I don’t know whether this was the best Cannes ever but it was certainly the best that I have attended in twenty-five years. First of all there were many fewer people. When I first went, in 1985, Cannes already hosted all the film world, the journalists, the festival programmers, the producers and distributors both big and small, the directors, and the stars. But every year as film became more dependent on television and the state, this original population was swelled by television executives and, worse, bureaucrats from every region in Europe that had started up a film fund. Finally, in recent years, as London nightclubs opened temporary branches, there have been huge numbers of young people for whom Cannes in May has absolutely nothing to do with films but is simply the venue of choice to get loaded and laid. Executives, bureaucrats, and liggers all gone, gone with the wind of economic collapse.

The film people were still there, however, and if belts were noticeably being tightened—hotels and apartments available for fewer than the full twelve days of the festival, buyers seeking market passes for one day—there was absolutely no stinting in the quality of films being shown. Indeed Cannes 2009 could be taken as proof that even as videogames displace film as the major form of entertainment, film’s position as the global art form remains unchallenged. By one of those coincidences at which history reveals itself, the competition strand this year played host to a group of outstanding directors: Pedro Almodóvar, Jacques Audiard, Ken Loach, Michael Haneke, and, almost like a time-traveling visitor, Alain Resnais. There is no doubt that the most moving moment of the festival was Resnais’s reception in the Grand Palais as he arrived to present *Wild Grass* (*Les Herbes folles*). When he entered the cinema, the applause went on forever. As indeed it should. This is the man who first introduced André Bazin to the history of film; the man who made *Les Statues meurent aussi* with Chris Marker and whose *Hiroshima mon amour* altered the artistic ambitions of postwar cinema. *Wild Grass* is a charming middle-aged love story, which weaves its protagonists’ lives together with wit, simplicity, and wisdom. However, the last two minutes of the film seem to come from another much more bitter and anguished film and *Wild Grass* demands a second viewing.

As is often the case at Cannes, old masters competed with newer talents. Andrea Arnold’s first film, *Red Road*, was set in Glasgow. Her second, *Fish Tank*, inhabits London’s East End. Not the fabled alleys of Whitechapel nor even the familiar parks of Hackney, but even further east where the white working class fled the slums in search of new jobs at Dagenham and the new houses that Harold Macmillan built as Churchill’s housing minister between 1951–54. Now, where the edge of London meets the Essex marshes, it is home to the underclass that Thatcher and Blair created. A world of terrible deprivation—deprivation of speech, deprivation of feeling, deprivation of life. Here Arnold finds her teenage heroine Mia (Katie Jarvis), isolated from her peers, rowing constantly with her party-loving single mother and her irritating younger sister. Every conversation is nasty, brutish, and short; Mia tries as hard as possible to be unlikeable. But she is as beautiful as the dawn and as Robbie Ryan’s cam-

Alain Resnais

Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival
era captures her in her environment, we are irresistibly drawn into her young life. Connor (Michael Fassbender) takes up with Mia's mother and the physical attraction between fifteen-year-old girl and charming hunk is perfectly realized, including a sex scene as moving as it is clichéd. The final scenes of the film are unbearably painful and yet Arnold manages to salvage a credible happy end. Red Road was marred by too melodramatic a script; Fish Tank effortlessly takes an uneventful story and turns it into gripping cinema. This really is direction of a very high order.

When John Keats died in Rome in 1821 at twenty-five of consumption, he thought himself an abject failure and asked that his grave bear the simple inscription: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water.” In fact, once dead, both his poetry and the story of his death became staples of the Victorian imagination. Part of that story is the secret engagement to Fanny Brawne, to whom he poured out, in some the greatest letters ever written in English, both his theory of poetry and the ambivalence and ambiguity of his attraction to Brawne. Unfortunately, Jane Campion’s biopic of Keats and Brawne, his “bright star,” has nothing to do with ambivalence or ambiguity. The love affair does not convince on any level. It is clear that Abbie Cornish, who plays Brawne, has a formidable screen presence, but Ben Whishaw struggles in a role that never begins to capture Keats’s obsession with death and his desire to “cease upon the midnight with no pain.” Bright Star oafishly fails to absorb what might have been learnt from “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the poem that captures most perfectly the poet’s ambivalence toward Brawne. I have great difficulty when teaching this poem to make students understand why Keats can prefer the bold lover on the urn who will “never, never” kiss to the “breathing human passion” which “leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,” but it can be safely said that Campion’s film doesn’t even attempt such a difficulty.

There were legitimately high hopes that Campion would find a cinematic style that did not detract from Keats’s magical but often disturbing poetry. Instead each gets in the way of the other. I would rather have seen a spare film in the manner of Straub-Huillet than one in which gambolling, trivializing camera movements combine with sentimental line readings. Bright Star was funded by the UK Film Council’s New Cinema Fund, the institutional successor to the British Film Institute Production Board. I was head of the Production Board from 1985–89, when we successfully brought historical fictions to Cannes. It was unimaginable then that subsidy could be given to conservative period pieces. The artistic and moral bankruptcy of New Labour’s cultural policies is evident in such funding decisions.

One of the weaknesses of recent Cannes has been the lamentable lack of great French films. This year we got not only Resnais but also Audard’s A Prophet (Un prophète). Although set in a jail, it is a Mafia rather than a prison movie. Its unknown star Tahar Rahim moves from humiliated underling to gang boss in a multilingual haze of violence, in which Corsican and Mahgrebian Arabic jostle with French in a plot which is both complex and gripping. Rahim is set, if I’m any judge, for French superstar status. One who has achieved that over five decades is Johnny Hallyday and he turns in a magnificent performance in Johnnie To’s Vengeance. I say “performance,” but more than anything else what Hallyday lends to this Hong Kong film is his unbelievably ravaged face, on which untold pleasures and vices seem written.

Ken Loach is one of the most accomplished and talented European directors and without doubt the greatest contemporary exponent of the aesthetics of Italian neorealism. However, his films about the past, of which the Palme d’or-winning The Wind that Shakes the Barley was a
prime example, are cock-eyed about history and seem dedicated to the celebration of violence. Luckily Looking for Eric is about the present and is a wonderful self-help film with Eric Cantona acting as a ghostly life coach to a postman whose family and work relations are in a mess. It’s a touching and funny film with a simple ideological message—“the people united will never be defeated”—and it’s very good to see a Communist film that one can applaud.

Michael Haneke is a great director and I suspect that The White Ribbon, set in a Protestant village in Northern Germany in the year before the outbreak of World War I, is his masterpiece. As I have got older Europe’s suicide in 1914 seems more and more the defining historical event of our era, and Haneke’s film makes a major contribution to diagnosing Europe’s terminal state. As the village disintegrates before our eyes into abuse and cruelty, we are watching not just Germany but Europe; not just one country but a whole ideal of civilization that is about to prove itself a hollow lie.

At one very simple and prosaic level, 2009 proved that Cannes remains the world’s pre-eminent film festival, a fortnight which really does offer the best of world cinema. At a more complex level, this year’s festival renewed one’s faith in the cinema. It was hard to spot themes other than the fact than many of the films were very long and that this must have been the most violent competition ever. But both A Prophet and The White Ribbon needed two and a half hours to tell their complicated stories, and all one can say about the violence is that reality continues to outstrip its representation by a comfortable distance. Quentin Tarantino’s film Inglourious Basterds enraged some, particularly Americans, for its portrayal of a U.S. unit behind German lines which engages in indiscriminate torture and murder. Yet, it was difficult to take Tarantino’s fable as anything but a prolonged cinematic joke with one or two of the set pieces, particularly Michael Fassbender (again) and a German Gestapo officer in a French bar, destined for film immortality. At the same time the film never amounts to more than the sum of its parts and will leave Tarantino fans hoping that their idol can shake his cinephilia into one more great film.

For there were superb films in Cannes this year and they provided angles on the world with a variety and profusion which suggested that as we enter a period of cultural revaluation, cinema will remain as central as it has ever been to an understanding of ourselves and our world. This would have pleased the ghosts that throng the Croisette. For if you have been coming to Cannes for twenty-five years then it is the dead as well as the living who patrol the seafront. As the sleep ration goes down and the alcohol intake goes up, T. S. Eliot’s conversation with the ghost of a dead friend that ends “Little Gidding” becomes a daily event. In February Hercules Belleville died (see the obituary I wrote for the Independent, March 2). Jeremy Thomas’s right-hand man at Recorded Pictures, longtime collaborator of Hal Ashby, Bernardo Bertolucci, and Roman Polanski, Hercules was a close friend. At Cannes, we would phone each other six times a day, censor each other’s dress and behavior, exchange gossip, and plot the night ahead. I kept hearing his voice throughout the festival and his final judgment was conclusive: “Great, mate. Just great.”

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