

# FESTCIRCUIT

## Cannes Film Festival, San Francisco International Film Festival, Tribeca Film Festival and the Aspen Shortsfest.

### CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

Consensus was that this year's Cannes festival turned out very well. And it's hard to disagree — profoundly satisfying work from a litany of major names in the art-film world will enrich screens for the months to come. Nevertheless, I cannot help feeling that the critical community, battered by the unrelenting mediocrity of contemporary cinema, may be overstating the case.

While no important director checked in with a bad or embarrassing film — save the inexplicable decision to open the festival with the unfunny *Hollywood Ending* by Woody Allen — no landmarks of cinematic innovation emerged either. Very good films arrived from established filmmakers returning to familiar narrative territories and engaging in familiar aesthetic strategies. But, instead of focusing on this impressive small group, the Festival's critical community forced a number of problematic, politically pandering films into the "thumbs-up" category. In contrast, work that might have been subject to interesting debate, work that pushed at notions of film narrative and aesthetics, was brutally put down by the majority of

attending press in aggressive post-screening rhubarbs. This lock-step approach to art-cinema criticism cannot be a good thing — while it is necessary these days to identify basic artistic competence, there was far too much emphasis put on the haughty dismissal of challenging work. The jury picked up on this mood and awarded a series of compromise prizes that reflected the length of the standing ovations each film received at their evening screenings, rather than their creative merit.

That being said, the Competition, at its best, was awesome this year. Ken Loach's return to working-class youth in *Sweet Sixteen* reminds us that the cycle of poverty, violence and abuse chronicled in his earlier films is still a potent force. Young actor Martin Compston sparkles in the lead role; the film won a prize for Best Screenplay. Also returning to familiar social strata are the Dardenne brothers, with their heartbreaking story of a tech-school teacher who hires his son's killer as an apprentice carpenter. Their in-your-face, roving camerawork teaches a lesson in creating visceral tension and suspense. The film won an acting prize for Olivier

Gourmet, the glum yet impassioned teacher.

Mike Leigh's *All or Nothing* returns to *Naked* territory, using a stellar ensemble cast to explore the fallout from a failed marriage in a bleak housing estate. The film features at its close an extraordinary speech of humility and defeat delivered by the often mannered and professionally downbeat Timothy Spall. A summation in many ways of Leigh's central character conceits, it dares the audience not to care about these sad people.

Im Kwon Taek's trademark pretty pictures and unceasing exploration of Korean historical detail find a happy match in *Chihwaseon*, the life of itinerant painter Ohwon. A biopic raised to impressive heights by its obsessive romance with the art of the brushstroke — think Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse* — it confirms director Im is in the top category of international film, a position reinforced by his shared award (with Paul Thomas Anderson) for Best Director. Abbas Kiarostami's recent dallings in digital video get a fascinating and button-pushing workout in his small-scale *Ten*. A series of (ten) unequal segments taking place in a car driven by a woman in Teheran, it tries to bring together the specifically Iranian forces of religious devotion, sin and, most interestingly, family conflict in its constrained setting.

Aki Kaurismäki, after a spell of indifferent work and sloth, returned with a bang. *The Man Without a Past* sees the iconoclastic Finn at his most romantic and humorous, investing a deadbeat, amnesiac hero with inviting charm. The film picked up the Grand Prize (second place). It also strangely received the Best Actress award, which went to Kati Outinen for her coy portrayal of his Salvation Army love interest. While she is undoubtedly charming in the role, her character is so objectified (on purpose) by Kaurismäki that it seems an odd choice for a jury dominated by divas like Sharon Stone and Michelle Yeoh.

Minor triumphs of two different kinds,



Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible*.

## FESTCIRCUIT

Alexander Payne's *About Schmidt* and Marco Bellocchio's *The Smile of My Mother*, sat well with audiences and critics even though they seemed to present such easy targets for criticism.

Payne's major studio entry explored such absolutely all-American concerns about old age, Midwestern agoraphobia and specifically American idioms of language and humor — just the stuff the French love to hate. The usually sneering Jack Nicholson plays a crusty widower trying to save his daughter from a bad marriage. But Payne ropes in Nicholson to an impressive degree and presents his argument for intra-family compromise and human dignity in admirably low-key terms. The film has an honest wisdom to it, which makes its studio backing all the more surprising.

Bellocchio had become something of an art-film world joke. The jaunty catholicized communism of his great early period — *Fists in the Pocket*, *China is Near* — was tumbling into anachronism even then. He has struggled to find a voice ever since. But this new film takes the central paradoxes of a deeply committed Catholic identity in an unbelieving world in an interesting new direction. With a flourish of Kafkaesque paranoia, a priest informs a man that he is due to testify at the Vatican the following day regarding his mother's possible sainthood. But then the man encounters a strange plot by the fallen Italian aristocracy to restore itself to prominence. Duels, cardinals, miracles and such things follow. Bellocchio plays the whole thing totally straight and the result is a satisfying, Aquinian intellectual exercise in faith and logic that poses new questions to the viewer even days later. While Catholic surrealism may not be everyone's taste, it certainly feels like something bizarrely fresh.

So much for the films everyone truly liked. There were other films, though, that everybody claimed to like, whether they actually did or not.

Roman Polanski's so-called "comeback" film, *The Pianist*, was pegged by the French as the Palme D'Or winner before the Festival began. And, lo and behold, it won. A lumpy, cold historical trudge through familiar Holocaust pieties, it follows a Jewish Warsaw pianist from middle-class sophistication through ghetto life until he just misses getting on the inevitable train East. Afterwards he hides out as a fugitive, betrayed and hidden in turn by Poles and then a music-loving Nazi. It stars Adrien Brody, with a most unconvincing accent

and an arch overuse of his moony eyes and their sad-sack lashes. Later on, things perk up with the charming Nazi, played by Thomas Kretschmann, but, by that time, we are longing for something a little less noble. The project, like other films admired for the wrong reasons, came to the Festival tightly wrapped in critical Teflon. After all, Polanski is a Holocaust survivor, so who are we to say that his approach is not valid? By denying its critical worth are we denying the continuing historical power of the Holocaust? Allowing this dull, obvious Europudding such moral stature, as the jury did, dumbs down the moral strength of contemporary Jewish political discourse. Probably not a wise move these days.

Not that Elia Suleiman would mind. His *Divine Intervention*, the first Palestinian film in Competition, dumbs down just about everything in its path, especially if Jews are involved. Suleiman is a clever filmmaker. He tightly intertwines an absurdist aesthetic, relying on flights of fancy and humor through repetition, with a David-like assertion of Palestinian rage. The first third of the film chronicles the amusing hijinks of a Palestinian community, including the filmmaker's father; see, he seems to be saying, Palestinians are fun too. The second third finds the filmmaker, returning after his father takes ill, falling in love with a woman while obsessively spying on an Israeli checkpoint. The final, deeply troubling segment features his girlfriend as a ninja battling five Israeli soldiers at a shooting range, and winning.

A progressively-minded critic is hard-pressed to admit fault with this film. Am I denying an authentic Palestinian voice by disagreeing with Suleiman's aesthetic choices? By questioning his strategy of throwing provocative ideas up in the air without resolution (or hope or consistency), do I misunderstand his oppression? I suspect so. But, nevertheless, I found *Divine Intervention* to be little better than a politically savvy sketch-comedy show. Some of the jokes work, some of them don't. But it is ultimately a film of moments, not of any profound or lasting importance. Of course, the majority of knee-jerk anti-Israel European intellectuals embraced the film's honesty and courage. It won the Special Jury Prize.

Another Special Jury Prize, invented on the spot as the 55th Anniversary Award, went to Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*. It was the first documentary to

appear in Competition for 40 years or so and, as such, it requires a deeper analysis. Is it really better than anything ever made by the Maysles brothers, D.A. Pennebaker or Errol Morris? According to the French, Moore's sarcastic take on America's foibles perfectly matches the condescension of French intellectuals towards the sociopolitical life of the United States, and they embraced it with cheers and foot-stamping enthusiasm. U.S. critics, so pleased to be represented on the right side of the political divide for once, joined right in.

Moore's progressive rabble-rousing has a certain vigor — here he is going after the gun lobby and seeking to analyze America's love of firearms through the filter of his own youthful flirtation with the NRA. But intelligent critics have come to be justifiably wary of both Moore's often simplistic solutions to difficult problems and his didactic populist confrontations. While I would not blame Moore for George Bush's election, his brand of painless leftism contributed to the breathless utopianism that allowed millions of people to vote for Ralph Nader without imagining the consequences of accidentally electing a Republican president. Moore has set himself up as the left's most accessible polemicist. The position requires considerably more humility than this film, or his recent book *Stupid White Men*, reveals. Snotty Europeans don't need to know this, but U.S. critics should.

I also did not care for Michael Winterbottom's *24 Hour Party People* but, to its credit, my reasons may not be all that valid. After all, it's meant to be a fun movie and people really dug it. The film certainly does not cloak itself in any impermeable political discourse like Polanski, Suleiman or Moore; in fact, it has no political discourse at all. Which, in the end, is my problem with it.

With constant ribald, direct-to-camera voiceover, British comedian Steve Coogan portrays Tony Wilson and tells the story of the Manchester music scene in the 1980s: Joy Division, New Order, Happy Mondays, the Hacienda, the rise of Ecstasy. What is interesting about the first part of this story is how angry, poor-as-fuck, working-class guys reshaped and rethought punk into a nervous, poetic and lasting kind of music. What is interesting about the second part is how angry, poor-as-fuck, working-class guys found a new drug, a new way of partying and transformed a generation's self-

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## Wares

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been directed at the problem of making video look like film. Researchers are up against a number of big obstacles. Video and film run at different frame rates. Standard video is interlaced, which means each frame is cut in half like it was shoved through a very fine slicer with 256 blades. (Now you know why TV can be so painful to watch.) Video has no grain, and its color characteristics and ability to handle contrast are very different from film. And transferring film to video introduces a host of other complicating differences.

CineLook and CineMotion are perhaps the most comprehensive desktop tools yet for overcoming these differences. CineLook modifies your video in three ways to make it look more like film: It gives you an extensive set of controls for adding layers of film grain to your image, color corrects your image to better emulate the color characteristics of film, and employs After Effects' 3:2 pulldown function to give your footage the look of telecined film. The results can be quite effective, but this is not a simple tool you'll master in a couple of hours. In an effort to simplify things, DigiEffects provides preset effects that emulate the characteristics of various film stocks — everything from 8mm to 35mm film. But in my experience, you must modify these presets on a shot-by-shot basis to get the best possible results. These modifications can be a time-consuming affair usually involving a great deal of trial and error. CineLook effects take quite a long time to render, so the trial-and-error cycle can be very long indeed.

You probably won't be surprised to learn that CineLook cannot take badly-shot low-resolution video footage and give it the look of a studio feature. That said, many films work not because they have a pristine visual appearance, but because they look distinctive. CineLook is a tool that can give your video just such a unique look. For example, I needed to fix a hopelessly contrasty shot I'd made with a single-chip DV camcorder. To get the correct exposure on my subject, I'd been forced to let the sky burn to an ugly radiant white. To my eye, the electronic sky made the shot unusable. I applied a CineLook 8mm-film effect to the shot, rendered it, and the result was a sky teaming with lovely film grain. The sky, though grungy with grain, was now

quite beautiful, and the shot quite usable.

CineMotion offers more precise control of a shot's film-motion characteristics than CineLook. It offers eight different styles of telecine simulations and (precise control) over parameters like shutter blur. CineMotion also includes nine additional plugins, including a Banding Reducer, a Grain Reducer and an Interlace Aliasing Reducer. CineLook can be used on its own, but CineMotion must be used in conjunction with CineLook to really achieve a film look.

Like many other After Effects plugins, CineLook and CineMotion will run on Premiere 6 and on Final Cut Pro. However, some functionality will be lost, so it's probably best to work in After Effects whenever possible. Demonstration versions of these plugins are available for download on the DigiEffects Web site, [www.digieffects.com](http://www.digieffects.com). These are excellent plugins, but I'd highly recommend trying them out before making a purchase.

CineLook will work with PAL video, but because PAL runs at 25 f.p.s, you can't make use of the telecine simulation. Grain effects and color corrections are fully functional. CineLook is available in two flavors: CineLook Broadcast (\$699), which handles images up to 768 x 576 pixels, and CineLook FilmRes (\$1995), which can handle images as large as 4000 x 4000 pixels. CineMotion (\$299, or \$199 if purchased with CineLook) will work with NTSC footage only. These plugins will work on Mac or Windows machines.

CineLook and CineMotion can achieve striking results, but the learning curve is steep. More comprehensive manuals would help. These plugins interact with After Effects in myriad ways, and the documentation is rather spotty in guiding the user through the various settings you must set manually to achieve the best results. More detailed explanations would make these very powerful applications much more user friendly and, I suspect, much more widely used.▼

## In Focus

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and Oldman's entrance as McConaughey's diminutive twin brother.

"[Matt's character] was the freak in his family since everyone else was short," says production exec Tim Peternell. "[Gary] is charming and he and Kate eventually fall in love." The film also has Patricia

Arquette as a trailer park wild woman who stirs things up.

So will *Tiptoes* be as outrageous as *Freeway* or Bright's followup, *Confessions of a Trickbaby*? Absolutely.

*Tiptoes* started shooting in L.A. on April 23. To transform Oldman into a dwarf, the filmmakers are using techniques like forced perspective and blue-screen head replacement. The film is the latest from Chris Hanley's Muse Films (*Love Liza*), which launched with *Freeway* and also made *Trickbaby*. Financing came through the film's co-producers, Studiocanal division Wild Bunch and COPS-creator John Langley's film company. Also on the way from Muse is music video whiz Jonas Akerlund's speed-freak fantasia, *Spun*. Next up, Hanley is scrambling to finance a Charles Manson movie, *The Family*, and an adaptation of Martin Amis's *London Fields*.

"We like the smart writers," Hanley says. "It's disruptive work that we create, and each time it goes out into the media and creates public awareness, it changes things a little bit."

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### THE UNITED STATES OF LELAND

Matthew Ryan Hoge makes his directorial debut with *Leland*, a meaty story he also wrote about a teen who kills an autistic child for no obvious reason and the way the crime reverberates through his family and community. Upping the ante for this project are cast members Ryan Gosling in the lead role and Kevin Spacey, also a producer through his Trigger Street Productions, as the teen's eccentric novelist father. Don Cheadle anchors the film as a teacher who bonds with him at the youth facility where Leland is remanded and becomes obsessed with his case. "It's a meditation on morality," says Hoge. "It takes a tragic act and explodes it."

Hoge, a '96 USC screenwriting graduate, says *Leland* was inspired by two years he spent teaching in L.A.'s juvenile court system. Although he counts *Leland* as his first feature, he made a "nine-day, \$9,000-dollar" project three years ago that he credits as essential prep. "I don't think I would have been able to pull this off without that," he says. "So much is getting out there and making the mistakes and learning from them."

Still a mystery is exactly how *Leland* landed at Trigger Street. "The script had been sent out and several people expressed

interest but thought it was too dark, and of course they weren't going to let Matthew direct," says Trigger Street's Bernie Morris, who's producing *Leland* with Spacey. "Kevin and I sat down with him for six hours and hammered him with every possible scenario and he gave us the confidence he could do it. He'd done his homework and had a very clear vision of the film. And Kevin has a track record of working with first-time directors [like] Bryan Singer and Sam Mendes and had the sense he could pull it off."

The \$5.5-million *Leland* wrapped in L.A. in March; co-financing came from Thousand Words' Palmer West and Jonah Smith. Also in *Leland* are Jena Malone, Michelle Williams, Lena Olin, Chris Klein, Martin Donovan, Sherilyn Fenn and Ann Magnuson.

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non-fiction film — but we didn't know how to do it. We hired an editor named Jun Diaz, who was the editor of *American Movie* and is also a commercial editor. Jun is a master of After Effects. We had never heard of the program before we met him. Jun really showed us that anything we could think of was possible, all in this very simplistic program that you can have on your home computer.

**FILMMAKER:** It a pretty staggering volume of photos you had to work with.

**BURSTEIN:** The first thing we did was go over to his house and there were photo albums and albums of newspaper clipping. It was like his whole life was leading up to this moment.

**MORGEN:** I asked Bob once why he saved everything. He said, "From the time I was 15 years old, I knew I was leading an extraordinary life. I would finish my homework and go to the Copacabana, go out for a fling with Marlon Brando's girlfriend at the top of the St. Moritz Hotel. I was in the gossip columns every day by the time I was 17 years old. I knew that no one would believe me if I didn't save everything." Bob documented every facet of his life. When he was running Paramount, every time he went to a set, he would bring a studio photographer.

**BURSTEIN:** Anyone who works in Hollywood is all about manufacturing image — and that's what you do in life.

**MORGEN:** What was interesting was that Bob didn't have any home movies. We thought we were going to uncover a treasure chest of Super-8 and 16mm film, but we learned very quickly that Bob would never allow himself to be filmed because he couldn't control it. If you're in a still shot, you can control what's happening — especially if you bring your own photographer. That said, we bought a lot of photographs that were not from Bob's collection, particularly those from the '80s. Bob did not save the pictures with drool coming down his mouth.

**FILMMAKER:** You guys sound critical of non-fiction filmmaking. Is this film, in the end, a reaction against that tradition?

**MORGEN:** Not at all. We're an outgrowth of non-fiction film. We are very aware of the evolution and history of non-fiction. This film really challenges the whole notion. All we are doing is representing the post-modern aesthetic seeping into non-fiction film.▼

## Fest Circuit

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image. Except the film doesn't tell these two stories. It instead tells us about Tony Wilson, an upper-class TV presenter who was a booster, manager, promoter, club owner and idealistic record label owner. Full of false humility and smarmy self-deprecation, Coogan is apparently mimicking a potent British icon. I just found this biopic a self-aggrandizing and beside-the-point portrait of a classic yuppie.

David Cronenberg's uninteresting *Spider* — a favorite of the aged U.K. press — sees this powerful filmmaker creating the most hermetic Lifetime Network special of all time. Ralph Fiennes mumbles his way through a Victorian halfway house as painful flashbacks reveal the murder of his mother by his dad and his acquisition of a new, floozie wife.

Finally, there were the films roundly hated by the vast majority of the Festival's attendees that, with all their problems acknowledged, need a second look. Most of these films were not particularly pleasant experiences to watch yet had serious intellectual intent.

The French got particularly mauled. Olivier Assayas brought *Demonlover*, a cool, stilted story of corporate intrigue around the acquisition of a 3D-anime-porn producer and its rollover sale to an Internet sex company, to the

Competition. The film is about half an hour too long and nowhere near as raunchy as it thinks it is. Critics found it ridiculous — a bad European take on an American genre. Well, maybe — if the genre Assayas was after was the contemporary American TV thriller genre. But Assayas is far more interested in the 1970s tropes of *The Parallax View*, *The Bourne Identity* and their ilk. Paranoid flirtations with the Other, pre-AIDS sexually predatory behavior — sex-as-power instead of sex-as-death — and pre-feminist but unusually empowered women mark this terrain. Assayas uses these contemporary anachronisms to bring into relief how prescient '70s-style paranoia was for our current faceless world.

(Out-of-Competition there were several other genre films, including the Walter Salles-produced *City of God*, a Brazil-sploitation picture that tipped its hat to the Cinema Novo and Nelson Pereira dos Santos but really wanted to be *Black Caesar*. This section also included the new *Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones*, Barbet Schroeder's *Murder By Numbers* and Brian De Palma's *Femme Fatale*, rather thickly underlining the point.)

One usually intelligent American critic told me the only thing to decide about Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* was whether it was silly or stupid. His comment joined the near-unanimous lynch mob on this most interesting film.

*Irréversible* begins with end credits in blood red going increasingly askew and running backwards. This joke should have told critics that we are dealing with some ideas about the cinema here. No one seemed to have been listening. Noé follows the credits with another joke: the murderous, incestuous father of his previous film, *I Stand Alone*, rattles on philosophically about "time destroying all things" — Noé is about to literally destroy everyone in the film and then make them whole again. He also is setting us up for a profound comment on the failure of narrative cinema.

Then the story is told backwards in time, forwards in narrative intent. A man (Vincent Cassel) rampages through a gay-sex/torture club looking for the man who killed his girlfriend (Monica Bellucci); after abusing lots of the guys, he mistakenly identifies a man as the killer, and this man is beaten to death by the girl's former lover, a philosophy professor. We trace the story back (but really forwards), through

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the boyfriend's quest for the killer, the brutal rape, the party she storms out of and their cuddling in bed, pre-party, ending with his girlfriend discovering she is pregnant.

Most critics believe the film should be judged as though the backwards narrative is in fact a stylistic flourish and that we need only reverse the film to read it. Read this way, the film is a conventional thriller à la every Ashley Judd vehicle and is easy to dismiss as, well, silly or stupid.

But this reading totally misses the point. The film's early sections strongly restate Noé's themes of male violence being the essential feature of male identity and the driving force in social politics. These are men — representing a corrupt France — acting out.

The later love scenes are what take Noé to a new, fascinating critical level. He dares the audience to reclaim the "descent into hell" narrative by throwing you the softball set-up scenes that normally persuade us to invest in bourgeois peril. He even seems to like the couple. Yet we don't reclaim the narrative and we find this scene somehow disturbing and creepy. And it is creepy — the real-life couple use the privileged act of making babies to

assert the foolish and dangerous bourgeois myths of safety and protection. It's their presumption that is vile, not their eventual demise.

That the critics failed to understand this frightening idea and Noé's critique of these sacrosanct social underpinnings is the only thing silly and stupid going on here, I fear.

Following last year's huge preponderance of Chinese and Japanese cinema in Competition, only one film from these nations made the cut this year: Jia Zhang Ke's *Unknown Pleasures*. Jia made *Platform*, one of the great triumphs of recent art cinema. A three-hour odyssey through the youth generation lost to the Cultural Revolution, it is as widely admired as it is little seen. His new film uses a similar style as *Platform* but returns to the characters of his first film, *Xiao Wu* — the displaced, unemployed kids of contemporary urban China and how their aimless ennui-filled existence is creating a kind of national agony. But the crowds hated its dispassionate style, long takes and deliberate cinematic language.

In Atom Egoyan's exploration of the Turkish slaughter of Armenians at the turn of the century, *Ararat*, he asserts that history, like religion, is largely a matter of faith. His characteristic multiple storylines and quiet moments of emotional intimacy are not perhaps showcased at their best here — the film-within-a-film motif is distracting, confusing and dominant — but it is pleasure to see an accomplished filmmaker working hard to get at a big idea like this.

The Un Certain Regard section, a well-spring of exciting cinema from the developing world and the radical fringes of the West, proved to yield some treasures this year.

Perhaps the finest film of the Festival was Abderrahmane Sissako's *Waiting for Happiness*, from Mali. This absolutely stunning, perfectly shot film captures life in a transient town on the edge of the desert. The film's intertwines simple metaphor and complex characterization seamlessly. And it is really funny; a scene with a boy from the city, unsure of the local language, getting seduced by a bunch of veiled women is glorious. (Sissako also made *Life on Earth*, a charming portrait of an African makeshift radio station.) This confirms him as Africa's great new talent.

More humor came from China in Liu Bingjian's kooky and exuberant *Cry*

*Woman*, the tale of a girl forced to abandon her job selling bootleg CDs on the streets once her husband is thrown in jail. She becomes a professional mourner, weeping and singing tribute songs at local luminaries' funerals. As she gets greedier, she takes on more dubious assignments, including a dog's burial.

The hermetic, intensely difficult *Blissfully Yours* comes from Thailand's ever-interesting film scene. Using a deliberate style — kind of schematic impressionism — the filmmaker, Apichatpong Weerasethakul (*Mysterious Object at Noon*), introduces us to a figurine painter, her Burmese lover and an emotionally unbalanced relative. The plot revolves around a rash on the Burmese man's chest and what they do to fix it and ends with a most extraordinary sex scene beside a river.

It is very odd that Pablo Trapero's *El Bonaerense* did not end up in a Latin America-less Competition. His *Crane World* was one of the sensations of the festival world a few years back; its terse black-and-white exploration of a working class man getting by under trying circumstances was placed in the same circles as Laurent Cantet's celebrated *Human Resources* and *Time Out*.

Using a gorgeous combination of pushed light and heavy grain, he tells the story of a locksmith who eventually becomes an inspector in the Buenos Aires police force. While corruption and brutality weave in and out of the story, Trapero firmly focuses on a man nearly always drowning in circumstances beyond his control. Out of this mess, he tries his best to be a loyal employee and a good boyfriend to a single mother. Trapero's refusal to condescend or judge the amorality of his characters makes for invigorating, honest cinema.

Another film strangely excluded from Competition was Bahman Ghobadi's *Songs of My Mother's Country*. Ghobadi made *A Time for Drunken Horses*, one of the more popular and celebrated recent films from Iran. Here he returns to the borderless, migratory region around the border of Iran, Iraq and Turkey, home to the nationless Kurds and lots of smuggling. Two chunky, hirsute Persian brothers help their father to track down his wife, a singer, who has run off with a Kurdish man. The film begins with lots of song and dance — they are all musicians-for-hire — and gradually becomes more serious as they become refugees themselves.



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If *Un Certain Regard* was the repository for developing world cinema, the Directors Fortnight was where the good women filmmakers took the spotlight. Gilles Jacob quite famously introduced "The Year of the Woman" about five years ago with a big bunch of films by female directors in the Competition. He announced at the time that Cannes had been transformed and that the Competition would look more like society at large from then on. Well, it hasn't quite worked out that way. The only woman with a film in Competition was French industry-favorite Nicole Garcia with yet another middlebrow Daniel Auteuil vehicle too uninteresting to mention above.

The Fortnight opened with Catherine Breillat's newest provocation, a fictionalization of the controversial sex scene from *Fat Girl* that has caused the film to be banned in Ontario and prompted questions everywhere about its representation of underage sex. The new film sees Breillat in a comedic vein. Anne Parillaud does a dead-on impression of the confrontational but spacey filmmaker — Breillat is an icon herself in France — and Grégoire Colin has great fun waving around his massive prosthetic cock. With its chilling last shot of Breillat, full of passionate satisfaction at getting her scene, beside a weeping Roxane Mesquida, just violated in front of a big crew, the film is transported to the world of Fassbinder's *Beware the Holy Whore* and Wenders's *The State of Things* — movies about making movies that leave one deeply suspicious of the medium one is watching.

Another terrific film by a woman in the Fortnight was provided by Lynne Ramsay. Perhaps the closest film to a breakthrough masterpiece in the whole event, its exclusion from Competition is a black mark on Fremaux and his boss, Gilles Jacob.

Ramsay made the scorching '70s ghetto horror show *Ratcatcher* two years ago. Here she turns away from Glasgow to Spain in a film about the anxiety of belonging, the conditions of a woman's intellectual and sexual awakening and the limits of female friendship. *Morvern Callar* is the name of the film and the unlikely name of its main character, a woman who runs away to Spain with a friend after her boyfriend kills himself. A pivotal moment in the film occurs when Morvern discovers a man crying in the hotel room next door and goes to comfort him. The unexpected, liberating sex that follows is as emotionally confrontational to viewers ready to grieve as it is to Morvern, who then quietly transforms her whole life once and for all. It is a transcendent moment that makes us all believe that cinema is alive and well.

— Noah Cowan

#### SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Following a clean sweep of its programming staff after the departure of longtime artistic director Peter Scarlet last year, the 45th San Francisco International Film Festival (SFIFF) returned this spring with a new team, headed by former Seattle International Film Festival associate director Carl Spence and assisted by Linda Blackaby, guest programmer Roger Garcia and SFIFF executive director Roxanne Messina Captor. And while the festival has shifted its centerpiece presentations to more commercial fare, it also has managed to maintain its continuing commitment to both local and international filmmakers.

Festival highlights included Teinosuke Kinugasa's 1926 *A Page of Madness*, an expressionistic landmark of Japanese silent cinema, which was accompanied at the packed Castro Theater by indie rockers Superchunk performing an evocative original score. Babak Payami's sweetly absurdist

comic romance, *Secret Ballot*, and *My Wife Is an Actress*, a romantic comedy of marital misgivings by Yvan Attal, were among 18 North American feature premieres, along with Zhang Yimou's charming but ultimately conformist urban-set stylistic departure *Happy Times* and the disappointingly pedestrian *Brief Crossing* from Catherine Breillat.

However, numerous feature documentaries outshone their narrative counterparts, though, including Mika Kaurismäki's *Sound of Brazil*, a celebratory tour through northeastern Brazilian roots music, Alexandra Pelosi's *Journeys with George*, an all-access postmodern "home movie" of George W. Bush's republican nomination and presidential campaigns, and *Uncle Frank*, director Matthew Ginsburg's profile of his uncle, Frank Pour, an ever-youthful octogenarian amateur musician — the first documentary produced by Kevin Spacey's Trigger Street Productions.

The juried Skyy Prize, a \$10,000 cash award for a first-time feature director, was presented to Bohdan Slama for *The Wild Bees*, a woozy, widescreen perspective on slow-witted youth dissipating away in the besotted Czech countryside. The Virginmega audience award for best feature went to Hayao Miyazaki's latest supernatural fantasy, *Spirited Away*. Local filmmaker Dierdre Lynch received the best documentary audience prize for *Photos to Send*, her portrait of the rustic country folk photographed in western Ireland by Dorothea Lange in the 1950s.

Thomas Riedelheimer's *Rivers and Tides*, a profile on the topographical totemics of environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy, took the Golden Gate Award documentary grand prize. The best Bay Area documentary co-recipients were Sundance grand jury prizewinner, *Daughter from Danang*, Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco's wrench-

ing account of cross-cultural family reunion and recrimination, and *Dear Judge* by Laleh Soomekh, a somber take on families impacted by California's mandatory minimum-sentencing law. — Justin Lowe

#### TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL

The inaugural edition of the Tribeca Film Festival surpassed all expectations, even among the most cynical of viewers. With only four full months to prepare, festival organizers pulled off a minor miracle. They roped in buckets of money from sponsor American Express, created an advertising blitz with film trailers and TV spots, showed a wide selection of new documentaries and features in some superb screening facilities, tapped major celebrities for panels, juries and red carpet photo-ops, and even nabbed the world premiere of the next *Stars Wars* clone.

A little sympathy goes a long way.

Of course, Tribeca's success can largely be credited to the events of September 11. Without Lower Manhattan businesses in dire straights, the pockets of festival benefactors may not have been so deep. Even walking to the festival's main venue in Battery Park offered a constant reminder of the event's link to 9/11: "Remember Me" signs of victims of the tragedy lined the street, as did construction crews working day and night at the nearby site of the former Twin Towers. Festival co-founders Jane Rosenthal and Robert DeNiro never shied away from these facts, constantly reminding audiences of the festival's mission: "To celebrate the revitalization of the neighborhood."

Oh yeah, and show movies, too.

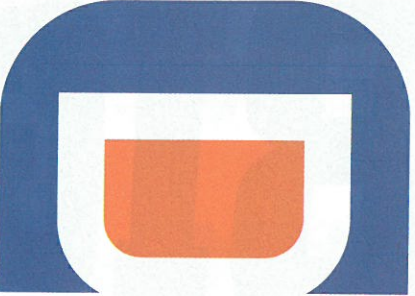
Packing four days with over 150 films makes for some hectic scheduling, but screenings largely went off without a hitch. Some attendees compared the easy-going multiplex viewing to mega-fest

Toronto. The sheer bulk of films also gave Tribeca the sense of several festivals in one. There was the studio-glitz fest, with Hollywood-style premieres; the International Showcase (programmed by Magnolia Pictures' Eamonn Bowles, who announced the company's acquisition of one of the fest's intriguing debuts, *Interview with the Assassin*); the Hollywood-classics festival (curated by Martin Scorsese); and the competitive festival for debuting directors in both dramatic and documentary categories.

While "starfucking" was in high supply at Tribeca, the massive amounts of press coverage had some PR benefits, even for first-timers. "All the celebrities drew so much attention," commented Eric Eason, director of competition film *Manito*. "People in Paris know about the Tribeca Film Festival, because they picked up feeds of the opening press conference with Bill Clinton and Nelson Mandela."

Eason had a particularly positive experience at Tribeca, winning a special emerging filmmaker award for his film, an ultra-low-budget urgent drama that seizes on the story of two Latino brothers in Washington Heights. While the distributor-less film also received special awards at Sundance and SXSW, Eason felt his Tribeca win could "give distributors pause," he said. "Maybe the Tribeca attention will finally bring them around."

Like many filmmakers, Eason remained skeptical of Tribeca's quick development at first. "I was expecting glitches, but everyday I was surprised by how well it was run. It was first class from the hospitality tent to the projection facilities." The hospitality tent, not to be underestimated, afforded pass-holders a never-ending supply of Tribeca Grill salads, sandwiches, drinks, and dessert platters, putting Park City's cheese and crackers to shame. And it was


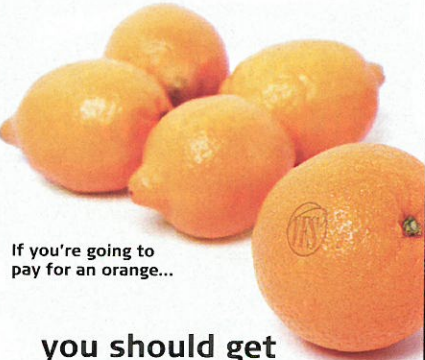


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n't even overcrowded.

Like Eason, Richard Sylvarnes, director of the dreamy miniDV competition feature *The Cloud of Unknowing* (a world premiere produced by Hal Hartley and starring his wife Miho Nikaido) applauded the festival's high-definition Panasonic laser projection. "It was beautiful," he said. "Having the chance to show my film to people in that environment, who could ask for anything more?"

While the festival's dramatic competition was considered largely mixed, nearly every film had its fans, with movies like *Manito*, *Cloud of Unknowing*, DV-entry *One Man's Ceiling* and even foreign premieres like Puerto Rico's *12 Hours* and Slovenia's *The Last Supper* garnering positive buzz. But it was local success story, Dylan Kidd's dramatic winner *Roger Dodger*, one of the few films actually shooting during 9/11, that will surely be Tribeca's coup, a quick-witted story about coming of age starring Campbell Scott. "We've been treated very well at this festival," said Kidd. "And having shot the film last fall in New York, it's been very meaningful to premiere here."

Tribeca's competition docs were on average stronger. Highlights included music profiles like *Breath Control: The History of the Human Beat Box* and *Jimmy Scott: If You Only Knew*, portraits of eccentric Americans from *Mai's America* to *Nine Good Teeth*, and engaging snapshots of spelling bees (*Spellbound*) and theater in the 'hood (*OT: Our Town*). In the festival's other sections, strong American non-fiction works (from HBO) showed the increased vitality of the format (and the cable station): *Journeys With George*, *American Standoff*, *Devil's Playground*, and the festival's most disturbing and yet also apropos document, *Telling Nicholas*, a riveting portrait of a father's inability to tell his 7-year-old son that his mother died in the World Trade

Center. Without the framework of 9/11 giving the festival such powerful works and passionate commitments, it will be interesting to see how the second Tribeca Film Festival shapes up. "This year it really had a *raison d'être*," noted Eason, "but will it be the same next year? We'll see."

— Anthony Kaufman

## ASPEN SHORTSFEST

Short films often get short shrift at major film festivals, so it's of no small importance that a forum like Aspen Shortsfest exists: where burgeoning filmmakers aren't treated like second-class citizens; where a film under 30 minutes is heralded as a work of art, not an undistributable liability; and where every breath you take holds about 75 percent of the oxygen to which you're normally accustomed. Just remember to drink lots of water and keep your alcohol intake to a minimum as you're soaking in the snow-capped vistas and over-priced restaurants. And yet, Shortsfest's attending filmmakers had such a good time this past April that the latter temptation was made almost impossible.

With its "award-qualifying" classification by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Aspen Shortsfest is a prestigious and potentially career-enhancing event. Past entries include Oscar noms *When the Day Breaks*, *More* and *The Periwig Maker*. Now, with the bust of the dot-com boom and the dwindling number of U.S. outlets for short films, the festival may be more important than ever.

"Shorts filmmakers have such a hard time," said Shortsfest's executive director Laura Thielen. "They're in debt, they have day jobs, they're in a fragile place in terms of their artistic careers, so it's vital to create a forum that inspires them and makes them feel like it's worth it." Thus, repre-

sentatives from AtomFilms, Hypnotic, Forefront Films, and San Francisco's PBS affiliate were invited to this year's festival. Said Thielen, "First and foremost, we're about filmmakers and film audiences."

Many of this year's international directors arrived in Aspen on the heels of February screenings at the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival, the world-renowned screening venue and sales market for *court metrage*, as the French say. At one of Aspen's several mixers, Hanno Höfer, director of *Humanitarian Aid* — a smart comedic gem about three European aid workers who visit a remote village — commented that Aspen is better programmed and less political than Clermont-Ferrand, mostly by virtue of its condensed schedule. (Only 59 films competed.) Another filmmaker who screened previously at Clermont-Ferrand was British director Robert Bradbrook, whose *Home Road Movies* took home a \$1,000 prize for most innovative animation film at Aspen. Bradbrook combines still images, animation and live action in stunningly original ways. "There's far more business at other festivals," noted Bradbrook. "This one is just for film lovers."

Other extraordinary works at Aspen included Clayton Hemmert and Benita Raphan's *2 + 2*, a multi-layered look at John Nash's theories that puts *A Beautiful Mind* to shame, Bob Sabiston's *Yard*, an animated Brakhagean homage to *Two-Lane Blacktop*, and *Counterfeit Film*, Brett Simon's clever look at the creation of silent film — and money — using a copy machine.

Sheila M. Sofian screened her heart-breaking animated documentary about a Bosnian child, *A Conversation with Haris*, and learned, during a festival Q&A on short-film financing, that she had won a Guggenheim fellowship. While Sofian

chairs an animation department at a California Community College and took some 5 years to hand paint *Haris*, a filmmaker like Liz Garneau, producer of the powerful, nightmare-inducing *The French Doors*, raised her financing through a major grant from New Zealand's Film Commission. Other strong foreign drama — *Lurch* (Best Cinematography), *Crow Stone*, *Golden Gate* (Best Drama), *Do Armed Robbers Have Love Affairs?*, *Gridlock* (Best Live Action Short) — similarly demonstrated that good short cinema more easily is produced overseas through financing structures that combine TV money with government subsidies.

In contrast, American Leo Geter spoke about acquiring both debt and friends in Hollywood in order to make his NYU thesis film, *Andy Across the Water*, an Aspen favorite, which won Best Comedy (and \$2,000). "We don't have state-funded anything," Geter said. Fortunately for Alice Elliott, director of another Aspen winner (Best Documentary), *The Collector of Bedford Street*, we have HBO. Elliott spent four years working on this affecting portrait of her Greenwich Village neighbor Larry Selman, but it wasn't until HBO's Sheila Nevins gave her the greenlight that she could complete the film. "There's no promise of paying your crew back with a short film," commented *In the Bedroom's* Todd Field, a 1995 Shortsfest alumnus (*Nonnie & Alex*) who came to the festival on closing night for a special tribute. "The most you can hope for is to sell your film somewhere and pay your parents back."▼

— Anthony Kaufman

## CORRECTION

In Vol. 10, No. 3, Spring 2002, page 14, the photo credit was incorrect for the film *Piggie*. Rufus Standefer is the photographer.



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