

Watershed January 2008 Podcast

Amidst the media glitz of Cannes it can be easily forgotten that the true purpose of the greatest film festival in the world is to uncover and promote the best in world cinema. The international competition at Cannes can be one of the best places to see the finest in new cinematic voices and it is doubly rewarding when the jury acknowledges one of those discoveries.

This happened last year when the Romanian film '4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days' was awarded the Palme D'or.

Seeing it for the first time without any critical framework was a revelation – a truly compelling film, which tells an increasingly gripping story in a uniquely cinematic way. Romanian cinema has really been on the resurgence over the past 10 years. Films such as Corneliu Porumboiu's '12.08 East of Bucharest' and Cristi Puiu's 'The Death of Mr Lazaresco' have been acclaimed internationally and have etched a new type of cinema into world consciousness. This isn't grim cinema – in a clichéd image of the impoverished Eastern Europe – but rather resilient cinema with acres of humanity, which charts the emergence of a culture from decades behind the iron curtain into an age of self-expression. It is interestingly and distinctively cinematic – the style of long observant takes, drawing you into the characters' worlds.

It reminds me of Andre Bazin, founding father of Cahier Du Cinema and, indeed, film criticism, and his argument for the importance of long takes as a defining characteristic of cinema. He argued that the films of Renoir, William Wyler and Orson Welles drew you into the films' worlds and created a fictional reality that was distinctively cinematic as opposed to a world constructed of fragments of edited footage. In '4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days' you feel the evidence of Bazin's argument – you, the audience, are there with the two women as they negotiate an abortion with a backstreet abortionist and you feel their entrapment, their terror and their friendship tested.

There is, not surprisingly, very little infrastructure for cinema in Romania; indeed, there has been little investment in any infrastructure in Romania. Ceausescu dominated with a cult of the personality and such was his that he built himself a palace, which is the second biggest building in the world – everyone else lived in classic communist style flats, which are on the verge of crumbling. However, on a recent trip to a Europa cinema conference in Bucharest, I noticed on the way from the airport signs for McDonalds and IKEA. Things are changing.

In cinema terms there are some multiplexes, but that means that US films have over 90% share of the market. Independent and art-house cinemas are few and far between, so the recent waves of excellent Romanian films only get a fraction of the market.

Following the Palme D'or win at Cannes for '4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days', the director Cristian Mungiu wanted to get his film out to as wide an audience as possible in his home country. Given the dearth of screens, he and his colleagues took the inspired and inspiring approach of treating the film a bit like a rock tour. They arranged to take the film around the country screening it in town halls, theatres – basically any space they could get their projector and screen in to. A group would go ahead 3/4 days in advance and start the advertising. Then Mungiu would arrive with the film, introduce it and talk afterwards. The audiences were extraordinary and, of course, as the tour went on it got bigger and bigger.

The audience response was also really incredible. The younger generations were shocked at what their parents had to go through under Ceausescu's regime, whilst for some of the older generations, being reminded was too much and some had to be carried weeping from the screening. A quite momentous experience, and testament to, not only an extraordinary film, but to the power of film.

'4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days' opens at Watershed on Fri 11 Jan.

Slapstick is now in its 4th year and it grows bigger and better in its explorations into silent comedy film. Being able to see silent film as it was intended – in a cinema with live music – really brings them back to glorious life. I've never said this to Slapstick chief programmer Paul Merton's face, but I've always been a Keaton kinda person in the evidently childish divide of Chaplin v Keaton. However, when you see both of them up there on the big screen their comic talents come to the fore. As if to prove all those Chaplin doubters wrong, Merton has commissioned a reworking of the original Chaplin score for his greatest silent film 'The Gold Rush'. This new score is to be performed by the 15-piece Emerald Ensemble at the Colston Hall on the 18th Jan. If you are either a Chaplin doubter, or have not yet experienced silent film with live music on this scale, I urge you to get along for what will be a truly unique experience.

Elsewhere in slapstick there are of host of very live comedians paying homage to their influences, including: Phill Jupitus in conversation with one time Bonzo Dog Doo Dah band member Neil Innes about the lineage from silent clowns to Monty Python and Spike Milligan; and former Goodies Tim Brooke-Taylor and Graeme Garden return to give their insights into comedy, film and timing.

We can all get a bit carried away with the funny guys from the era but there were a whole host of funny women too and so there is a timely focus on the funny ladies of silent cinema. Over four programmes you can be reminded of the formidable comic talents of Clara Bow, Mabel Normand and Beatrice Lillie.

There is much more on offer and most is accompanied with live music. See slapstick.org.uk for more details of the programme.

January also sees the welcome release of some heavy weight auteur cinema: Ang Lee revisits his far-east roots for a provocative study of espionage and eroticism in pre revolution Shanghai in 'Lust, Caution'; Mexican Carlos Reygadas is emerging as one of the most talented figures in world cinema and his new film 'Silent Light' is as breathtaking in its intensity as it is esoteric in its subject matter; The Coen Brothers return to their 'Blood Simple' roots in 'No Country for Old Men', a dark thriller with an absurdist twist and a terrifying performance from Javier Bardem as a psychopathic assassin.

If this is the start of the year, then 2008 is looking like a quite brilliant year for cinema.

For further information, visit: watershed.co.uk