

Watershed July 2008 Podcast: Il Cinema Ritrovato

I've just come back from a festival where the history of cinema is taken seriously and given its rightful place as a cultural celebration. Here you can revisit the silent era – always presented with live music – reappraise long forgotten films, see classics reissued in new prints and rethink cinema as a living, breathing art form with a rich and rewarding history, lively present and – according to some here – an uncertain future.

The event is *Il Cinema Ritrovato* in Bologna, Italy now in its 22nd edition. Based at the Cineteca, it presents an extraordinarily varied programme of retrospectives, themed programmes and events over 8 packed days. The work varies from some of the earliest recordings on film of, for example, the Suffragettes, to reissues of classics from world cinema – amongst them *Bad Day at Black Rock* and *Touki Bouki*. The latter film is part of the world cinema foundation programme, which is fronted by Martin Scorsese. He announced in Cannes last year a strategy to start to save the heritage of world cinema. If it is an arduous and expensive task in so-called developed countries to preserve their cinematic past, imagine what it is like for countries without any archive infrastructure or whose economic needs is such that film preservation does not begin to register as a necessity.

In this context Scorsese championed – and indeed is chairman of – the olympian task of preserving world cinema. This year's festival saw the screening of the first fruits of this programme. Two films and a short were screened. The feature films were, from 1964 *Susuz Yaz* (*Dry Summer* in English), from Turkey and directed by Metin Krksan, of which I have to say I had never come across.

The contemporary Turkish director Fatih Akin nominated the film, and this is what he said about it:

“Dry Summer is a film of passion. A passion for water as well as the obsessive passion created by forbidden love... Here is a film that, in 45 years since it was made, has lost none of its universal qualities, none of its relevance, particularly today when wars and rebellions are waged because of droughts... Dry Summer is an important piece of cinema because it is unlike any other film made at the time and its narrative is strikingly original... Authorities at the time objected to Dry Summer representing Turkey overseas, which presented all kinds of obstacles when the film came to the Berlin Film festival. The film walked away with the top prize but before success could even be celebrated it was ‘taken captive’ and completely forgotten for the next 45 years. Today, in these times of intellectually dry summers, when greed is driving humanity to the brink of starvation, this film could hardly be more valid. Dry Summer is one of the most important legacies of Turkish cinema, and thanks to restoration it can be re-discovered by the next generations of audiences all over the world.”

The second film is the aforementioned *Touki Bouki* from Senegal, directed by Djibril Diop Mambety in 1973. It has been described as Africa’s Easy Rider – its tale of one man’s journey becomes a modern day odyssey and morality tale.

Contemporary Senegalese director Souleymane Cisse wrote this introduction to the film:

"Touki Bouki is a prophetic film. Its portrayal of 1973 Senegalese society is not too different from today's reality. Hundreds of young Africans die every day at the Straits of Gibraltar trying to reach Europe... All their hardships find voice in Djibril's film: the young nomads who think they can cross the desert ocean and find their own lucky star and happiness but are disappointed by the human cruelty they encounter. Touki Bouki is a beautiful, upsetting and unexpected film that makes us question ourselves."

These are two prime examples of previously neglected films with contemporary resonance, which the foundation and the festival are there to preserve and present.

The short in the world cinema foundation programme is the first of 18 previously unseen behind-the-scenes footage of the great Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. This is a partnership with the Bergman foundation to make this tantalising glimpse of the great auteur in action more widely available.

A key part of the Bologna festival is to experience silent film with live accompaniment. At its most spectacular this is presented in open air in the main Bologna square, where literally thousands of people congregate. The screenings are on an epic scale. I managed to see a screening of Alfred Hitchcock's last silent film *Blackmail* with a 60-piece orchestra and a truly fantastic score by Neil Brand. His score made energetic use of Bernard Herrmann's many collaborations with Hitchcock and, for me, rather than dissociate *Blackmail* from pre-sound Hitchcock, Brand made the film all the more strikingly contemporary. The print is from the British Film Institute and the following day there was much enthusiastic talk about the possibilities of getting a similar scale of screening in London. After all, this is where the film is set. If it happens I will be first in line for a ticket.

Coincidentally, the day before I had seen a French documentary called *The Wolf and the Lamb*. This was a set of interviews filmed in the 1960s with John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock. Ford – in typical fashion – gave nothing away whilst maintaining he was just doing a job. Hitchcock on the other hand gave quite brilliant analysis of *North by Northwest* demonstrating – as if we needed anymore than his films – that he was, and is, the master of manipulation.

I was in Bologna actually to do some work, participating and talking at a Europa cinemas workshop on developing young audiences for European Cinema - something of a Herculean task you might think in the face of Indiana Jones and Harry Potter. However, given the energy and ideas from the participants, who ranged from Slovenia and Bulgaria to Greece and Holland, there are ways and means and networking with European partners is a good way of sharing experiences. I did however manage to steal myself away for the guilty pleasure of seeing two new prints of Hollywood classics on the big screen. They were in the ongoing Cinema Larger Life strand, which re-presents classic cinemascope films.

The first film was Budd Boetticher's *Ride Lonesome* from 1959 starring Randolph Scott and featuring early appearances by Lee Van Cleef and James Coburn. The film has been restored by Sony Columbia in an extraordinary process. The severely faded original was digitised frame-by-frame, completely cleaned of scratches, dust and tears then the colour restored. The end digital result was then transferred back onto film. The results were extraordinary – a film, in effect, reborn. You can see how it influenced a whole generation of French critics and directors; it must also surely have been a template for Leone's Spaghetti Westerns.

Also in this programme was John Sturges' 1955 *Bad Day At Black Rock* where a one armed Spencer Tracy arrives in the isolated desert hamlet of Black Rock to unravel a dark secret. It is a lesson in composition with characters and landscape that again I'm sure Sergio Leone learnt a few things from.

It was pointed out to me that in the context of a European cinema conference to develop young audiences for European cinema, wasn't this in effect sleeping with the enemy? I could only answer that I was paying a lot of attention to the Italian subtitles.

The issue of digital crops up again and again in various forums I have been at over the past five years. The industry is going through one of the most turbulent transformations since, well, the coming of sound. It is recognised that the film industry will go digital but what are the implications of this for the preservation of world film heritage? Initially the optimistic view was that it was the answer – surely film could be digitised and stored on disc – not taking up space like celluloid – and every screening would be like the first. Whereas film collects dust and scratches the more it is screened. Not only was it overly optimistic, it is unrealistic. Digital, people are realising has its own storage problems, corruptibility and foibles. For archivists a combination of the sheer volume of cinema, issues of degradation and storage, added to the fact that today's films become tomorrow's heritage, can become an overwhelming challenge.

However, cinema is so often thought of in the present – the latest blockbuster release – that it is a refreshing and rewarding to see cinema presented with a past and a future. *Il Cinema Ritrovato* in Bologna is a heroic and passionate enterprise in all of this and if I were you I would be saving up for next year.