

Cannes

FILM FESTIVAL

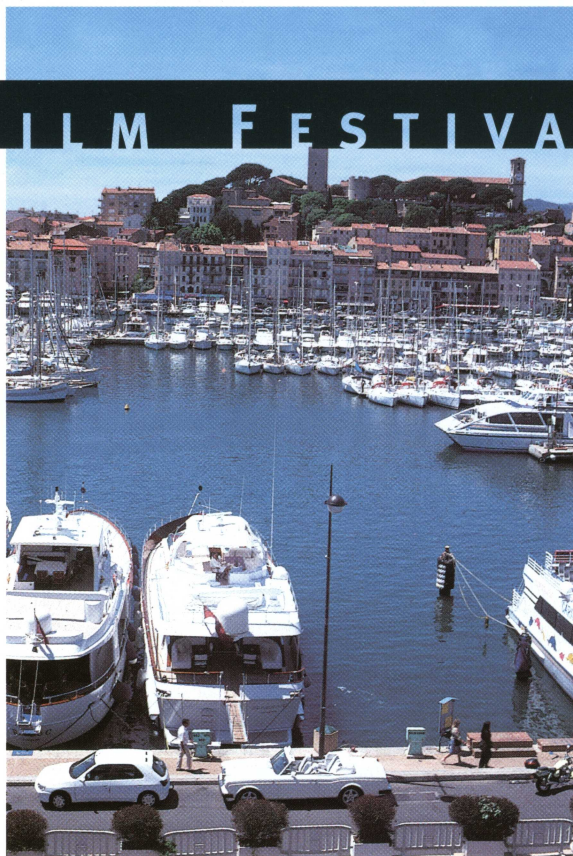
Wrap

The most spoiled brats on God's green earth. From "Blah, Blah, Blah" by Iggy Pop

POOR BABIES. All that sun and surf, all that azure sky, all that free bubbly, all that top-of-the-food-chain privileged ennui, all that primping and posing and fretting about looking one's best, all that sad small chatter in theatres and foyers and parties, all that money; and nobody seems to be even content, let alone pleased with Cannes 2003. Everyone from *The New York Times*, which labelled Cannes 2003 "the worst ever," to Roger Ebert, to *Variety* appeared to agree that what was the 56th edition of the fabled film carnival by the Mediterranean is one best forgotten, one to be hastily

consigned to *les poubelles* of the collective consciousness of the world's film elites. Hell, even Denys Arcand looked less than pleased during his acceptance speech on closing night, *only* receiving prizes for Best Screenplay and Best Actress for his latest, *Les Invasions barbares*. No Palme d'Or. Again. And there's more. The day after Cannes 2003 expired, the French press assailed French filmmaker Patrice Chereau, this year's festival jury president, for the selection of the prizewinners (including Gus Van Sant's eventual Palme d'Or winner, *Elephant*) and the lack of any French film or performer receiving an award.

Where's Iggy Pop when you need him? A rhetorical question, obviously. After all, there's no place for a wet blanket



BY TOM MCSORLEY

"Where's
Iggy Pop
when you need him?"

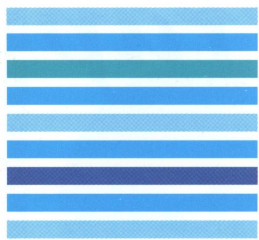
at a big beach party. The Cannes Film Festival does have a way of making people forget that the world beyond the brilliant blue skies and the sun-dappled water is in considerable and dangerous turmoil. So, instead of Iraq and SARS and terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, people get exercised over the "pain of having to sit through Vincent Gallo's *The Brown Bunny*, the *bête noire* of the festival, or loudly lament the anti-Americanism of Lars von Trier's *Dogville*, which prompted *Variety*'s usually imperturbable Todd McCarthy to write a review bordering on Yankee jingoism—ah, the Bush effect felt even in Cannes. Despite new films by Alexander Sokurov (*Father and Son*), Clint Eastwood (*Mystic River*), Peter Greenaway (*The Tulse Luper*

Suitcases, Part 1: The Moab Story), Raul Ruiz (*Ce jour là*) and talented Japanese director Naomi Kawase (*Shara*), it was the consensus along the Croisette that all was disappointment in the 2003 Official Selection. Perhaps a mere minor manifestation of mass delusion, the decidedly grumpy reaction to this year's festival, which intensified as the festival went along, struck me as at best oddly churlish and at worst ridiculously inaccurate.

As usual, there were plenty of fine films to be found in the world's largest celluloid bazaar. Typical of Cannes' programming idiosyncrasy, not to say venality (not too loudly, at any rate), right beside *The Matrix Reloaded* you could find the final

work by the late Portuguese actor/director, Joao Cesar Monteiro, the aptly titled *Coming and Going*, a three-hour philosophical disquisition on desire and memory. Similarly, James Cameron's 3-D documentary about the wreck of (what else?) the Titanic, *Ghosts of the Abyss*, shares the Official Selection program with Austrian dreadmeister Michael Haneke's *Le Temps du loup*. *Vive la difference*, indeed. Given the range of films on offer, in Cannes it always pays to look carefully at the festival's various sections (Un Certain Regard, the Director's Fortnight, et al). It also helps to be a little lucky. And I guess I was.

Debates about the Official Selection section aside, the real strength of the 2003 Cannes was to be found down



the Croisette from the Palais at the Miramar cinema. Past the topless beaches, the carnies, the *T3* promotional displays (with its "Rise of the Machines" tag line acquiring more sinister overtones so soon after the assault on Iraq), and the sweaty black-tie crowd heading in the other direction, it was in the modest Miramar that the Critics' Week program unspooled, featuring just seven features and seven shorts. Canada was prominent with Bernard Émond's well-respected second feature, *20 h 17, rue Darling*, garnering praise, and Dale Heslip's short, *The Truth about Head*, capturing a Jury Prize. Now in its 42nd year, the Critics' Week offered cinematic nourishment all out of proportion to its modest number of films.

Most impressive of all was French filmmaker Siegrid Alnoy's debut feature, *Elle est de nôtres* (*She's One of Us*). It is the story of an awkward

young woman named Christine Blanc, a temp employee who moves from job to job not really fitting in. What she actually does to connect to the world of work, to become "one of us," is one of the most unsettling sequences in recent memory. Part Chantal Akerman, part Laurent Cantet, part Michael Haneke, it is a chilling study of power and manipulation in a culture of conformity. Alnoy's is an ugly duckling tale that is truly ugly, and is a bracing, ironic commentary on contemporary European social mores. *Elle est de nôtres* signals the arrival of a promising new talent in French cinema. Another excellent first feature in the Critics' Week is Julie Bertuccelli's *Depuis qu'Otar est parti* (*Since Otar Left*), a France/Belgium co-production set in T'bilisi, in post-Soviet Georgia. The touching story of a woman's concealment of the death of her son, Otar, from her own aging mother. Otar, who was living in Paris and was the hope of the family for a new life, is killed in a car crash, but his mother cannot bring herself to tell her mother, so she and her daughter Ada write fake letters from Otar to keep the old woman's dreams alive. At once spirited and filled with pathos, and sensitively directed, the film speaks to a whole range of larger geopolitical issues in the finest nuanced gestures of family intimacy.

Finally, the Camera d'Or winner for best first feature went to Danish director Christopher Boe's very stylish and very clever Critics' Week entry, *Reconstruction*, which relocates Dogme-inflected realist aesthetic into more fabulist forms in its self-consciously artificial tale of love and uncertainty in a dark, labyrinthine Copenhagen. Despite an atrocious, embarrassingly mawkish American entry, *Milwaukee Minnesota*, the 42nd Critics' Week in general delivered



Jean Cocteau (far right) with director François Truffaut and star Jean-Pierre Leaud (far left) at the premier of *400 Blows* at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival.

both fine films and a measure of hope for the future of cinema.

As always at Cannes, the cinema's possible future was juxtaposed with several homages to its past. In addition to a photographic exhibition honouring Jean Cocteau, Cannes 2003 mounted a Fellini retrospective (I watched *La Strada*, appropriately enough if you recall the ending of that film, on the beach under the stars at a special outdoor screening), a special presentation screening of the restored print of Chaplin's *Modern Times* (an interesting contrast to the *T3* promos, as Chaplin's film sounds a more important warning about the "rise of the machines") and presented American film critic Richard Schickel's documentary *Charlie: The Life and Art of Charles Chaplin*.

At one level, one is tempted to see the retrospective programming as a stratagem to help soothe the savage beast of the "spoiled brats," bleating about a barren crop of films at Cannes 2003. That would be to replicate inaccuracy. It simply wasn't so. There was plenty of fine work and, as usual, lots of detritus, too. Whatever the year and whatever the relative merits of new films, one can always find cinematic sanctuary somewhere in Cannes.

Tom McSorley is head of the Canadian Film Institute and a contributing editor to *Take One*.

From top to bottom: Dale Heslip's *The Truth about Head*, Nicole Kidman in Lars von Trier's *Dogville*

