

From the French Riviera, Noah Cowan discusses the great films and bad buzz of the Cannes Film Festival. Also, reports from docfest 2000, Seattle, Florida, Oberhausen, and the New York Latino International Film Festival.

Cannes Film Festival

There is no better sport at the Cannes Film Festival's end than reading the oh-so-aptly-named "trade" coverage of the event. In years past filled with tawdry cinema from hack directors and also-ran studios, the American industry press extolled the triumphs found on the Croisette and the "brisk business" that inevitably followed. In this, perhaps the Official Competition's best year in recent memory, they bemoaned the lack of "action" and

The trades, of course, could have been safely ignored if their negative buzz hadn't been reinforced by the more conventional media outlets, particularly the star-obsessed kind.

Part of this problem, as in all things, is the fault of the French. In order to secure their prime Festival's place at the very top of the cinema constellation, the French have talked the world forces of media El-vil into thinking that Cannes is just as important as other such defining film events as L.A. celebrity premieres and the Oscars. Sycophantic starfuckers, uh, I mean celebrity interviewers, and TV "entertainment anchors" have therefore flocked to the red carpet in order to gain access to the stars in a glamorous environment.

Now, Cannes gets its share of stars — often big ones — but since the Festival's beginning the Competition has been dominated by films that would spin the heads of your average Iowa City film fans (or, more likely, just bore them to tears). Cannes Competition films are, in fact, far less accessible than the Premieres of Sundance or Galas of Toronto. Thus the star-driven press is largely frustrated unless a studio sends over a megastar — Arnold is a frequent visitor — for a promotional drive-by that is slavishly reported on back home. So the U.S. media coverage of Cannes ends up actually having nothing to do with the Festival itself.

The French don't get it. Why, they ask imperiously, can't you make Samira Makhmalbaf (the daughter of venerable Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf and a fine young talent in her own right) a star just like Tom Cruise? Well, Gilles, perhaps it's an American thing — even if Samira is a total babe.

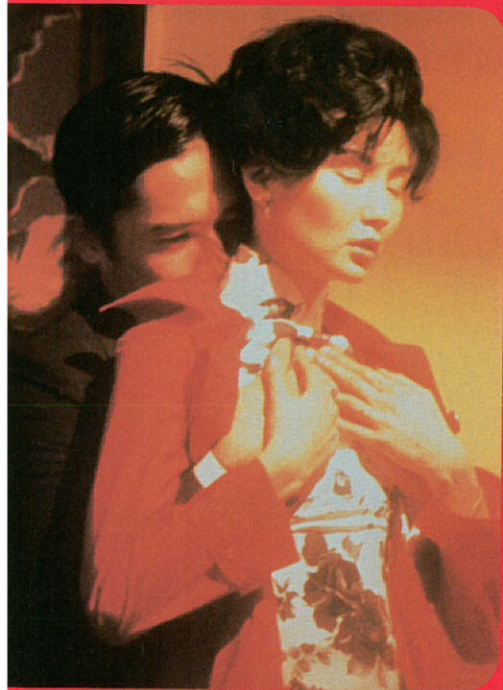
The ugly truth about this year's Cannes is that it was driven primarily by the exceptionally rich cinema of Asia and that the American and French cinema on offer was full of pretty pictures and little else. The fact that this situation was barely mentioned Stateside I put down to the dumb-founded response by the U.S. press to subtitled films rather than more insidious "isms."

That said, the big prizewinner was the rather un-Asian Lars von Trier with his post-Dogma-thingee, *Dancer in The Dark*. The film won the Palme d'Or and Björk, the star, won see page 116

docfest 2000

Now in its third year, the New York International Documentary Festival — more spiffily referred to as docfest 2000 — recently hit New York City with a program of 17 films comprising all styles of documentary filmmaking. A festival dedicated exclusively to this theatrically endangered species is a rare thing indeed, so you have to credit Festival director and founder Gary Pollard for his good intentions in creating what he calls "a high-profile event to promote the documentary art form." And for Pollard, it's the "art" that distinguishes documentary from journalism. "Documentaries *should* be subjective," he told me. "The voice of the filmmaker should be heard." Indeed, an eclectic array of voices veritably leapt out of the Festival program, discussing such subjects as polygamy, cannibalism, robots and political refugees.

Yet despite these potentially charged topics, the Festival and its filmmakers steered a safe course marked by reasoned discourse and political correctness rather than controversy or provocation. The most striking example of this was the Festival's Jury Prize winner, *Well-Founded Fear*, an inside look at the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) by Michael Camerini and Shari Robertson. Now, the INS's less-than-stellar reputation presumably comes from somewhere, but those expecting a damning cinematic attack will be sorely disappointed by the film. As the camera follows a half-dozen INS officers in their daily interviews to determine whether political refugees merit political asylum, a group portrait emerges that is utterly sympathetic to the stresses and difficulties inherent in the officer's decision-making process. I for one had hoped for a little more of an edge. Even so, it's amazing that the filmmakers got access at all. Winner of the Festival's Audience Award was Barak Goodman and Daniel Anker's *Scottsboro: An American Tragedy*. Utterly traditional, but in the best sense of the word, the film mixes together interviews, archival footage and voiceovers to reconstruct the story of the nine black youths falsely accused of raping two white women in Depression-stricken Alabama. As it recounts the ensuing trials and retrials that sparked international protest, the film looks and sounds exactly like the kind of well-made doc you have seen numerous times on public television. But in this case, the story is more important than the storytelling, and in its interwoven critique of racism, anti-Semitism and



pronounced the Festival moribund on Opening Night. Baffling phrases — "If Festival director Gilles Jacob is really committed to making the Festival strong, why doesn't he make the effort to go to Hollywood every year?" was a personal favorite — betrayed the sheer disinterest in quality cinema evinced by the majority of the press corps.

Ultimately the trades let the mini-majors tell them that there was nothing to buy, presumably driving down prices, and then, by the end of the Festival, virtually every unacquired film was bought (or will be bought soon) for North America by one of these "sources." Hearst himself couldn't have orchestrated it better.

Photo: *In the Mood for Love*, which screened at the Cannes Film Festival.

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opportunity for us to communicate — much more so than when we were making the film. It's weird that my dad is more comfortable communicating with an audience than he is with people who are close to him. He can say things to an audience that he couldn't say to me one-on-one. With other people somehow it's safer or something. But everything that has sprung up around the film has become a vehicle for us to communicate. ▼

Cannes Film Festival

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the Best Actress prize. The film is very good, and Björk gives a magnificent performance, but there is some question about whether this was actually von Trier's Palme-worthy effort. He probably should have won a few years ago with *Breaking the Waves*, when he introduced to the world many of the aesthetic trappings of the Dogma style, a style which carries over into this film. *Dancer* embellishes on the Dogma techniques in grandiose ways — some scenes use 100 cameras — but these additions seem more rococo than inventive.

Another concern is the gnawing suspicion that during the filming Björk took the film far more

seriously than von Trier and so is artistically way out ahead of him for most of its two-and-a-half hours. It is odd to imagine awarding perhaps art cinema's most important prize to a laggard, but at least that acknowledges his lazily brilliant artistic effort, I guess.

The film is a musical melodrama in which Björk plays an East European emigrant to an American factory town who is rapidly losing her sight. She is desperate to save up enough money to get her son an operation before he goes blind too. Once she has saved enough, she is betrayed by a friend, and awful violence ensues, landing her on death row.

The plot is corny and its liberal politics hackneyed. Is von Trier making fun of us again? One could say "yes" and be done with his contempt, except that Björk brings a passion and soulfulness to this tragic heroine that will defy any audience not to weep for her plight.

Another film that inspired tears could not be farther removed from von Trier's Puritanism. Inspired by Douglas Sirk and the Hong Kong melodramas of his youth, Wong Kar-wai closed the Competition with *In the Mood for Love*, a heavily stylized anatomy of a love affair that Variety's David Rooney brilliantly described as "the anti-Dogma film." Everything about it is artificial — the

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elaborate costumes, the insanely precise early 1960s period detail, the elegantly controlled pacing, constant evocative background music and two stars — Maggie Cheung and Best Actor prizewinner Tony Leung Chiu-wai — acting their guts out. The result is a mesmerizing, escapist treat. The simple story describes the gradual intimacy experienced by a man and a woman who learn that their spouses are having an affair.

The Grand Jury Prize was awarded the brilliant *Devils on the Doorstep*. Filming in sprawling black and white Cinemascope, director Jiang Wen leads us through almost two hours of fast-paced comedy involving a Chinese peasant forced to harbor a Japanese officer and his translator while the Japanese army occupies his town. When they finally figure out a way to return the soldier to his barracks, an insidious process of great tragedy and horror begins. In its ability to impart both the absurdity and the sheer horror of war it stands tall alongside films like *Apocalypse Now*, *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *A Bullet In The Head*.

Also of note from Asia was *Chunhyang* from veteran Korean director Im Kwon-Taek, a luscious epic poem sung in a traditional style somewhere between Placido Domingo and Robert Plant. The film intercuts between a contemporary performance of the song and an astonishingly beautiful re-enactment of its tale of woe concerning a powerful official's son and a provincial courtesan's daughter.

Audiences were split on *Gohatto*, a comeback film for Nagisa Oshima. It is an elegantly conceived tale of a Samurai school thrown into disarray when it admits a gorgeous young boy who becomes the object of affection for several classmates and teachers. Sadly, the film was burdened with a stupid English title — *Taboo!* — and odd-sounding subtitles. ("Does he lean that way?") Odd, because these guys are meant to be speaking in poetic, Renaissance-like language; I guess someone wanted to spruce it up but destroyed the film's integrity in the process.

Another fascinating Asian film was Aoyama Shinja's *Eureka*, an extremely long (over three-and-a-half hours) exploration of how people deal with the effects of inexplicable violence on their lives. The film follows the three survivors of a bus-jacking as they discover that they can no longer

live in the conventional world. They move in together and then take a road trip to try to find some answers. It sounds New Age-y as so described, but the film is icy cold in its portrait of human frailty, emotional and otherwise. The film did not actually need to be this long — a conventional story about a serial killer who shadows them is overly attenuated — but is still effective, strong cinema.

France was represented by a solid, well constructed (but overrated as an art film, in my opinion) stalker scenario called *Harry: Un Ami Qui Vous Veut Bien* and two lugubrious period films from the Great White Hopes of young French cinema. Both Olivier Assayas's *Les Destinées Sentimentales* and Arnaud Desplechin's *Esther Khan* were bafflingly conventional works, one about bourgeois relationships in Dickensian Armagnac and the other about how a great actress was created in Dickensian London. Both of these films, however, seemed profound stacked up against Fatwah-worthy Roland Joffé's pathetic period-food endeavor, *Vatel*, which opened the Festival.

America did little better, with the deeply minor, overly-extended "SNL"-skit *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* from the Coen brothers leading the way. Normally interesting button-pusher Neil LaBute retreated way back with the conventional and dull *Nurse Betty*. So too with Amos Kollek's *Fast Food*, *Fast Women*, a charming ride but a far cry from the horrors of his masterpiece, *Sue*, and the deeply unsettling *Fiona*. James Gray's *The Yards* is a solid, if less than exciting youth melodrama that has the same gravitas as his earlier *Little Odessa* but without any of the exotic Brighton Beach spin or an offbeat performance to match Tim Roth's in that overlooked gem. The less said about James Ivory's stultifying adaptation of *The Golden Bowl*, the better.

Ken Loach, a Cannes perennial, can always be counted on to present a film with fabulous performances from little-known actors in an overly-determined, didactic package. In *Bread and Roses* the actors are two wonderful Mexican women, Pilar Padilla and Elpidia Carrillo, and the political discourse concerns the rights of janitors in L.A. office buildings.

The above-mentioned Samira Makhmalbaf, whose *The Apple* was a much-celebrated film on

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the festival circuit last year, returned to the Cannes Competition with an austere film called *Blackboards* that may have been the finest film of the bunch. It follows two teachers traveling with their blackboards literally strapped to their backs. Each of their encounters itinerant bands of people who exist literally on the border between Iran and Iraq. Refugees on one hand and child smugglers on the other, the world of the frontier has so much to tell us about how humans act when faced with inhuman challenges. But Makhmalbaf only allows us clues and suggestions; her two border "tribes" betray practically nothing about what drives them to eke out a living here. It is a great, difficult film.

In the Out of Competition section were two major new films by interesting directors, one of which was the masterpiece of the Festival, the other a sad disappointment. Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a marvel. Lee carefully fuses King Hu and Chen Kaige to make a stunning period martial arts art film. Michelle Yeoh dominates the film as a female master recovering a stolen sword with help from her great love and mentor, played by Chow Yun Fat; Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem For A Dream* is perhaps as visually intense and technically extraordinary as *Crouching Tiger* as it chronicles four people sinking into the deepest possible holes of addiction imaginable. I have only been able to read the film as a fairly basic anti-drug movie, but I would like to believe that those pictures are being put to more interesting uses.

The Festival's noncompetitive Un Certain Regard, for the films that are not "special events"—the films that do get an Out of Competition slot but still merit screening—is traditionally a mixed bag. This year was no exception, but what was good here was great.

It should come as no surprise that this section too, was dominated by great films from Asia. The triumphant return of Tran Anh Hung—after a short absence following his masterful *Cyclo* and *The Scent of Green Papaya*—was a delight. Nowhere near as political as his earlier work, *At the Vertical of Summer* is a sweet summer postcard of desire, betrayal and reconciliation in a gorgeous Saigon family. Every single shot in this film is perfectly composed and exhibits colors rarely seen on screen. Few directors understand the visual

power of the medium quite like this elusive Vietnamese master.

From Korea came the intriguing narrative play provocatively titled after the Marcel Duchamp *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors*. The film tells sequentially two versions of the seduction of a young woman by two self-deluded older men. Neatly turning the Lolita myth on its head, Hong Sang-soo impressively questions the narrative authority of the artists' perspective.

The other work of import in this section falls into the category of "unfashionable cinema," which probably accounts for these otherwise outstanding films being shunted off into a side section.

Juan Carlos Tabío, Tomás Alea's collaborator on *Strawberry and Chocolate* and *Guantanamera*, debuted at Cannes with a sunny, romantic fantasy about a bus station makeover. Despite issuing from the Latin American magic realism factory, the film is sufficiently political and genuinely amusing enough to not make one's teeth hurt.

Moufida Tlatli's masterful *The Silences of the Palace* brought us into a secret world of women within a North African harem. His new *The Season of Men* again portrays a world of virtual imprisonment, but instead of comely courtesans we have weeping wives, pining for one month a year their husbands's summer at their island houses.

Mimmo Calopresti is a kind of B-list Gianni Amelio who deals with metaphysical conundrums within contemporary Italian society. Unlike Amelio, his protagonists tend to be bourgeois and grumpy and the problems faced less visceral. *I Prefer the Sound of the Sea* is a film of genuine quiet introspection as it chronicles a self-made man's attempts to become a patron to a teenage orphan boy.

Unfashionable cinema was also back in fashion at the Director's Fortnight, the "oppositional" section to the main Festival. From Béla Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonik* to Chantal Akerman's *La Captive* to Nana Djordjadze's *27 Missing Kisses*, aging stars of the auteurist '80s proved they were still making personal art films that few people will see. After a first year full of experimentation in her selection, the feeling is that returning Fortnight Director Marie-Pierre Macia has retrenched somewhat, relying heavily on these

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intellectual heavyweights of the past to keep the section relevant.

More insidious was the inclusion of weak, irrelevant films such as Karim Dridi's *Cuba Feliz*, an unnecessary "rap" take on *Buena Vista Social Club*, and Claude Mouriéras's *Tout Va Bien, On S'en Va*, another father fantasy film from bourgeois France. (I suppose one must cut some slack for Macia on the French stuff but these really sucked.)

Charity does not explain the inclusion of *Some Voices* from the U.K. Sporting a jocular performance from sexy Daniel Craig (*Love is the Devil*), it is a paint-by-numbers out-of-the-asylum-and-cannot-handle-normal-life-downward-spiral etude. The theme of fatherlessness also dominated the other British selection, *Purely Belter*, in which two poor Newcastle boys try anything to get football season tickets. Although better than director Mark Herman's other films (*Little Voices*, *Brassed Off*), this is not exactly life-changing cinema.

In fact, the Director's Fortnight only really managed to provide one truly great film, Bahman Ghobadi's *A Time for Drunken Horses*. Its wonderful title refers to the rather brutal practice of giving smuggler horses diluted wine for the rough, rock-strewn trip between Iraq and Iran. As they trip and fall up the passage, subject to gunshots from border guards and heavy loads on their backs, these heroic creatures provide the last chance for a young boy seeking an operation for his sick young brother. Per usual in Iranian cinema, the kids are dynamite actors, the vistas beyond spectacular and

the direction controlled and simple.

The other two interesting works on offer were portraits of extraordinary politicians. Raoul Peck's penetrating and revelatory *Lumumba* marries his deliberate rhythms to a political urgency. Serge Le Peron's *L'Affaire Marcorelle* also, in a thoughtful way, displays equal parts outrage and control.

The CriticsWeek is sort of the lame sister to the Competition, always trying to be made more officially part of the Festival and generally getting short shrift from the critics who are meant to be its foundation. Even so, the committee manages to find a truly extraordinary film every year. In the past, these have been the breakthrough films of, among others, Gaspar Noé and Wong Kar-wai. This year, *Amores Perros*, a film sort of about a guy victimizing dogs actually ended up being the biggest "buzz" film of the Festival. And it is extraordinary. A hallucinatory, tough-as-nails descent into an original cinematic hell, it was not unlike the feeling of returning to New York and having the Hollywood Reporter choose its "buzz" film of the festival: shock producer Menachem Golan's soon-to-be-completed biopic of Elian Gonzales. ▼

Festivals

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Latino audience squirm with discomfort during the gay scenes in this bold, interesting film.


In *Road Dogz*, directed by Alfredo Ramos, an ex-

con returns to his 'hood only to find that a young charge of his is now grown-up and terrorizing the area with his gang. Technically accomplished, the film's principal cast lacks the acting prowess needed to pull the high drama off. An inability to escape the cycle of violence was also the theme of Lorena David's *Eastside* and Van Fischer's *Blink of an Eye*.

A little more variety was to be found amidst the international selections. Chile's *El Chacotero Sentimental* was a crowd pleaser and easily the best film of the Festival. Directed by Cristián Galaz, this feature mixed drama, comedy and commentary on socio-economic issues.

On the documentary front, standouts included Laurie Collyer's powerful and moving *Nuyorican Dream*. *Chupacabra*, by Patricio Serna, tracks the existence of the legendary blood-sucking creature. What at first seems like a *Blair Witch* homage is actually a serious piece dedicated to uncovering the truth behind the chilling myth. And *Americanos! Latino Life in the United States*, a 35mm celebration of all things Latino by Susan Todd and Andrew Young, was vociferously upbeat if ultimately hollow.

There was no shortage of quality shorts at the Fest, a good number of them from Mexico and shown together in a special screening. *Ponchada*, by Alejandra Moya, was a macabre yet amusing tale of murder; *Adios Mama*, directed by Ariel Gordon, depicted a money-scramming granny; and *Pasajera* was Jorge Villalobos's all-too-brief, and acidly humorous take on tensions between



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