Despite these financially strained times, British cinemas are reporting record attendance and box office revenue. When the London Film Festival wrapped for 2009, organizers claimed that attendance this year was higher than last year—124,000 compared to 115,000. Falling incomes ruled out foreign holidays and expensive entertainment for some, leaving many grateful for the simple pleasures of film. While Woody Allen’s subject, a depressed housewife, in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) seeks an escape from the brutalities of life in cinematic fantasies, today’s beleaguered worker finds similar escape from economic hardship through film. Yet, this year’s festival films suggest that cinema is not merely fantastical entertainment. Even when it seems so, like in Wes Anderson’s playful adaptation of Roald Dahl’s *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009), the film’s stop-motion animation signals a welcome change from the ubiquity of CGI in contemporary film and celebrates film’s technological history.

Michael Moore’s *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), a timely call to action, was this year’s surprise film, for which audiences bought tickets blind. Frederick Wiseman’s *La Danse: The Paris Opera Ballet* (2009) is an elegant observational documentary about one of France’s foremost cultural institutions. At one point, the creative director secures patronage from the Lehman Brothers (oh, happy pre-credit crunch days!) as she seeks to restrict these donors’ access to rehearsals. Here, the dancers’ anxieties and aspirations are juxtaposed with their on-stage agility and beauty. John Hillcoat’s *The Road* (2009), adapted from Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel, warns about the consequences of wanton environmental destruction. Additionally, Chris Atkin’s *Starsuckers* (2009) investigates the dominance of celebrity culture by providing a convincing psychosocial explanation for society’s fixation on fame, while showing how the prevalence of celebrity culture is a placebo for public political discussion. Sergio Vieira de Mello, the UN Human Rights Commissioner killed in the bombing of a Baghdad hotel, is a touching portrait of a charming peacemaker who engages both heroes and villains on the world stage. Yoav Shamir’s *Defamation* (2009) is a lighthearted Israeli film that investigates claims of contemporary anti-Semitism. It concludes that such accusations are a conservative strategy for defining a secular Jewish identity within a fraught political situation rather than overt proof of racism. Similarly, *Osadné* (2009, directed by Marko Škop) is a humorous account of a dying Slovak village’s attempt to lobby the European Union for a heritage trail. The *Absence* (2009, directed by Mama Keïta) is a French-Senegalese thriller about a young man’s reluctant return to Senegal from Paris to rescue his sister and resolve his ambiguous feelings about the culture he left behind fifteen years above
prior. A fun piece, *Double Hour* (2009, directed by Giuseppe Capotondi) is a clever and complex take on the noir thriller, while the French film *Regrets* (2009, directed by Cédric Kahn) portrays the consequences of running into a former lover with whom one has unfinished business.

Festival events this year included “Snipping Away at the Celluloid Ceiling,” a forum on women filmmakers featuring producers Jan Chapman, Lisa Cortés, and Finola Dwyer, along with filmmakers Xiaolu Guo and Lindy Heymann. While well intentioned, the moderator led the discussion down the familiar feminist garden path of trying to identify “female aesthetics,” which in turn elicited a string of cringe-worthy generalizations about women and cinema. Such an inquiry into female aesthetics forgets that the establishment of a women’s cinema in the 1970s amounted to more of a straitjacket than a sustaining political stance. The diverse works represented by the panel, as well as other films included in the festival, point more to the urgent need for an updated feminist politics than a codified female aesthetics. Guo’s *She, a Chinese* (2009), for example, traces the journey of a peasant girl to the big city and then to London. Along the way, she experiences the downside of transnational mobility: Chinese villagers living off mountains of Europe’s recycled products, sweatshop labor conditions, and prostitution; a marriage of convenience and rootlessness as she moves from one scenario of entrapment to another. *She, a Chinese* can be compared with *His & Hers* (2009), a talking-head documentary that uses interviews with Irish women of increasing ages. Several dozen discuss their lives, which are invariably tied to the family and domesticity. The film then begs the question, are these the only options for women today? Another meaningful film, *Precious* (2009, directed by Lee Daniels) is a redemption story of an impoverished, obese, and abused African American teenager. A documentary about women inmates’ participation in prison rodeo, *Sweethearts of the Prison Rodeo* (2009, directed by Bradley Beesley) alerts viewers to Oklahoma’s rate of female incarceration—the highest in the United States. Interviews introduce some inmates with long sentences on drug charges, usually committed with or for their male partners. This film also presents difficult scenarios, such as the impregnation of an inmate on prison grounds. Iranian American Shirin Neshat’s *Women Without Men* (2009) is an exercise in maintaining the delicate balance between one’s artistic practice and his or her politics. The tension in Neshat’s magical-realist film about four women against the backdrop of the Iranian Revolution lies precisely at this juncture. Instead of relying on female aesthetics as a point of analytical departure, one might pose a more productive and provocative question about the politics of an artist’s film practice, regardless of his or her gender.

**BRINGING SEXY BACK**

**MIX New York Queer Experimental Film Festival**

New York City  
November 17–22, 2009

Where else but at MIX could one see so much heady formal innovation, sexual themes, and gender play, and meet bona fide pornographers, social activists, and seasoned filmmakers? MIX, the love child of writer Sarah Schulman and experimental filmmaker Jim Hubbard, has become an important event on New York’s annual arts calendar with its focus on installation and performance. In its twenty-second year, the festival continues to serve as a bridge between queer communities and art scenes, as evident in its most recent edition.

MIX’s exhibition site, or “factory,” has varied for the last few years as it depends on fluctuations in the real estate market and the generosity of property owners. While the 2008 edition of the festival occupied the former flagship Liz Claiborne store at the South Street Seaport, this year’s festival took over a storefront space in a new luxury Chelsea condominium co-op. The commercial space passed for a typical art gallery with its high ceilings, concrete floors and walls, and horseshoe layout: performances and installations took place on either side, while film and video programs were streamed in a curtained-off back area.

MIX 22 screened more than eighty films and videos and exhibited more than a dozen installations and performances. Noam Gonick and Luis Jacob’s installation “Wildflowers of Manitoba” (2007), which includes performance, stood out, due in part to its majestic Buckminster Fuller-esque geodesic dome that inhabited the space. Moving images of wildflowers and four young men frolicking in a meadow were projected onto the inside of the dome, which also housed a young long-haired man on a mattress, surrounded by burning incense, vinyl records, and other signifiers of an intimate space. The mattress motif also surfaced in Adriana Varella’s meditative installation “Meeting God” (2009), which included the projection of innumerable fornicating couples in black outline on a white background onto a mattress resting on the floor. On the wall there was a separate projection of verdant images of a forest.

Hector Canoge’s installation-performance “Schema CorpoReal” (2009) left an impression that lasted throughout the festival. The artist stood nearly naked with bar codes fixed to different parts of