WROCŁAW, REYKJAVIK

As medium-sized events toward the end of the festival calendar, both the Wroclaw Era New Horizons film festival in Poland (July 22–August 1) and Iceland’s Reykjavik International Film Festival (September 23–October 3) aim to showcase challenging and innovative work. With much smaller press and industry contingents than at the big spring and summer festivals, these are audience events, showing new films to open-minded, enthusiastic, and demanding paying customers.

Wroclaw programmed both a massive Godard retrospective (the director was scheduled to appear, but failed to do so—as he had at Cannes in May and would do again at Toronto in September). A season on a smaller scale was accorded to the films of Laura Mulvey, who did attend the festival, and the first movie I saw at Wroclaw was her and Peter Wollen’s 1974 debut feature, *Penthesilea: Queen of the Amazons*. Despite the fact that she was once my MA course leader, I admit that I had never seen a film directed by Mulvey, though the fact is that her cinematic efforts, which have a reputation for being stringent and difficult, are far less easy to access than her theoretical writings. Yet if the Wroclaw audience’s reaction to *Penthesilea* is anything to go by, there’s no good reason for this state of affairs. The screenings were sold out and the response was extremely warm and enthusiastic.

An interpretation of Greek myth, *Penthesilea* contains four distinct segments which make up a rumination on, among other things, the position of women in western art and society; the rarely acknowledged way that mainstream film conventions, especially continuity editing, reinforce ideological conventions; and the links between Heinrich von Kleist and Leni Reifenstahl. If the film’s political enunciations now seem unfamiliarly forthright, the intellectual radicalism in display is none the less invigorating for that. The force of the polemic is matched by impressive formal rigor. A mime version of Kleist’s play *Penthesilea* in the first segment has a hypnotic theatricality; the single take in which Wollen reads out an essay on the many and contested images of Penthesilea has a curious, rough-hewn virtuosity; and the collage of images of femininity in western art that comprises the third section has an associative playfulness that anticipates present-day digital assemblages—remixes, mashups, and the like. In an informative sidebar event, Polish scholar Jakub Majmurek noted that Polish film studies in the 1970s and 80s were heavily indebted to cognitive philosophy and tended to ignore the blend of Marxism, structuralism, and psychoanalysis with which Mulvey is so closely associated. The large audiences and lively Q&A sessions that accompanied the season of her complementary film work (DVD publishers should take note) indicate that times have changed.

A main plank of the Wroclaw program is the International Competition, which focused on films from emerging talent. The exception to this was Harmony Korine, by far the most established of the four filmmakers selected, but his film, *Trash Humpers*, suggests he’s uncomfortable with that position. A wilful act of regression—the movie was shot on VHS tape—this is Korine’s attempt to reclaim the *enfant terrible* status of his early twenties (when he was poster boy for abrasive hipster cinema). The film follows a group of four figures, each wearing old-crone masks, causing various degrees of chaos in derelict patches of downtown Memphis. It’s puerile, arguably idiotic, sometimes sheer slapstick, and to Korine’s detractors the exercise can be written off as an episode of *Jackass*, with pretensions to video art. But *Trash Humpers* finds moments of delicate, melancholy beauty amid the urban scrapheaps and detritus that Korine films, and there is something undeniably infectious about its mood of childlike mischief and mayhem.

Having premiered in late 2009, *Trash Humpers* was the least fresh of the competition titles, most of which were selected from the major spring and summer festivals. A talking point of Cannes, Michelangelo Frammartino’s *Le quattro volte*, also in competition, is a portrait of a farming community in Calabria, Southern Italy. Combining elements of poetic ethnography, observational documentary, and rural fable, the film is an almost entirely dialogue-free study of four “characters”: an elderly shepherd, a kid goat, a tall fir tree, and a charcoal oven. What emerges is a study of the cyclical pattern of life and death in the natural world, one grounded in an earthy feel for the Calabrian landscape and village communities that stops things from lapsing into New Age mysticism. A work of visual elegance and contemplative charm, *Le quattro volte* features flashes of wry near-silent comedy and includes one stunning long-take sequence involving a curious dog, a runaway truck, a fenced-in enclosure of sheep, and some locals dressed as Roman centurions.
Estonian director Veiko Õunpuu’s The Temptation of St Tony opens with a quote from Dante’s Inferno and features among its closing credits acknowledgments to Pasolini and Buñuel. In between there are plenty more other references (to Tarkovsky, Kaurismäki, William Blake, Hieronymous Bosch). This deadpan allegorical drama about white-collar worker Tony’s manager’s descent into a private hell doesn’t, however, quite merit these weighty allusions: the structure is so episodic as to be fragmentary, and the nicely underplayed sense of anarchy of the opening half tips into undisciplined self-indulgence (when the profane influence of Pasolini is most evident). But there are enough moments of arresting absurdism and several striking set pieces (all beautifully filmed in black-and-white) to make this exercise in style worthwhile.

The International Competition’s main jury prize went to Mundane History, Thai director Anocha Suwichakornpong’s striking debut, a drama set in contemporary Bangkok about the developing relationship between paralyzed young man Ake, son of a senior politician, and his carer Pun, recently relocated to the city from a humble rural background. Working with Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s regular editor Lee Chatametikool, the film is a haunting and immersive mood piece that begins by charting with watchful, unhurried precision the daily rituals of Pun’s care regime, before the tone turns much more mysterious, elusive, and reflective, culminating in a visit to a planetarium that is a trippy as anything in Gaspar Noé’s Enter the Void (but without the pompous metaphysics). Mundane History is as fascinating as it is hard to classify. The other prizewinner in competition (awarded by the FIPRESCI jury) was the Russian film Mama, directed by Yelana and Nikolay Renard, about the relationship between an overbearing elderly mother and her grown-up, overweight son. Mama is shot with a fixed camera in a series of single-take vignettes, mostly set in the characters’ cramped Moscow flat. The film remarkably conveys a sense of emotional claustrophobia; it is at once grotesque and strangely moving, captured with unblinking directness and commanding formal control.

Wrocław also provided a useful survey of contemporary Polish cinema in the New Polish Films competition. Of the films I saw, the strongest was Przemysław Wojcieszk’s Made in Poland. Focused on seventeen-year-old working-class altar boy turned punk (whose first act is tattooing the words “fuck off” on his forehead), the film channels some of the character’s disgust and anger at the older generation to make some spikey swipes of its own at Polish culture (the title’s similarity to Alan Clarke’s state-of-the-nation drama Made in Britain is surely not accidental). But for me the most moving Polish work was tucked away in a strand devoted to Films on Art (a surprisingly large collection of titles, including Sophie Fiennes’s haunting study of the work and practice of German artist Anselm Kiefer, Under Your Cities Will Grow Grass). Wiktoria Szymanksa’s Themerson & Themerson is a beguiling and poignant documentary about the lives of the late avant-garde artists Franciszka and Stefan Themerson. A married couple, she was a painter and filmmaker, he a poet and writer. Mixing home movies and sensitive interviews with their surviving colleagues and friends, the film takes us from their enthusiastic involvement in pre-war Warsaw’s experimental art scene through prolonged separation during World War II and finally to London where they settled and spent the rest of their life together. Themerson & Themerson is full of charm and affection, but a thread of melancholy runs through it, a powerful sense of the loss and suffering inflicted on their generation of Polish Jews.

With a similar emphasis on discovering new arthouse talent, the Reykjavik festival overlapped to an extent with Wrocław. The main jury prizewinner, for instance, was Le quattro volte.
There are never enough films to go round the plethora of international festivals and toward the end of the season, festivals like Reykjavik (as well as New York and London) pick up films from earlier events. Some of the outstanding titles from Venice and Locarno this year were also shown at Reykjavik, one of the most impressive being Greek director Athina Rachel Tsangari’s *Attenberg*. The film is a haunting drama, revolving around twenty-three-year-old Maria, whose father is dying of cancer. An emotionally disconnected young woman, she is a fan of the BBC nature documentaries presented by David Attenborough (of which the film’s title is a mispronunciation). Tsangari’s approach to depicting Maria’s routine — her testy friendship with her sexually adventurous friend, her tentative, passionless attempt to pick up a stranger — might be said to have something of the restrained attention of Attenborough’s work. There are shades, too, of Antonioni in Tsangari’s feel for the expressive emotional potential of urban landscapes (the director’s architect father designed the factory workers’ town in which the film takes place). If the movie falters during its earlier more self-conscious formal flourishes — for instance an extended sequence in which Maria and her friend goof around (apparently in homage to Monty Python) — the film’s quieter, more intimate moments between Maria and her ailing father are powerfully moving. *Maria* is another encouraging sign of the current strength of Greek cinema, after *Dogtooth* (whose director Yorgos Lanthimos features in a supporting role).

Equally striking was American director Kitao Sakurai’s *Aardvark*. An atmospheric thriller, the film follows a blind recovering alcoholic, Larry, who sets out to avenge the murder of his friend by local gangsters. If that premise sounds improbable, Sakurai develops it with a hardboiled but dreamy intensity. This and the ambient electronic soundtrack recall Michael Mann’s early work, but with an added homoerotic charge. Sakurai looks like a name to watch out for.

The banks crashed during the 2008 edition of the festival and two years later I saw occasional signs of the repercussions of Iceland’s economic meltdown during my trip. But these were evidence less of any pressing financial distress (although this undoubtedly exists) as of the sense of humor which is such a robust strand in the national culture. For example, I witnessed the most well-behaved political demonstration I’ve ever seen outside a government building, the participants seemingly more bemused than angry. The prevailing attitude was best summed up by a T-shirt I saw in a souvenir shop — a picture of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano (whose eruption caused so much travel chaos this past summer) was emblazoned with the legend: “Don’t Fuck with Iceland: We May Not Have the Cash but We Have the Ash.”

That tone of caustic wit also characterized Valdis Óskardóttir’s *King’s Road*, a raucous, cherubishly misanthropic comedy about the various residents of a muddy trailer park community in rural Iceland. The film combines moments of droll domestic dysfunction with lively bits of slapstick and a running gag involving the Icelandic characters’ refusal to speak English to German actor Daniel Bruhl. *Mamma Gógó*, the new film from Frithrik Thór Frithirksson, one of Iceland’s most established directors, was a more somber affair — a heartfelt but sometimes heavy-handed autobiographical drama about a middle-aged filmmaker’s mother succumbing to Alzheimer’s that is enlivened by moments of low-key humor (mainly at the expense of the Icelandic film industry).

The best Icelandic film I saw received its world premiere at Reykjavik. The festival’s closing-night film, Ámi Ásgeirsson’s *Undercurrent*, is an absorbing drama set on board a fishing vessel. The depiction of the crew members’ hardships inevitably resonated with the country’s economic situation. A beautifully played ensemble piece, the movie is based on a stage play, but Ásgeirsson’s confident direction ensures that it works cinematically: portraying the reaction of the crew to the onboard suicide of their colleague on the last expedition, for example, the film evokes his memory through deft use of flashback. The death seems to haunt the ship; the cramped and dilapidated cabins seem the sites of an eerie unease. *Undercurrent’s* editing was completed in Poland, making it a rare co-production between the two countries which are also host to these fine arthouse festivals.

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