AN AMOROUS CATFISH

Last year at Cannes we watched masterpiece after masterpiece, but this year (May 12–23) the films were nowhere near as good. Even Ken Loach, who can usually be relied upon, turned in a terrible dud with Route Irish, a film about mercenaries in Iraq with a convoluted and implausible plot and the unsurprising message that mercenaries are both brutal and brutalized. In the cafes and bars, the dinners and the parties, there was much talk of the death of cinema. Actually the death of cinema has been a staple topic of conversation among film folk since the advent of sound but somehow there was a deathly chill in the air as though the films that Cannes depends on that blend art and money, originality and star power, may in fact be passing from the screens.

Such thoughts were stimulated by the fact that one highlight this year was a special presentation of Visconti’s The Leopard. I’m not Visconti’s greatest fan. The word operatic is well applied to him and a screening of Senso in Lyon last year left me impressed but cold, but The Leopard is different. The astounding beauty of Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale; the startling performance of Burt Lancaster as the prince; above all the cinematography and the decor that climax in the final ball scene—all these add up to one of the greatest of films as a historical era and a man’s life wane in concert. The sense of time’s passing was unmistakable because Delon and Cardinale, forty-seven years older and the last survivors of the films that Cannes depends on that blend art and money, originality and star power, may in fact be passing from the screens.

What The Leopard had which most of this year’s films lack is a great script—not simply the powerful narrative of Lampedusa’s novel but the great adaptation for the screen by Suso Cecchi d’Amici. From the abysmal Robin Hood, which opened the festival, onward, accomplished displays of acting and cinematography were wasted on hackneyed scripts. Even Paul Laverty, who has turned in great Loach scripts for over a decade, allowed his take on Iraq to be overwhelmed by the fatal trope of the stolen recorded sound or image that will reveal all. It is true that Antonioni in Blowup and Coppola in The Conversation used this trope brilliantly, but the storytelling in Route Irish offers nothing that even approaches these films. It also features what must be a first in the Loach canon, a truly weak central performance. Mark Womack, as ex-mercenary Fergus seeking the truth about his best friend’s death, is reduced to a one-note shout.

Loach’s rare failure is not going to harm the reputation he has built over five decades, but I doubt if the same can be said in the case of Alejandro González Iñárritu’s Biutiful, which was so disappointing that it prompted the thought that in the much-publicized bust-up with regular scriptwriter Guillermo Arriaga, it is Iñárritu who is the loser. Even Javier Bardem’s splendid performance as the central character Uxbal, which was rewarded with one of the Best Actor prizes, cannot redeem a ludicrously overloaded plot and an insufferably self-satisfied tone. Iñárritu’s three earlier films all cover a huge amount of territory but they involve multiple characters and locations. Making one character bear the weight of imminent death from cancer, a bipolar wife, and responsibility for both Chinese and African illegal immigration becomes simply ridiculous. The fact that Uxbal’s exact economic role in the exploitation of the illegal immigrants he befriends is never actually made clear is typical of a film which is so narcissistically self-satisfied with its own social conscience that it is incapable of real social engagement.

Another film that scored high marks for pretentiousness but low marks for insight was Abbas Kiarostami’s Certified Copy. The Iranian master seems to have been reading a lot of out-of-date European theory and much of the dialogue is taken up with well-rehearsed riffs on the relation between original and copy. If this wasn’t bad enough, his account of a mature woman meeting a visiting lecturer (or is it in fact not an original meeting but yet another copy in an overlone relationship?) stars Juliette Binoche in her most irritating vein, never using one simper when three will do. The jury’s decision to award her the Best Actress award was incomprehensible to this reviewer.

Jean-Luc Godard has perhaps been the filmmaker who has tussled longest and hardest in both theory and practice to rethink cinematic narrative. His dictum that every film must have a beginning, a middle, and an end—but not necessarily in that order—is well known. Even better in my opinion is the scene in Passion where the director, hounded by Italian financiers, turns and exclames that he does understand how important a script is to them and the minute the film is finished his first action will be to have a transcript made and

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sent round. In fact Godard has all but abandoned narrative since *Hail Mary* twenty-five years ago, but his contribution to Cannes this year, *Socialism*, took the deconstruction of story to a new level.

The film is in three parts. In the first a cruise ship wanders around the Mediterranean adrift on a sea of history that the passengers have ceased to understand; these tourists have forgotten the struggles and conflicts that make up the history of the Mediterranean although those struggles and conflicts still have their effects in the present. The second section takes us to one of those Swiss gas stations that have been so central to Godard’s films since *Passion*. Here two children and a llama interrogate the Western political tradition. Finally the third section takes us to six historical stopping-off points around the Mediterranean: Egypt, Palestine, Odessa, Hellas, Naples, and Barcelona. As with all Godard’s films, *Socialism* teems both with ideas and unforgettable images. In addition Godard has invented a new trick—the English subtitles are written in a kind of pidgin (Godard calls it “American Navajo”) that actually provides a counterpoint to the French rather than a translation. This is intriguing enough, but the old man is now completely unforgiving to any pleasure. At any moment when an image might become a story or a thought an argument he cuts—this must be the most castrating film of all time. The final shot is of a card that simply says NO COMMENT: difficult to improve on that as a summary of Godard’s intransigence.

One of the more pleasing aspects of Godard’s career since 1968 has been his willingness to help young filmmakers such as Xavier Beauvois, whose 1992 debut *Nord* was so impressive. This year Beauvois provided one of the few films, *Of Gods and Men*, where the beauty of the cinematography (Caroline Champetier) and the brilliant ensemble cast were matched by an excellent script (written by Beauvois himself) which eschewed easy narrative thrills or smug soul-searching. The film is set in a Cistercian priory in Algeria in the mid-1990s as the full-scale civil war between Islamist rebels and the government becomes ever more savage. The insurgents warn the monks that they must leave; the neighboring villagers beg them to stay. The situation, based on a true story, provides all the narrative menace that one could want—for the monks are facing imminent violent death. The suspense created by this situation is offset by, on the one hand, scenes of the monks as they sing their prayers and go about their daily tasks and, on the other, a series of community debates about what to do. Some will find the film slow but the precision of word and image is gripping and the final denouement as the monks make their decision and then celebrate with a feast is deeply moving. *Of Gods and Men* deservedly won the Grand Prix.

If it can seem that art cinema is dying in the multiplexes, it is nevertheless finding new life in galleries and museums where the moving image has become more and more dominant. It was thus fitting that the winner of this year’s Palme d’Or, Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Previous Lives*, was conceived as part of a larger installation. The opening shots are of a water buffalo slipping its halter to wander into a forest from which its owner then retrieves it. The beauty of the images is immediately overwhelming as one enters into a world where the distinctions between animal and human, living and dead begin to lose their significance. Uncle Boonmee has come to the country to die and among those who gather to witness his passing are his dead wife and a son who has become a spectacularly hairy monkey. No description of the film can sound anything but ludicrous (particularly an unbelievably touching scene when a catfish and a princess make love), but watching it is not a ludicrous but an uplifting process.

It is tempting to say that Apichatpong (aka Joe) has abandoned story for a lyricism that simply celebrates the beauty of the world. But so to do is to ignore the fact that he has a very secure end, in fact our model of all narrative endings, in Uncle Boonmee’s fast-approaching death. With such an end almost all the rest of the film becomes middle—from the buffalo that we might conjecture is one of Boonmee’s previous lives to the discussion of the politics of Thailand’s North East region. It was in this region that Apichatpong grew up and protests initiated there provided much of the impetus for the Red Shirts movement that brought Bangkok to a standstill as the film was screened at Cannes. *Uncle Boonmee* also had, at
least on this viewer’s interpretation, a beginning, for the
ecstatic coupling of princess and catfish might well be the
origin of Boonmee’s multiple existences.
Many were surprised by the jury’s choice of such an
avant-garde film for the Palme d’Or. It is arguably the most
avant-garde film ever to have won Cannes but it was certainly
a great choice in a poor year. It must also be remembered that
the president of the jury this year was Tim Burton whose
much underrated Big Fish shares many themes with the Thai
film. Indeed it would be interesting to know if Apichatpong
had seen Burton’s film.
But it will be even more interesting to see how Uncle
Boonmee fares when it is released. Any hard-nosed calculator
of percentages and profits would instantly dismiss any chance
of it making an impact at the box office. However the film is
so beautiful and haunting, and Apichatpong has acquired
such a brilliant reputation in little over a decade, that maybe
this will be the film that breaks through.
Anyone who wants to know more about this forty-year-
old director should consult James Quandt’s magnificent book
on the director published in the Austrian Film Museum’s
SYNEMA series in 2009. Quandt has gathered together a
stellar set of articles and added a full filmography, bibliogra-
phy, and other invaluable information. Perhaps the single
most illuminating article is Tony Rayns’s contribution that
links Apichatpong’s films both to a childhood spent in a hos-
pital as the son of two doctors and to Buddhism. The director
is not explicitly religious but he is clearly sensitive to Thai
Buddhist culture. Rayns points particularly to the concept of
sunnata and its twentieth-century interpretation in
Buddhadasa Bhikku’s Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree: The
Buddha’s Teaching on Voidness. For Rayns, Apichatpong’s
films attempt a spiritual healing in which both director and
viewer become empty of self. Whether Apichatpong can heal
the cinema as well we shall see.

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