

Cannes 2010 – A Festival during a crisis?

Movie Reviews

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The Croisette is unaltered. Just a week ago, a storm ravaged the beach, the ads, flooded the streets and cars close to the beach. The film festival was far too important, so the authorities mobilized and everything looks impeccable again.

The world crisis doesn't seem to affect the French Riviera and with all the complaints coming from the managers, you can only find hotel rooms at extravagant prices and, at the weekends, at restaurants, you can hardly find a place to eat without a reservation.

Unfortunately, the crisis had an effect over the selections: the official competition, *Un Certain Regard*, *Quinzaine des Réalistes*, *Semaine de la Critique* have not screened big movies, reference movies, masterpieces. We should have realised that after the opening gala with Ridley Scott's Robin Hood – a rather Hollywood movie (thankfully, it was not included in the competition!). Where is *The Duellists*, that cinematographic jewel which the, now famous, English director was starting his career with?

First days, first movies - nothing surprising

Tournée, one of the three French movies in the competition, not only starring Mathieu Amalric, but also having him as a director, is a light comedy, with a bold touch, which has amused the public, especially the French public and which, although awarded, did not seem to me like it made any statement.



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Also disappointing was Hanyo/The Housemaid by Korean Im Sangsoo, a movie which at least might have set off a small scandal for its full frontal nudity scenes, but that was not meant to be...

However, Mike Leigh reaffirmed himself with Another Year, a family portrait, with its ups and downs, with the day to day life, a movie over which you get the feeling of something divine – a well made movie, which quickly became a critics' favourite and generated great disappointment when it was not awarded the great prize. Why? Quite simple: because the English director, a festivals' favourite, already had a Palme d'Or for Secrets & Lies (1996), a truly extraordinary work and it is hard to award him a great prize for a movie that does not live up to the previous one's expectations, even in a competition as modest as the one in 2010. Bear in mind that in the last years, two Palme d'Or prizes were awarded only to the Dardenne brothers – for Rosetta (1999) and L'enfant (2005) and before them to Kusturica, who returned in the '90s with the remarkable Underground after it had been awarded the great prize for Tata e în călătorie de afaceri in 1988. This sort of jury calculation does not take away any of the beauty of Mike Leigh's movie.

Not the same can be said about Outrage, the latest movie of the well-known Japanese director Takeshi Kitano, who is trying another comeback to the style of the old movies Sonatine and Hana- Bi, sadly unsuccessfully. With all that apparently shocking violence, you have the feeling of a déjà-vu and nothing is surprising. What is said is that even the dark humour of the character portrayed by actor Kitono, the essence of the movies stated above, was lost. Or maybe in the meantime, from Hana-Bi so far, other masters of the same movie type have emerged (see Johnnie To).

With Biutiful – there is no mistake, it is written as Javier Bardem's daughter, the main character, hears it – Mexican director Alejandro Gonzales Iñárritu, awaited as one of the possible candidates, did not disappoint. Being more related to 21 Grams than to the "lighter" Babel, the movie is a one-man show Bardem, who portrays a job dealer for the African emigrants in the suburbs of Barcelona, also adjusting his income as a psychic, talking to the dead. The news of his imminent death determines him to try to resolve the life problems of the one he loves and that he leaves behind (wife and daughter). The movie was awarded the prize for male performance for the Spanish actor, but unfortunately it was shared with the young Italian actor, Elio Germano, who starred in La nostra vita by Daniele Luchetti. Both for the audience and the critics, the Italian movie would have gone unnoticed if



it had not been awarded. For us, the movie has two positive aspects: the way in which the Romanian emigrants are perceived and the good acting performed by two almost unknown Romanian actors, Alina Berzunțeanu and Marius Ignat.

We salute the presence in the competition of the first African movie after a long while, *Un homme qui crie*, by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun and we move on to the two French movies which have sparked discussions. One because it was not awarded the great prize (*Des hommes et des dieux*), the other because it caused a scandal (*Hors la loi*). Both talk about Algeria, always a hot topic for the French.

Des hommes et des dieux by Xavier Beauvois, inspired from a true event, tries to explain the tragic death of the monks in a Christian monastery in Algeria in the '90s. Sent there to bring peace and to help the Muslim community, the sacrifice, just like the execution of the nine Christian 'martyrs', is absurd and revolting for the end of the 20th century. The film is beautiful but the excess of religious music is sometimes bothering. The special jury award for this film did not satisfy the French critics, who wanted more, but how far was this movie from Laurent Canet's motion picture in 2008, *Entre les murs* !

Rachid Bouchareb's **Hors la loi** seems a continuation of the much awarded **Indigènes** in 2006. The topic is the liberation war in Algeria seen through the point of view of an emigrating Algerian family (cast away) in France. Right after the film, the streets of Cannes were crowded with a spontaneous manifestation of the French veterans, which gave the local press a lot to write about and only then I understood why the entrance check-up in the projection halls that day was stricter.

I will pass quickly over **Fair Games** by director Doug Liman (who also made *The Bourne Identity* and *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*), a mall movie, but with Cannes aspirations, and get to *Poetry* by Lee Chang-Dong. The director – the former Minister of Culture from South Korea – has already been awarded at the great festivals, especially for the performance of his heroines in *Oasis* and *Secret Sunshine*. The current film is truly a poetic one about an elder woman, with early Alzheimer, who wants to learn how to write poems. This time the film was awarded for its script, not for the actress in the leading role (Yun Junghee), although she had a great performance.



The female performance award was justly given to the one that also appears on the festivals poster - Juliette Binoche – for the leading role in *Copie conforme/Certified Copy* by Abbas Kiarostami. I admit it is my favourite film from Cannes 2010. The Iranian director, a frequent and much awarded in the festivals cycle, manages to make an incredible film outside of his native space. The action takes place in Italian Tuscany, and the topic is a simple love story, without any kind of political implications (most of the Iranian movies always keep a political sub-layer). Can a perfect copy replace the original? It is the case of Mona Lisa and the copy made by the same Leonardo. Which one do we admire nowadays? The copy or the original? This artistic discourse is the movie's pretext in which an English writer (baritone William Shimell) and a Frenchwoman (Juliette Binoche), owner of an antique gallery, meet. In a village they visit together they become, by accident, part of an old married couple's game in which they remember and give tongue-lashing at each others' mistakes. Each becomes part of the other one's game and tell their life story. We can think of Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia*, but there the two main characters pretended they met for the first time, thus trying to solve their old marriage issues. Without the performance of magnificent Juliette Binoche, the film would have been the same, particularly because master Kiarostami apparently wrote the part especially for her.

I mention the first film of Ukrainian Sergei Loznista *Schastye moe/My Joy*, an absurd story with a feel of horror, from which I can only remember the image of our operator Oleg Mutu and the long awaited *Utomlyonnye solntsem 2/Burnt by the Sun 2: Exodus*, Nikita Mihalkov's latest film (only at the end of the film I discovered that it was the first part of the second part!). Inspired by Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and making often references to the great Soviet movies about the war, the film continues the story of general Kotov (Nikita Mihalkov), who at the end of the first film finds himself in a concentration camp in Siberia, where he had been sent by Stalin. Miraculously surviving in the concentration camp during the first days, the general is enrolled as a simple soldier. The war events, perfectly filmed and impeccably directed, unfortunately give the impression of a déjà-vu, which remind me of episodes from Sven Hassel's novels. Of course we will not be able to draw a conclusion unless we have seen the second part. But anyway the sequel will not be able to reach the quality of *Burnt by the Sun* (except *The Godfather Part 2*, I do not know any work which has surpassed the *Princeps*).



The 63rd Cannes Film Festival's great prize, Palme d'Or, was awarded to the Thai film *Loong Boonmee raleuk chat* by director Apichatpong Weerasethakul. It was a partly unexpected award, which sparked discussions. After the press preview I was among those who said the Thai director would be definitely awarded one of the big prizes (maybe not the greatest), the movie being one of my favourites. A name hard to pronounce and to remember, A.W. was not a surprise for the film critics, being one of the favourites of the *Cahier du Cinema* magazine. His movie, *Tropical Malady*, was included among the best 10 movies of the 21st century's first decade. I saw this film in 2004, at the Cannes festival and I have to admit I was not impressed. Then I was actually disappointed by *Syndromes and a Century*, awarded in Venice in 2006. At the beginning of 2010, at the recommendation of director Corneliu Porumboiu, I watched *Blisfully Yours* which I liked better than the first two. A simple conclusion: I cannot be labelled as a fan of the Thai director. With *Oncle Boonmee...*, things change: there is a more connected story, the slow movie rhythm is supported by an image of great plasticity and the ending, surprisingly metaphysical, makes you wonder. In his house in the rainforest, old Boonmee (suffering from diabetes and under dialysis), together with this wife and grandson, remembers his life. The colours and the lights of the jungle, the scents and the noises attract the spirits and the ghosts of the past, which take part in the dialogue. The walk through the cave he was born in is the last initiation road towards death. The vigil is next and then... The acknowledgement of the cinematographic value of Thai films is almost natural – a special work, totally original in this year's modest festival – if we keep in mind that the jury was lead by director Tim Burton, along whom was Victor Erice, nowadays, one of the most special directors.

I cannot finish without speaking about the Romanian presence in the festival. A lot of people are disappointed about the lack of awards. It is hard to stay on the forefront (where we are!) and also win awards. We have to remember we were awarded in 2010 – for short film – in *Quinzaine des Realisateurs* section for *Căutare*, directed by Ionuț Pițurescu. Again a big prize at Cannes! A week before the festival's opening, the two Romanian films were selected in the official competition where, I believe, they would have been well received. But, in the end, for unknown reasons, we entered the *Un Certain Regard* competition. Why were they not awarded there? Because it is very hard to compete in the same competition four years in a row and receive awards every time. We won three times in four years! In 2007, two important awards (Palme d'Or and *Un Certain Regard*). The situation would probably be similar with the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded three years in a row to Romanian writers.



Mărți, după Crăciun/Tuesday after Christmas by Radu Muntean (the most prolific cineaste from the new wave) was very well received, both by the audience and the critics. It is a possible follow-up to Boogie and I consider it Radu Muntean's best film. The topic is the resolution of a marital triangle in today's society, based on a script by Răzvan Rădulescu and Alexandru Baciu, with great dialogues and acting performances.

With Cristi Puiu's Aurora things get complicated, the director has set the bar very high. Clearly he thought about the official selection and an important award, it seemed natural after the triumph with Moartea domnului Lăzărescu/The Death of Mr. Lazarescu. I believe Cristi Puiu made a wonderful movie, but it is a difficult one, it is hard to follow and even harder to understand. The references to Aurora by Murnau or Six Modern Tales by Rohmer complicate the analysis of the movie even further. Written, directed and performed by Cristi Puiu, filmed impeccably by Viorel Sergovici, the movie – inspired from a true story – lasts 180 minutes and manages to keep the tension until the end. Why the movie wasn't liked? Maybe because it is too sombre and too long. Of course it is a simple answer, but Cristi Puiu should be congratulated for a new exceptional cinematographic work. It is not at the same level as Mr. Lazarescu, it runs another path, especially chosen to be more difficult.

The presentation, out of the official competition, of Autobiografia lui Nicolae Ceaușescu/The Autobiography of Nicolae Ceausescu by Andrei Ujica, sparked curiosity first of all, especially because it was competing with Olivier Assayas' Carlos (the story of Carlos the Jackal). Those who knew something about communism, and even some history, understood the film, but the general reaction was, especially for the young generation, the amusement. The director's intense work in researching the communist archives matches with a perfect montage, makes the three hours not seem boring, even if most of the documented pieces were already familiar to us. I would like to notice the two press conferences, the one in 1968, before the Prague events, and the one in 1989, before the revolution, which are emblematic for the man, leader and politician Nicolae Ceaușescu. I still believe the movie should come with a few explanatory notes at the beginning and at the end, so the audience may better understand that it is an autobiography, otherwise the presentation on our screens may create some confusion (some foreign voices in Cannes said, without having understood, that the film was about Nicolae Ceaușescu's rehabilitation!)



One last mention for one of my favourite directors – Otar Iosseliani, a Georgian settled in Paris, which presents his last creation Chantrapas, outside of the competition. At the press conference, the title of the movie was explained: chantera pas becomes in Russian chantrapas. It is about the children of bourgeoisie in 19th century Sankt Petersburg who, studying music with Italian masters, received the chantera pa verdict, equivalent with to be worthless in Russian chantrapa. Of course, it is a film with an autobiographic side, like most of the master's works. The film tells the story of a young director, born in Soviet-ruled Georgia, forced to emigrate in France for political reasons. Everything is filmed, acted and sang in Iosseliani's unique style – a little jewel, which erased all the disappointments of this cinematographic journey.

The Cannes Film Festival is over, but only now the films begin their face-off with the large audience that will provide the verdict.

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