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Watershed January 2009 Podcast

As the old year ended with a look back at the highs and lows so it is only right that the new one should begin with forward glance at the forthcoming prospects. We literally hit the ground running and as far as I can see do not take a break until sometime in April. Already showing at watershed as we belatedly record this podcast are two powerful films. First up is Stephen Daldry's **The Reader** adapted by David Hare from the acclaimed novel by Bernhard Schlink. The acclaim for the novel was that it presented a fresh and uncomfortable perspective on the Holocaust: one which tried to get into the minds of the perpetrators. Uncomfortable because it is all too easy to think of the world in easy binary opposition of right and wrong, good and evil whereas the novel presents nuance and moral ambiguity. For Germans it begins to address the question head on of generational responsibility. In a recent article for the guardian newspaper David Hare reminded of Jean-Luc Godard's astute observation: "If ever a film is to be made about Auschwitz, it will have to be from the point of view of the guards." **The Reader** – film and book – are attempts to address this controversial and complex perspective.

The Reader is the story of a teenage boy in the post war Germany who has an affair with an older woman – played by Kate Winslet. In later years the boy is training to be a lawyer. As part of his studies he goes to the war crime trials where he discovers his former lover on trial accused of being a Nazi guard in the Holocaust. The film is beautifully judged and excellently structured with a truly outstanding performance from Winslet. I confess now that I am not a great admirer of Kate

Winslet but here she shows herself to be formidable actress with a emotional depth presented in the nuances of her facial expressions that gives her character a very real presence and ambiguous past. (As an aside I am sure Winslet will be an Oscar winner either for this or for her other up and coming film Revolutionary Road.)

Good as the **The Reader** is, I feel it is not without its problems. It is of course dramatic and Daldry as you can imagine does an great job of drawing the audience in and engages us in the morality of actions but.....and for me it is a big but!.....I couldn't help wondering if the film ended up, to put it crudely as an apology for illiterate Nazis. If only this woman had been able to read, been educated, she would have been saved from her barbaric actions. In effect it wasn't really her fault, was it? This I feel is given more credibility by the fact that she is played by our very own dear Kate Winslet who, whilst giving a quite brilliant performance, would never knowingly or maliciously hurt anyone.

Perhaps I am being naïve and, having read David Hare's account of tackling the adaptation I certainly wouldn't like to go a few rounds with him on it. But on leaving the cinema, with some fellow audience members reduced to tears, indeed my own emotions wrung, as I started to think about what the film was trying to say, the seeds of doubt were planted. Maybe it is a flaw of cinema in dealing with such subject matter – that the visual image reduces the ability to describe and debate whereas the novel can explore and investigate emotion without becoming caught up in the emotional.

Moving on **Che: the Argentine** is the first of two parts of a portrait of revolutionary icon Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. The second part opens here in February. Director Soderberg has come in from praise and criticism in equal measure for his efforts. I haven't seen them yet so hold critical

fire but vis-a-vis the Winslett issue above I am somehow convinced of Benicio del Toro's ability to portray Che. (Where did that view come from I think to myself.) Apart from obvious historic significance Soderberg's film is interesting from a technical perspective because he shot them using the new Red cameras which apparently give filmmakers, the flexibility of digital with the quality of 35mm and a low price and are spoken of as revolutionising – no pun intended – the digital filmmaking process. South West based cinematographer Terry Flaxton is doing some pioneering research at Bristol University on Hi-definition and electronic cinematography and gave an illuminating talk at the encounters festival on the impact and virtues of Red cameras and you can find out more at <http://www.flaxton.btinternet.co.uk/>

No sooner are *The Reader* and *Che* on our screens than Danny Boyle's **Slumdog Millionaire** hits the cinema. It is a dazzling energetic film which moves you effortlessly between the slums and mean streets of Mumbai, wrapped up with the inexorable narrative pull of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, the script is by Simon Beaufoy is moving and witty and Boyle's dynamic direction makes the film zip along. The first in what I am sure will be an increasing synthesis of dramatic structure of western cinema and the exuberance of Bollywood films.

Milk will surely win Sean Penn an Oscar for his equally exuberant performance as Harvey Milk, the first openly Gay American voted into major public office in San Francisco in the 1970s. He was assassinated in 1978 and as recently as 2000 was voted as one of the most important Americans of the 20th century by Time magazine.

Doubt sees another masterclass in acting between Meryl Streep as a sister Aloysius Beauvier who suspects a priest played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman of abusing young boys. The dialogue rich film

allows the actors to parley great exchanges which lead to though provoking debate about religion and morality.

February sees the return of Woody Allen. He has been going through a varied few years but by all accounts **Vicky Christina Barcelona** is a true return to form (unlike some of the previous so called return to forms...) it certainly has a mouthwatering if not juicy cast list including Spanish stars Javier Bardem and Penelope Cruz and Scarlet Johanssen and with a witty Allen script - something for everyone I would have thought. Laurent Cantet's **The Class** was the unanimous Palm d'Or winner at Cannes last year and whilst its synopsis - a committed teacher tackles a racially mixed school in a tough district of Paris - might sound somewhat clichéd in cinema terms but Cantet delivers an absorbing, powerful and extremely topical film drawn from the very real experience of teacher Francois Begaudeau who stars in the film. Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan's **Three Monkeys** is an exquisitely filmed drama. Ceylan trained as a photographer and his images are exquisite in the film.

Smuggled amongst all these art house big hitters - as the film industry parlance would have it - is **Better Things** a British film which was one of only three representing the UK in Cannes last year. It was shown in the critics week strand. Directed by Duane Hopkins whose short films we have screened at encounters short film festival, Better Things is a distinctive austere drama about rural teenage life and drug addiction set in the Cotswolds. The story of the films reception in the UK and attempts to get it distributed are a demonstration of how difficult the UK exhibition scene is for distinctive unorthodox voices. At the time of recording this podcast I am hoping to get the Duane Hopkins and the film's energetic producer Samm Haily to come to Watershed to talk

about the film and share experiences of how independent films can get made and distributed against the odds in the UK.

Looking further ahead we have – the screen adaptation of David Peace's **The Damned United** a portrait of maverick football manager Brian Clough's tenure over the team he loathed Leeds United. Clough is played by Michael Sheen so it should be a cracker. Continuing the football theme, June sees Ken Loach's **Looking for Eric**, a drama based on the life of Eric Cantona – story has it that when Loach was researching the film he went to a Man Utd match at Old Trafford and was in one of the guests box's before the match where in he met Alex Ferguson who proceeded to quote verbatim from Loach's films. Loach had to remind him he had a team talk to get to. Getting Loach and Ferguson on stage for a discussion now there's a thought. Looking for Eric I'm sure will get a coveted slot in competition at Cannes this year along with Pedro Almodovar's new film **Broken Embraces** which gets a release in the UK in late August. All in all, good cinematic prospects for 2009. See you at the cinema.