

# FESTIVALWRAPS

## THE MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF NEW CINEMA AND NEW MEDIA (10/12-22/00)

As a long-time collaborator of the Montreal International Festival of New Cinema and New Media, it was a delight to finally enjoy it from a spectator's point of view. What constitutes the very essence of this festival (founded in 1991 by Claude Chamberlain and Dimitri Eipides) – apart from its funky, multicultural St. Laurent Boulevard location – is its uncanny ability to tap into the fabric of our times and see into the future of moving images, reflecting it before or as it happens. Not surprisingly, its biggest point of interest lies in its wildly eclectic character – something that is both its strength and its weakness, as it can translate into internal crises and dispersion. However, in the past few years, the festival has finally started to regain its focus and build a new momentum, with help from patron of the arts (and Softimage president) Daniel Langlois, who took it under his wing and gave it a chance to expand and fully explore its potential. The fact that it moved to Ex-Centris, Langlois's incredibly successful state-of-the-art film and new-media complex, also helped tremendously. While the organization still needs a few adjustments to this sudden growth, this year's edition was truly exciting.

Opening with the Cannes 2000 Palme d'Or winner, Lars von Trier's brilliant musical tragedy *Dancer in the Dark*, featuring a heart-breaking performance by Icelandic alt-diva Björk, the festival certainly got off to a good start. This choice rallied film lovers and critics alike while also bridging the gap between the festival's two poles: what popular *cinéma d'auteur* can be and what the future of cinema could become in the hands of a visionary who knows how to use digital technology to his advantage. In fact, digital advancements seemed to be one of the festival's main themes this year, as exemplified by a (very successful) two-day forum on the subject of digital technology. Complementing this forum was a special selection of films that included Jonathan Nossiter's haunting and peculiar *Signs and Wonders* (France) and Philippe Falardeau's mock-documentary *La Moitié gauche du frigo* from Quebec.

Two of the festival's other very popular films also explored the possibilities of the medium in very different fashions. In *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse*, winner of the Public's Choice Award, veteran French filmmaker

Agnès Varda put to good use the freedom of movement and approach afforded by mini-DV and offered a vibrant portrait of the world of recyclers, a metaphor for her own work as a documentary filmmaker. First-time Belgian feature filmmaker Pierre-Paul Renders took a completely different approach in *Thomas est amoureux*, a virtual reality fable shot entirely from the point of view of the title character, an agoraphobic whose only link to the real world is through videophone screens. Winner of the Special Jury Prize, the film is certainly very amusing and innovative in its use of digital effects and 3-D animation, but its overly simplistic narrative confines it to the realm of fairy tales: to be appreciated, it should, in fact, be read strictly as such.

Another theme that permeated this year's event was the spirit of dance and music, which seemed to reflect the festival's newfound vitality and to carry it on its emotional vibration. Apart from the opening film, it was also present, among others, in Heddy Honigmann's documentary *Crazy* (Netherlands), about how UN peacekeepers managed to make it through their dark hours by hanging on to pop songs as their only link to a certain idea of civilization; in Quebec filmmaker Céline Baril's debut feature *Du pic au cœur*, a sweet, if uneven love story bathed in a 1960's atmosphere and whimsical Quebec/French rock 'n' roll; in Austrian Michael Haneke's typically rigorous *Code inconnu* (France), a reflection on xenophobia, where the almost complete absence of music only served to heighten the highly effective use of one single powerful percussion piece played with exuberant energy by a group of deaf-mute children; or in guest programmer Jocelyne Montpetit's tribute to one of Japan's greatest artist, butō dancer/choreographer Tatsumi Hijikata. A number of short films also tapped into this theme, including Cameron McNall's *The Last Drawing of Canaletto* (USA), a beautiful 3-D stroll through an 18th-century Venetian drawing; Oliver Harrison's delightfully kitschy visual interpretation of Deanna Durbin's classic 1940s song *Love Is All* (UK); and *Duet* (UK), a choreographic exploration of male/female relationships from the ever-intriguing Brothers Quay.

However, never was the power of sound and music explored more explicitly than in

the New Media section, which brought together musicians, sound explorers, multimedia artists and videomakers in mind-boggling performances and installations. A new-media neophyte myself, I must say I am often overwhelmed by the sheer saturation of sounds and images offered in most of these happenings, or simply perplexed by the obscure purpose of certain artists' experimentations. Having said that, I am also often pleasantly surprised by the formidable inventiveness of these creators and I believe that, in many cases, losing oneself in the experience of these works of art is precisely what is required to be able to absorb them. Jaroslaw Kapuscinski's *Yours*, one of the two New Media Award winners, a real-time dialogue between a piano player and the video projection of a dancer's performance, was a remarkable and strangely troubling piece.

Among the many discoveries in this year's festival, I should at least mention a few remarkable works: Michèle Cournoyer's NFB-produced, *The Hat*, a strikingly simple animation film about sexual abuse (one of Canada's most interesting experimental animators, Cournoyer was also the subject of a much-deserved homage); Iranian first-timer Bahman Ghobadi's *Un temps pour l'ivresse des chevaux*, a harsh, yet strangely poetic look at the life of a small Kurdistan village as seen through the eyes of two of its children (a much more effective and moving piece, in my opinion, than Jafar Panahi's heavy-handed *The Circle*, which was also presented); and Canadian Frank Cole's beautifully evocative documentary *Life Without Death*, about crossing the Sahara desert.

Last but not least, I should conclude with a personal favourite, and certainly the best film I've seen this year: Wong Kar-wai's sublime *In the Mood For Love*, which also happened to be the Festival's Grand Prize winner. A seemingly banal love story, it features all of the Hong Kong filmmaker's usual aesthetics (highly contrasted colours, repetitions, musical patterns, image composition), yet its unexpected visual and emotional restraint makes the unavowed passion of its protagonists felt all the more violently by the audience. The result is a very personal, deeply affecting, lyrical film – a true work of art. ●

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