

Story-telling on screen: The Cannes Film Festival 2003

Kristine Greenaway

It may well have been, as The Guardian's critic Peter Bradshaw said, 'the worst Cannes film festival in living memory.' The danger signals were there from the first when the farcical costume comedy, *Fanfan la Tulipe*, was screened at the opening night gala. It is a movie that can most charitably be called 'lightweight but pretty' and is certainly not the calibre of film one would expect to be chosen to open a top-class world film festival. As the following article recounts, things did not get better!

Members of the Ecumenical Jury at this year's festival quickly saw the need to create a list of films 'to come back to, in case of drought'. After screening all 30 films in competition, the 'drought list' was an important source for our deliberations. But, in the end, our award to Iranian director Samira Makhmalbaf for her film, *At Five in the Afternoon*, honoured a film that would have looked good in any festival line-up. It is an accomplished film by an assured filmmaker. Already at 23 years old, Makhmalbaf uses the camera to create visual images of haunting, almost surreal beauty.

At Five in the Afternoon, is a profound and memorable piece of work which puts to shame the many examples of self-indulgent, flawed, or failed aspirations on show this year at Cannes. Bertrand Blier's, *Les Côtelettes*, was loudly booed and hissed at the press screening. After journalists hooted throughout Vincent Gallo's narcissistic and pornographic *Brown Bunny*, weary members of the Ecumenical Jury could be heard asking each other how festival organizers could have screened 2,000 movies and chosen so many weak films for the official competition.

According to film critic, Thierry Jobin, writing in the Swiss French-language daily, *Le Temps*, some top filmmakers who had been expected to deliver films did not come through (Wong Kar-Wai, Quentin Tarantino, and the Coen brothers). These were replaced by films that might not have been selected in other years. As well, Ecumenical Jury member Charles Martig, a veteran of other film festivals, noted that there is increasing competition for unreleased movies that can premiere on the international film festival circuit. This year, Cannes clearly lost out.

Alienation and uprootedness

Still, although the selection was weaker overall than in past years, there were some excellent films on the screens of the Palais du Festival that tell stories which evoke the mood of this era. Hardly surprising then that the dominant theme was alienation and uprootedness. Two of the most discussed films, *Elephant* and *Dogville*, focus on people living on the edge of society, people who have lost their moral compass. At *Five in the Afternoon*, *Uzak*, *Les égarés*, and *L'heure du loup*, tell of people who have literally lost their homes and are struggling to survive in unfamiliar and hostile environments.

Directors often chose to use silence to evoke this sense of alienation, the unspoken, and the unspeakable. At its best, silence on film focuses our attention on visual metaphor and image-driven story telling. At its worst, it is empty, pretentious, and intensely tedious. And there was a lot of tedious pretension at Cannes this year. Members of the Ecumenical Jury spent hours in press screenings watching meaningless images playing out over silence that was often punctuated by mocking laughter from the journalists.

Many filmmakers sought directly or indirectly to draw attention to American violence at home and abroad, thus earning the wrath of American film critics. Tensions and sensitivities following 'September 11' still make it politically incorrect to criticise the USA. American critics are not yet ready to see their country through the eyes of German filmmaker Max Faeberboeck (*September*) or American documentary director Errol Morris (*The Fog of War*). Given the sensitivities of the times, I loved the juxtaposition in this festival of two American movies, *Matrix Reloaded* and *American Splendor*. The narrative lines of *Matrix Reloaded* can be read at multiple levels, but the first and most obvious is that the Neo, the hero, is glorified for his ability in combat. *American Splendor* on the other hand focuses on a 'non-super hero', an ordinary guy from Cleveland who becomes a legend because of his ironic view of the world around him. His confrontation with the icon of American pop culture, David Letterman, is a non-violent act of self-redemption.

Challenging study

It wasn't always easy to follow and interpret what was happening on the screen. There were new filmic conventions (*Matrix Reloaded*, *Dogville*, *American Splendor*, *The Tulse Luper Suitcases*) that were disorienting for the uninitiated. There were story elements that were difficult to accept (euthanasia in Canadian director Denys Arcand's, *Les Invasions barbares*, or incest in Russian director Alexander Sokoruv's, *Father and Son*). For me, being a member of the jury at the Cannes Film Festival was like being a student at a world-class film school and, at the same time, a participant in a challenging study seminar on faith and contemporary issues. The meetings of the Ecumenical Jury offered opportunities to share analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of each film we saw together. What were the film's strengths and weaknesses? Why? Was it a film to which our jury could award a prize? Why not?

We drew for these discussions on the list of criteria which ecumenical juries are to use in selecting the best film in competition at a festival: 'The award-winning film should be of high

artistic quality, present positive human values that can be read in the light of the Gospel, and encourage the viewing public to support the social justice values it depicts. The film should be true to the culture which it portrays and create respect for the language and images of that culture. At the same time, it should be understandable and have an impact outside the local culture it presents.'

But what does each of those criteria mean to individual jury members? North Americans have a different sense of narrative story telling in film than Europeans. (Compare Jean-Luc Godard to Quentin Tarantino.) People from the global south tend to see social, political, and moral issues from the point of view of those on the margins of the globalised economy. (Jury members at Cannes this year had several debates about the depiction in Arcand's, *Les Invasions barbares*, of a wealthy young man buying his father comfort and peace as he prepares to die.) Age, sex, education, and experience too affect how we react to film. Thank goodness! When the members of a jury listen and learn from each other, as did the members of the Ecumenical Jury at Cannes this year, that diversity of perspectives strengthens the decision-making process.

The Festival's Grand Jury, chaired by French director Patrice Chéreau, agreed with the Ecumenical Jury when it awarded its Prix du Jury to Samira Makhmalbaf's, *At Five in the Afternoon*. The Grand Jury's Palme d'or went to American director Gus van Sant's, *Elephant*. The movie had impressed the Ecumenical Jury but we did not give it an award because it ends in scenes of disorientation, terror, and death. Our award is meant to honour and draw attention to a story that offers images of hope or salvation. But do go to see *Elephant*. It is a study of the terrain of the psychology of mass murderers, the ground in which the seeds of violence are sown, take root, and are nurtured. It is not a study of violence but rather of the context and conditions that breed violence and, as such, is an important and provocative commentary on contemporary western societies.

In times past, the legends, stories, and cautionary tales of a people were told around campfires and then carried by minstrels and traders along the roads and byways linking one village to another. Plays were presented in churchyards and in town squares on market days. For decades now many of our culturally defining stories have been told on screens in our living rooms or at the local movie theatre and are distributed at market places like Cannes.

The presence of ecumenical juries at film festivals is a witness to the belief that the best films can enhance our faith. The awards made by these juries 'broaden the cinema horizons of the public' by drawing attention to what is possible in films and to the interest of church people in the cinema. 'They demonstrate' writes Robert Molhant, '...that cinema of quality, portraying values which are humane, social, cultural and spiritual, are produced by numerous countries around the world.' (Quoted in the pamphlet *Cinema Religion and Values* published by OCIC in 1999).

In the beginning was the word. From the time of Greek theatre through the early morality plays and on through to the stage and screens of the 21st century, religions have had their storytellers

and promoters. Jesus was a great storyteller whose stories of ordinary people, rulers, and the Divine transcended his time and place. Ever since he lived among us, storytellers have reacted for or against his message. But they have never stopped telling it. Nor should we, the members of his church.

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