

Watershed March 2008 Podcast

Last month I attended the Berlin Film Festival and I thought I would give you a rundown of some of the highlights from this year's festival and what you might expect to see at Watershed over the forthcoming year.

The Berlinale is one of the greatest world film festivals, in one of the world's great city's. It is immense and diverse in scale and it is completely impossible to capture everything but you can get a sense of currents in world cinema from the festival's International Competition Forum and Panorama Strands. It is indeed global, screening films from all over the world. One day I went from China to Afghanistan and then onto Belgium all within one afternoon.

The first film I managed to see was a real treat and I don't think can really be counted in the way of work. I noticed there was a press show of the opening film **Shine a Light**, Scorsese's film of a live concert by the Rolling Stones. While I didn't have press accreditation, I knew they often did repeat screenings 15 min's after the official press show and industry accredited sorts like myself could often get in (in a parenthesis and not one that would interest the casual listener, but the hierarchies in film festivals, esp. the large ones, have their very own class systems. Someone who you were casually chatting with as an equal all of a sudden becomes an object of your ire, as they swan past you into a screening and you are left fuming anxiously wondering if you will get in. On this occasion it was to be.)

I was quite surprised by the tepid critical reaction to **Shine a Light**. I think there is something about not allowing old rockers, who were once rebellious young rockers, to be acknowledged for the great performers that they are. It's a curious thing with the Stones because their influences were blues singers, who the older they got the more they seemed to be revered. **Shine a Light** is filmed over two nights in a small venue by Martin Scorsese. Whilst Scorsese seems to be the director of choice for rock docs, the thing about him is that he understands the dynamic of pop music in relation to the image and he is seriously into the Stones music having used them in most of his soundtracks. Jagger joked at the press conference that his was the first film in which Scorsese hadn't used "Street Fighting Man". The opening of the film is about the creative tensions between rock 'n' rollers and dynamic filmmaker. They won't give him the set list, coz they haven't decided, he wants the set list because he has storyboarded – what seems to be like the whole of the Stones back catalogue – and wants to tell the camera operators what positions to take up. As the Stones are about to take to the stage Scorsese is handed the set list. His knowledge of their music and dynamic of the performance is such that throughout the film you feel the intense energy of their performance. At times years drop off Jagger so that he becomes a lithe dangerous twenty something again. Unlike some critics I do not agree that this is just some record of the aged Stones, **Shine a Light** captures the reason why the Stones are indeed the greatest rock 'n' roll band. Richards is now the electric bluesman he always wanted to be, as is shown when Buddy Guy shares the stage and a riff with him.

That was as exhilarating a start to a festival as you could ask for. Following that I went on to see Peter Greenaway's new film **Rembrandt**. A surprise because I had forgotten he had made a new film and further surprise because it starred Martin Freeman from The Office as Rembrandt. What was extraordinary was that the more the film progressed the less he looked like that funny wee guy from The Office and the more he became Rembrandt – slightly pudgy nosed and all. Greenaway has gone

to, as one would expect, great lengths to recreate the light and the quality of the painted image. The film though is not as powerful as his 1980's career but sees Greenaway make, and he would probably grimace at the term, a more accessible film in narrative terms at least.

Films which should definitely get a release in the UK are:

Elegy an adaptation from Philip Roth's novel. I've always been wary of Roth's novels for no other reason than a prejudiced sense that they were going to be smugly middle aged, white and male and a follow through feeling that I wouldn't really want to hang out with those simmeringly misogynistic characters. I was uncomfortable at the beginning, as I felt this is entirely what was going to be delivered as we enter into the world of middle aged NY university lecturer played by Ben Kingsley. He talks smugly of his sexual journey through the 1960s and his current affair with new Cuban student, (played by Penelope Cruz) middle aged male wish fulfilment indeed. However the film takes a more complex turn and holds in great tension the balance of all the characters desires, pasts and possible futures. In fact towards the end as their relationships unravel there is an absolutely brilliant scene acted almost wordless between Kingsley and Cruz which manages to evoke such depths of emotion, loss and regret from the simple act of taking a photograph. Both of them are quite brilliant in **Elegy**.

Moving onto more female wish fulfilment territory is **El Pasado** starring Gael Garcia Bernal as a man caught in a series of relationships and haunted by the past of his marriage. It's directed by Brazilian director Hector Babenco who is probably most famous for **Kiss of the Spiderwoman**. Here he displays finely tuned hugely enjoyable storytelling finesse with a great central performance from Bernal who manages to bring an authenticity and believability to his situation – which I guess is why he is such an attractive personality as you believe that is him you are watching.

Continuing in the Hispanic vein **The Oxford Murders** is Spanish director Albert de la Iglesia's first full-blooded English language film. Some of you might know his earlier work such as **Day of the Beast** or **Acción Mutante**. **The Oxford Murders** could mark his breakthrough to a more English language audience. Iglesia's has a great track record of wayward hysterical gothic films. Here he embraces with full bloodied vigour the quintessential English murder mystery set amongst the spires of Oxford – at one point I half expected Morse or Lewis to walk across frame. Iglesia, I suspect plays with these expectations but takes us into infinitely darker and sexier territory. It's a tight twisting – imagine Agatha Christie in a room with PD James and – and your kind of getting there. John Hurt brings an etched gravitas as a philosophy lecturer and there is a jaw dropping sequence starring British director Alex Cox that defies even David Lynch for weirdness.

The Italian film **Calm Chaos** shown in competition was a real highlight as when it unfolded I thought - is it going to pull it off or will it simply fall on the weight of its contrivance? A successful businessman, played by Italian actor director Nanni Moretti, tragically loses his wife in an accident. He wasn't there at time and his 9-year-old daughter asks why he wasn't there for her. Later, on taking his daughter to her first day back at school he says he will wait for her in the park opposite. This he does day after day after day bringing his business world to him and building up relationships with the community around the park. The film does it with such belief, primarily radiated through Moretti's performance, that you buy into the circumstances and root for the emotions of the character. It pulls back from any

saccharine sentimentality instead building to an emotionally satisfying climax. Unfortunately this will I am sure be remade by Hollywood who will inject the saccharine sentimentality and probably cast Tom Hanks – see the original before that calamity.

Two films from Sweden were real highlights for me. I've admired the strength of Swedish short films for years in my capacity as Creative Director of **Encounters Short Film Festival**. It was only just last year at Encounters that we screened Jens Jonsson's wonderful **Linerboard**. Indeed Jonsson's body of short films must be one of the most distinctive and talented. So it was with high anticipation that I went to see his first feature **The King of Ping Pong**. It had already picked up an award at the Sundance Film Festival and got a great audience response from the Rotterdam Film Festival. It delivers on Jonsson's idiosyncratic visual style telling the story of an overweight adolescent boy whose life becomes increasingly fraught, his one release of Table Tennis is not enough to shield him from the ambiguities of his parentage and tense relationship with his brother. I enjoyed the film but I suffered from the weight of raised expectation knowing Jonsson's earlier work. However I was pleased that UK colleagues in both exhibition and distribution responded warmly and enthusiastically. It deserves to be seen and Jonsson is a talent that deserves to be promoted.

Similarly **Leo** by Josef Fares was a powerful experience. A leisurely opening sequence depicts the main characters 30th birthday celebrations, introducing us to his family and friends. As he and his girlfriend stumble happily drunkenly home they bump into a couple of terrifying characters and the story takes a tragically shocking course. **Leo** is tense filmmaking with excellent performance and script – I have severe reservations about the last 15 minutes, but up until then I was gripped in its vice like self assurance. I was urging all indie UK distributors to see **Leo** in the hope that someone will pick it up for UK distribution.

A footnote; at the Swedish reception I met both directors and duly complimented them on their films and discovered that they were in the same year at film school. One can only imagine the cinematic fireworks at that film school.

Sometimes it's difficult to know how to make choices on what films to see when you are at a festival of the scale of Berlin – something in the region of 200 screenings per day – of films that are so new there is no word on the street. A couple of times I took the decision based on the titles and much to my delight this paid off. First was **Buddha Collapsed out of Shame**, which I have to admit was mainly due to the poster as it seemed to be set amidst the ruined Buddha's of Bahrain. I remember seeing that on the news when the Taliban, in a final act of cultural barbarity and sacrilegious defiance, bombed the amazing statues. The film turned out to be one of the most powerful of the festival telling on one level the moving story of a 6-year- old girl who simply wants to go to school and on another an extraordinary effective parable of the barbarity of men. Whilst the power of the film was being absorbed as the credits went by I noticed the name Makhmalbaf and it is indeed come from the Iranian Makhmalbaf dynasty. **Buddha Collapsed out of Shame** went onto to win an award.

The other was **Mad Detective**, a combination of intriguing B-movie title and country of origin- China had me hooked. And what a treat! a brilliantly original take on the detective genre featuring a cop who can see the personality or in cases personalities of people and discover the killer. However he is seriously mad, having conversations with his non-existent girlfriend, slicing off his own ear to give to his chief as a

retirement present. The film works in its own sublime madness and reaches a genre satisfying climax with a glorious nod to the famous mirror scene in Orson Wells' **Lady from Shanghai**, completely and utterly brilliant.

Finally documentaries which reflect and remind us of great cultural personalities, Hunter S Thompson and Derek Jarman. Clearly very different in their personas and art but illuminating to be brought back face to face as it were, with their work and lives. **The Core of Derek** is an interview with Jarman in his Dungeness cottage where he expansively, articulately reflects on his life work and art. Interspersed with sequences from his films it leaves you with the desire to see his work again in the cinema and highlights the phenomenal impact that Jarman had. I know the documentary and some of his work was screened on More 4, but they deserve to be available in cinemas, which as I write they are not (or similarly in DVD). The director Isaac Julien has curated a show which is currently on at the Serpentine, where Derek is also screening which hints at what is available. Next year is 15 years since his death, let the campaign commence to get his films back in the cinema and honour at the feet of St. Derek.

For more information on the films mentioned in this month's podcast visit www.berlinale.de