JOBS WELL DONE

According to the speculation that always accompanies the run-up to the announcement of the Cannes Film Festival program, the 2010 edition (May 12–23) was almost certain to premiere new films by Terrence Malick and Béla Tarr. In the event, neither Malick’s The Tree of Life nor Tarr’s The Turin Horse made it (the former wasn’t finished in time; the latter, who knows?), and these high-profile absences added to a sense of disappointment with a competition line-up that generally lacked big-name auteurs. Perhaps the competition wasn’t as rich as previous years; certainly there was no Antichrist-style controversy this time and no film generated the same acclaim as The White Ribbon or A Prophet did in 2009. I had bad luck with the two competition films I managed to watch: Bertrand Tavernier’s The Princess of Montpensier is a terribly creaky chivalric historical romance; and Abbas Kiarostami’s Certified Copy, a talky drama about a couple who may or may not be pretending to be lovers, sees the Iranian director swap his usual nimble intelligence for plodding observations about the nature of artifice and deception.

Much more interesting was Manoel de Oliveira’s The Strange Case of Angelica. Playing in the Un Certain Regard strand, it tells of Isaak, a shy photographer living in rural Portugal who is commissioned to take the portrait of a beautiful young woman who has died only days after her wedding. Captivated by the image of her corpse, artfully laid out to rest before burial, Isaak falls under a ghostly spell. He becomes increasingly withdrawn from village life, and—in sequences of beguiling Melies-like fantasy—dreams of flying through the night sky with her. If The Strange Case of Angelica’s dialogue scenes between the fellow guests in Isaak’s boarding house are a little stiff, and the film’s ruminative tone never quite makes for fully engaged emotional drama, its reflections on impermanence, mortality, and the changing world convey great pathos. As well as Isaak’s obsession with the deceased Angelica, The Strange Case of Angelica charts his parallel fascination with photographing agricultural workers who are tilling the nearby fields, eschewing machinery (just as Isaak, who is encumbered for much of the picture with an antiquated camera around his neck, has renounced digital technology). Those lengthy, mostly wordless sequences of Isaak following a line of men as they undertake backbreaking work inevitably evoke the perseverance and resilience of Oliveira himself, who has been making films since 1942. The audience gave the Portuguese director a standing ovation even before his film screened, the latest of many warm receptions that he has enjoyed at Cannes. Long may it continue.

About twenty years younger than Oliveira, the venerable documentary director Frederick Wiseman is almost as prodigious, and his latest, Boxing Gym, is similarly concerned with hard graft—the discipline, stamina, and tenacity required to do any job well. Screening in Director’s Fortnight, the film focuses on a boxing gym in Austin, Texas, a defiantly old-fashioned venue run by ex-professional boxer Richard Long. The customers of the gym have a broader range of abilities and come from a wider cross-section of society than the elite athletes of Wiseman’s previous documentary, La Danse, about the Ballet de l’Opéra National de Paris, but Boxing Gym is just as much a celebration of the body in movement. Adding a percussive sound mix of exhausted panting and shuffling feet, Wiseman creates a wonderfully impressionistic, sometimes near-abstract record of physical exertion that has the rhythm and musicality of choreographed dance. At only ninety minutes, it’s one of Wiseman’s shortest films, and perhaps a minor work, but fresh and delightful nonetheless.

For me, the standout film was another documentary: Andrei Ujica’s Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu, which screened outside of competition. This engaging portrait of the former Romanian president was assembled largely from the official films covering his rule. On one level this is an expertly assembled work of historical record: without voice-over or explanatory intertitles, the film features superbly selected archive footage, in rough chronological order, that brilliantly evokes the Ceausescu era: from the uniform acclaim the president could count on during absurdly sycophantic party conventions of the 1960s and 70s to the desperate visits to desultory state supermarkets in the final days of his regime.

There is impressive formal rigor and self-reflexive complexity to Ujica’s project. Over the course of its three-hour running time, the documentary persuasively suggests that Ceausescu’s identification with the nation was so complete that the propaganda footage commissioned under his watch functioned almost as a vehicle of self-expression (hence the film’s provocative “autobiographical” provenance, advertised...
in the title). Needless to say, the many excerpts from state broadcasts glorifying Ceausescu’s achievements now carry quite different meanings. An obvious example are the sequences of the May Day rallies that the president inaugurates, perhaps inspired (or so the film suggests) by the stadium-sized kitsch of North Korean mass spectacles and the Ruritanian make-believe of a royal banquet at Buckingham Palace. What once were carnivals of state power become, in the context of the other material gathered here and the passage of time, symptomatic of Ceausescu’s delusional grandiosity, increasingly at odds with the grim realities of ordinary Romanian life occasionally glimpsed elsewhere in the film.

The footage is frequently spectacular. Many sequences play with notions of scale, most hilariously when we see the diminutive Ceausescu resorting to very unsporting behaviour during a game of volleyball with much taller players. At one point, the president looms over an architectural model of his latest palace and then moments later we see him dwarfed by the sprawling complex as it’s being built, a vast site stretching far into the grey Bucharest mist. But there’s also a fascinating attention to the small, human side of the statesman. In regular sequences of near silence—we hear only what sounds like the click of the projector—Ceausescu is revealed during more unguarded moments in the company of figures like Nixon, Brezhnev, and Queen Elizabeth II. The effect is of a home-movie immediacy or diary-like intimacy—vulnerability, even. Among the many achievements of this major work is that, while we never lose sight of the monstrous self-regard of the Romanian dictator, he emerges as a figure of some poignancy.

The festival’s other three-hour Romanian film, Aurora, made similarly intricate demands on our compassion toward its deeply unsympathetic character. The long-awaited follow-up to Cristi Puiu’s The Death of Mister Lazarescu, Aurora features the director himself as Viorel, a divorced, middle-aged factory supervisor. In almost every scene, he is a scowling, taciturn, sluggish figure nursing a grudge against the world. The specific nature of the grudge slowly emerges during the film. (To reveal the cause, and the effect, of Viorel’s embittered grievances would ruin the unfurling psychological richness of this absorbing character study and the grisly punchline of its final scene.) Similar to The Death of Mister Lazarescu in its long-take realism—whose fluid naturalism disguises a virtuoso command of pace and camerawork—the film departs from its predecessor’s view of the
Romanian health service’s institutional breakdown in favor of depicting personal turmoil and disintegration. Remarkably played by Puiu, Viorel is first seen, naked, as his lover sleeps beside him on the bed—yet he only gets more exposed as Aurora progresses in its raw account of his paranoid, violently insecure masculinity. This is a remarkable film and I hope that its distributors will resist the temptation to shorten its running time.

After the exacting stringency of Aurora, I was happy to surrender to Carancho, a tense, soulful urban thriller from Argentine director Pablo Trapero that was by far the most straightforwardly gripping film I saw at Cannes. Ricardo Darín is ambulance-chasing lawyer Sosa who launches compensation claims on behalf of Buenos Aires poor, injured in traffic accidents; Martina Gusman is Luján, a doctor who provides emergency treatment to many of Sosa’s potential clients. The two meet, fall in love, and hatch a scheme to bring justice to a vulnerable family exploited by Sosa’s firm. This is intelligent, character-driven entertainment of the first order, whose social realist concern for an underclass that can’t afford health cover is married to a thriller of pacey and fluid assurance. It handsomely delivers on the promise of the other Trapero films I’ve seen, The Lion’s Den and Born and Bred.

Just as entertaining—although a little more scrappy—was Greg Araki’s Kaboom. A gleefully improbable tale of a young bisexual student living in a candy-colored Californian campus who finds himself the centre of a new age cult’s machinations, Kaboom combines swoony teen drama, witty dialogue, Lynchian weirdness, and breezily polysexual shenanigans: which is to say it’s vintage Araki. I enjoyed the mix immensely. The acting is fresh (and seriously sexy), and the humor sharp and knowing. There were a few walkouts at the screening I attended, but perhaps these spectators had just remembered where they left their sense of irony.

If the directors I’ve mentioned so far are all familiar names, then that’s because this wasn’t much of a year for discovering new talent. Of the debut features I saw, Vietnamese director Dang Di Phan’s Bi, Don’t Be Afraid was the strongest. A portrait of a middle-class family in present-day Hanoi, the movie features minimal dialogue, but it evokes the relationships, tensions, and desires that charge the home atmosphere with an elliptical narrative, delicately imagistic direction, and subtle, honest performances. The impressionistic storytelling requires patience—this is not a film to make grand claims about—but it’s a work of shifting surprises and quiet beauty.

Shown alongside Bi, Don’t Be Afraid in Critics’ Week, Armadillo, a sophomore effort, was clearly the work of a highly talented filmmaker. Janus Metz Pedersen’s accomplished documentary follows a group of Danish Army recruits, stationed in a heavily fortified camp in Helmand Province in Afghanistan. Observational in style, its close-quarters view of the young, often inexperienced soldiers is immediate and moving. The person I saw the film with found its portrayal of the military troublingly sympathetic, but Armadillo seemed to me keenly sensitive to the complexities of the conflict. Pedersen is careful, for instance, to give voice to the civilians caught in the crossfire between the coalition troops and Taliban. The centerpiece is a terrifyingly vivid battle between the Danes and a few Taliban fighters (which later became the subject of a media storm back in Denmark). Not only is this an extraordinarily disturbing example of war reporting, the sequence has a provocative ambiguity, depicting the firefight in such a way that both confirms and contradicts the testimony that the soldiers later give of the battle.

In a year when new talent was hard to find it was perhaps fitting that the most memorable film I saw should have been by an octogenarian director whose history with Cannes is long and formative. Not that Jean-Luc Godard was cowed by tradition or convention in presenting his Socialism in Un Certain Regard; he didn’t turn up for the screening or the press conference. And—as if to mock the festival’s insistence on world premieres—he posted a speeded-up version of Socialism in its entirety online in advance. This is a film that needs more than one viewing, so I’ll just say that it’s one of the most striking uses of HD photography I’ve seen and it replaces the elegiac tone of the director’s last few films with a more vital sardonic wit. If the film had been directed by a twentysomething newcomer, we’d all be hailing it as the future of cinema.

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