

Watershed June 2008 Podcast: 61st Cannes Film Festival

If last year's 60th edition of the Cannes Film Festival was a vintage year, then the 61st must be close behind. There were no obvious 'big-hitters' as the parlance would have it – i.e. no on-form Coen Brothers – but it meant that the field was wide open for discoveries, revelations and argument. Indeed, by midweek the critics were in no agreement, which is a good sign in my book.

A story to illustrate was the eagerly awaited premiere of Argentinean director Lucrecia Martel's third feature *The Women Without a Head*. Her earlier *La Cienega* and *The Holy Girl* were brilliantly atmospheric, wonderfully ambiguous films, which marked a decidedly new and exciting talent. This new film had the added attraction of being produced via Spanish director Pedro Almodovar's company. Unfortunately, I couldn't get myself a ticket to see the movie and read the following day in the trade papers that it was poorly received – certainly by Screen International's critics, although the French were more favourable. I was due to leave on the day of its second screening but a colleague David Sin from the Independent Cinema Office had just arrived and was going to see it. I got a text at the airport simply saying the critics got it wrong; I look forward to catching up with it in the near future and screening it at Watershed.

There had been a bit of broo-ha-ha in the UK press on the run up to Cannes: no British film was selected for the main competition and this prompted the usual cry of “well, Cannes doesn’t matter...” from some quarters. However, as was pointed out, a British debut feature was opening the prestigious Un Certain Regard section, which in other festivals would be a sidebar, but in Cannes it’s very prestigious indeed.

Another British feature was in the Director’s Fortnight, and the greatest British director never to have been supported to make a film in the last 10 years, Terence Davies, remarkably had his new film – albeit a documentary relying heavily on archive footage – screening out of competition. Not bad for a wee country!

Steve McQueen is known and hugely respected for his artwork, all of which – to my knowledge – have been moving image installations. The most recent at the Venice Biennale was an extraordinary, intense piece following the manual extraction of a rare mineral out of Congo soil to use in hi-tech manufacturing. I was aware McQueen was working on his first feature film and when I hear of artists making moves into the film world – as regular readers will know already – I flinch somewhat. However, McQueen’s work has an intensity that uses cinematic language to convey his meaning. When I heard the subject was Bobby Sands, the IRA hunger striker in the notorious H block prisons, I thought that if anyone was going to capture the intensity of that situation, then McQueen could.

It was with some trepidation that I went to the screening, only to be sent reeling into the Cannes streets afterwards shocked, speechless and in complete admiration for the power of the film. This was a 10am screening and I had another reportedly heavy film, *Soi Cowboy*, to see at noon. I walked down the street with Culture Show critic Mark Kermode who had also been in the screening – he was heading off to see the return of Indiana Jones. I thought for a moment about how could I get a ticket, as that's exactly the mindless entertainment required after *Hunger*; I would have to settle for stiff drink instead. *Hunger* went on to win the Camera D'or for first time filmmakers and was subsequently bought for UK distribution by Pathé, and will be released later in the year.

I know of Duane Hopkins – the British director of *Better Things*, showing in the Critics' Week - through his short films, which we have screened at the Encounters Short Film Festival. His feature is an exceptional gloomy film – and I do mean gloomy in the best sense of the word – which unusually depicts a teenage reality of drug-fuelled miserablism in rural Cotswolds. It's a confidently assured, cinematographically precise film in which Hopkins knows exactly what he is trying to achieve.

Terence Davies made a triumphant return to Cannes. His documentary *Of Time and the City* is a poetic meditation on his home city Liverpool. Reports of critics leaving the press screening in tears circulated round the Croisette. I managed to get into the late night repeat screening introduced by Davies himself. It was indeed a moving scene as most of the British

delegation arose in applause to this much-maltreated major filmmaking talent. The film, as said, is a poetic meditation relying heavily on wonderful archive footage of Liverpool and narrated in fully animated undulating melodramatic timbre by Davies himself. It wasn't the moving masterpiece I was expecting but it was rewarding enough to hopefully be at the beginning of the renaissance of Davies, and I much look forward to Davies' own moving images.

I also managed to see a handful of films from the main competition, of which some thoughts are:

Linha de Passe from Walter Salles, and co directed by Daniela Thomas, was a powerful if somewhat predictable triumph of the human spirit in the slums of Brazil. However, its predictability is I think down to world-weary film people like myself probably seeing too many films. In retrospect, this film will really engage audiences in the ensemble stories of the family it depicts, their aspirations and passions. The opening sequences themselves were an energetic triumph of cinema.

Also from South America – there is a pattern emerging here, because I do believe cinema from south America has been consistently strong for the past few years – was *Leonera* from the director of *El Bonaerense / Familia Rodante* – another engaging story of a woman locked up in prison whilst pregnant who gets salvation of sorts through the burgeoning relationship with her child. Its depiction of 'family' prison life is raw and the performance by the main actress exceptional.

Waltz with Bashir was probably the most emotional amongst a line up of highly charged films. It depicts the remembrances of Israeli soldiers' attack on Lebanon in the early 1980s via animation – a technique that pulls you into the evolving narrative in a seductive dreamlike way, only to reveal in a devastatingly powerful way the consequences of the attack.

Hungarian film *Delta* was exquisitely realised, classically constructed eastern European cinema. The kind of cinema you have to give yourself over to, rather than expecting conventional, mainstream narrative flow. It's set in the extraordinary Danube delta where a man returns to build himself a new life. Some of the images were stunning, as was the music.

The stand out cinematic moment was seeing enigmatic director Leos Carax's contribution to the triptych *Tokyo*. It grips from the off and doesn't let go - like Monty Python on speed. It's completely serious and completely daft and proves beyond a doubt the extraordinary remarkable talent of French actor Denis Lavant.

Stand out crazy Cannes moment? Diego Maradona standing at the top of the red carpet showing he still has that phenomenal talent with the ball and then kicking it into the crowds.