too much history for redemption to be possible, a question rarely asked seriously by American films.

However, if the focus of Randy's story is the psyche, the soul, the heart, the self (choose your own concept), the finely detailed life of the wrestling profession is the vehicle for delivering the more spiritual aspect of the story. All the wrestlers in the movie are actual professional wrestlers who have never acted before, and Rourke spent a couple of months living among and being trained by them. As a result, all the wrestling scenes have the feel of reality, a reality I, for one, found moving and compelling. The extreme physical punishment endured by these men is unfathomable to me; why would anyone willingly surrender his body to barbed wire and a staple gun as part of the paraphernalia of conflict in the ring? But the film makes it clear that it's a 'guy thing,' or an aspect of the 'guy thing,' and it is so powerfully a fact of Randy's life that I found myself accepting it as fact. At the same time, the film also makes manifest an immense bond of affection and support among these odd warrior-clowns of the wrestling ring. For my part, the comraderie, which radiates an inspiring humanity, made the commitment of the wrestlers to violence all the more mysterious. Male readers may recognise this as a picture of an inconsistency they know well that is deeply embedded in the lives of Western men, yet find it less mysterious. I felt that I was being given an insight into male identity that I had not had before.

In the final scene of the film Randy, in his American hero drag, fights a well-known villain of the wrestling world who is costumed as The Ayatollah. These men are, behind the scenes, dear friends, warmly collaborating to produce the effects the fans see. The link during this closure between American

macho mystique and an America fooling itself in a terrible, drastic, and pointless way about the political configuration of the world is inescapable - especially considering the outcome of the battle. Aronofsky and Rourke have found hidden treasure in the catacombs of a dilapidated genre form.

The Class, directed by Laurent Cantet, was screened on the opening night film of NYFF 2008 and it was the first film shown during the press screenings. It presents a series of events that take place in a high school classroom in the 20th arrondissement in Paris, a diverse, working class, 'tough' neighbourhood. Though the events filmed were not real, the performers are real, non-professional students, most of whom are creating themselves as characters, and a few who are creating characters to act; and their teacher, Francois Begaudeau, a real teacher, on whose book, *Entre Les Murs*, this film was based. In the production notes, Begaudeau notes that he constructed himself as a character in the film but sometimes speaks in his own voice as he actually would in a classroom (all the instructors in *The Class* are played by actual high school teachers). Like *24 City*, Cantet's film seeks to capture a moment of transition in social history through a combination of documentary and fiction. Lacking the aesthetic beauty of *24 City* (Cantet's film looks like videotape, while Zhangke's film attains the quality associated with film) *The Class*, nevertheless captivates. It seethes with the energy of the adolescents and captures the real frustrations of the teachers confronted with classes that find the body of knowledge they are attempting to communicate irrelevant for a number of reasons that will be familiar to audiences but which come at us in a fresh and fascinating way.

Say good-bye to the 'Gay Paree' of the movies, filled with Gallic charm in a range of homogeneous shapes and sizes. This class has the look of the melting pot of New York. Say good-bye to the vaunted discipline of French education. This class has kicked the traces and not only will not learn to command; it questions the need for instruction that is not immediately relevant to their lives. Say good-bye to the class, racial, and ethnic hierarchy that has so long characterised modern France. This class isn't buying it and is not afraid to register the humiliation and anger of being defined as second best. Cantet's depiction of the high school, intentionally, rejects the idea of school as a haven

or sanctuary, and defines it as what he refers to in the note for the film as a 'sounding board', a microcosm in which the conflicts of the large society play themselves out. Alarming as this may be to some, Begaudeau's classroom embodies the ideal that Jia Zhangke seeks for China, the free play of individuals who are up to challenging the system.

Memorable moments in Cantet's free form construction of *The Class*, include a male student asking Begaudeau if he is gay; students rebelling against being taught the subjunctive tense which they think is absurd; students rebelling against the use of 'strange' European names in sentences being used to teach grammar. In the notes, Begaudeau says that he welcomes exactly those kinds of questions. Where traditional teachers try to shut down those discussions as fast as they can, he encourages them in his real classes, as he does in the film. The prickly interchanges play out like allegories of the force of tradition meeting the force of change. Things get especially hairy when Begaudeau's teacher character is at his wits end and finds himself calling one of the girls a 'skank', a momentary loss of control that has major consequences. However, because of the un sentimental, non-melodramatic nature of this film, there is little that doesn't reverse itself in interesting ways over the period of time of the semester.

Ultimately, all of these films are about radical historical discontinuities and the capacity of a free 'I' to use memory to examine trauma for productive purposes. Despite their darkness, more than any feel good films I have ever seen (with the exception of the Astaire/Rogers musicals) they produce in me an optimism about our sad world and a belief in the ongoing vitality of cinema.