

Tales from the Dark Side There was more than enough death to go around in Venice this year

FEST HEAD MARCO MÜLLER OUGHT TO BE happy. The 67th Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica was quite the success—at least according to the foreign press. This was partly because the competition played much better than it looked on paper, featuring several discoveries, a few pleasant surprises, and maybe four certifiable masterpieces. And the restructuring of the Horizons sidebar to include more challenging films worked spectacularly well: the short film competition was folded into it, re-radicalizing a section which in the last two years had showcased too many cute “small” films and not enough endeavors of aesthetic difference. The 2010 Horizons line-up of short and medium-length work ranged from the avant to the arrièrè to the sui generis by established greats and up-and-comers alike. The traditional experimental wing, the avant-garde animation realm, the advanced documentary front, and the art world were all represented, as were purely singular works that transcended

genre by such greats as Manoel de Oliveira (*The Panels of São Vicente de Fora: A Poetic Vision*), Rustam Khamdamov (*Diamonds*), and shooting star Mauro Andrizzi (*In the Future*).

Certain shorts played prior to features, often resulting in unexpected interactions. Sun Xun's *21 Grams*, a sinister animation nocturne, tilted the juicy investigative cine-journalism of Gianfranco Rosi's *El Sicario Room 164* toward Grand Guignol. Dealing with the confessions of a Ciudad Juárez hit man, there's something theatrical about Rosi's documentary from the start: the killer, back to the camera, dons a mask and turns to face his audience, soon proving to be a master raconteur. By extension, Sun's short seems to cause the drawings filling this criminal's notebooks to move before your inner eyes, like cels from an abstract animation of prostitution, drugs, extortion, kidnapping, torture, and 100-plus murders. By the same token, the intelligence of Rosi's film endows Sun's allegory with a more concrete political relevance. *El Sicario Room 164's* description

of Mexico's body politic as a cadaver seething with maggots has the ring of truth and is confirmed every day by the news. Taken together, short and feature reaffirm that the absurd is mankind's shared heritage.

ABSURD IS ALSO THE MOST FITTING description for the festival's local reception—the reason why Müller, for all the laurels from abroad, is probably not *too* happy.

A few years ago it looked like the Italian “quality” press had finally gotten behind his vision. But this year their coverage seemed to be an object lesson in how every regime needs the support of the bourgeoisie to function properly—and Berlusconi and sure functions well, *grazie per la collaborazione*. The lowest blow was an interview given by Berlusconi's minister of culture, Sandro Bondi, who fumed about the awards, accused Jury President Quentin Tarantino of nepotism (which is funny coming from a member of this government), and called for a wholesome cinema for the people of Italy, i.e., a steady diet of *cinepanettone* plus a biannual command performance of the latest *capolavoro* from the great Italian master Pupi Avati.

The fact of the matter is that of the four local competition entries, two were turkeys and one was a sitting duck. The only one worth watching was Mario Martone's *We Believed*, a bleak epic about the realpolitik underbelly of the Risorgimento, the Italian state's unification in the mid-19th century. Artistically, the film is seriously flawed—imagine a misbegotten three-and-a-half-hour cross between Rossellini's *Viva l'Italia!* and Visconti's *The Leopard*. The first two hours are standard-issue RAI realism, but thereafter, when meadows are littered with corpses and politicians battle with the specters of the people they've sacrificed in the name of what they deem the greater good, the direction becomes grander and imaginative and the film more gripping and intellectually engaging. From a political-historical



El Sicario Room 164



Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame



We Believed



The Ditch

standpoint it's fascinating from the get-go, detailing all the schemes and conspiracies, contradictory agendas, corrupted best intentions, and internecine fights. The nation-state of Italy was born from such bloody chaos—which, Martone grimly concludes, persists to this day.

Bondi wasn't the only one griping about "Tarantino's awards"—that QT sure keeps 'em mesmerized. God knows what went on during the jury discussions, but the fact is, they led to an almost perfect decision. Almost. The Golden Lion for Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere* was uncalled for—but isn't it exactly the kind of artsy entertainment that normally receives top honors? Also puzzling was the Marcello Mastroianni Award for Best Young Actress, which went to Mila Kunis in *Black Swan*. But why not, since the competition's true revelation, Ariane Labed, won Best Actress for her stunning performance in Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg*, one of the festival's major left-field pleasures. Everything else was equally deserving: Monte Hellman's Special Lion for Overall Work à propos *Road to Nowhere*; Best Director and Best Screenplay to Álex de la Iglesia for *A Sad Trumpet Ballad*; Mihkail Krichman's Best Technical Contribution Osella for his discreetly beautiful, classical camerawork on Aleksei Fedorchenko's *Silent Souls*, another discovery for those who missed Fedorchenko's 2005 debut, *Horizons* winner *First on the Moon*; and Jerzy Skolimowski's Special Jury Prize for *Essential Killing*, which also earned Vincent Gallo a well-deserved Best Actor award.

Still, an award for **Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame**, Tsui Hark's fantasy-spectacle return to form, might have been nice. Directed flawlessly and with brio, and featuring an amazing cast headed by Andy Lau, it contained a timely subtext about the ruthlessness of China's power elite. Equally overlooked was Tran Anh Hung's adaptation of Haruki Murakami's 1987 generational-touchstone bestseller, *Norwegian Wood*, the competition's biggest surprise this side of *A Sad Trumpet Ballad*. In both cases, grossly overrated directors finally delivered.

The *Horizons* jury were in the unenviable position of not having enough awards to go round, faced with a taut, muscular line-up united by clearly stated

aesthetic preferences and political positions. (Among the unawarded, mention should be made of Amit Dutta's *Nainsukh*, João Nicolau's *The Sword and the Rose*, and Kim Gok and Kim Sun's *Anti Gas Skin*.) Nicolas Pereda's semi-fictional exercise in quietism, *Summer of Goliath*, deservedly won Best Feature; the Special Jury Prize went to Noël Burch and Allan Sekula's *The Forgotten Space*; you can read about Roe Rosen's *Out*, the medium-length film prize-winner, in next issue's Olaf's World; and the short-film prize went to Peter Tscherkassky's *Coming Attractions*.

WANG BING'S *The Ditch* WAS THE ELEPHANT in the room: the jury tiptoed around it and few wholeheartedly embraced it. And no wonder: the subject matter is somewhat taboo in China and the film was shot without official permission. Screened as a surprise film, it was credited in the festival catalogue as a Belgian-French production titled *Le Fossé*, with no mention of its Hong Kong co-producers. *The Ditch* offers little in the way of story or drama—it's more like a ragged assemblage of scenes from the daily life of Jiabianguo, a re-education (i.e. forced labor) camp in the People's Republic during the late Fifties "Anti-Rightist" crackdown. Wang opts for a self-consciously uneasy hybrid approach,

basing the film partly on Yang Xianhui's nonfiction anthology *Woman from Shanghai: Tales of Survival from a Chinese Labour Camp*, and partly on his own research (hours of interviews with ex-inmates and a few jailers). The result is a painstakingly detailed historical reconstruction and reenactment with a strangely theatrical acting style—a stylized mix of muted Socialist Realism and high-strung Chinese opera (minus the singing, dancing, and acrobatics). The first half of the film is almost devoid of narrative—it's a series of vignettes of people suffering and trying to cope, and Wang leaves little to the imagination, even if that means including desperate individuals eating a rat or one another's vomit. In the second half, three sketchy stories emerge, but nothing in *The Ditch* is ever fleshed out or resolved and, accordingly, the film feels incomplete. And with good reason: *The Ditch* offers just one fragment of an experience whose true dimensions it can only suggest, and that continues to this day—China's forced labor prison system is still in use.

Jerzy Skolimowski's **Essential Killing** offered a similarly abstract meditation on death—but in full breathless flight. It's a variation on Joseph Losey's 1969 film *Figures in a Landscape*, but rooted in a



Essential Killing



Cold Fish



Attenberg



A Sad Trumpet Ballad

specific political context. Vincent Gallo, all haunted glances and instinctive movements, plays a captured Afghan jihadist who escapes into the deep-winter Polish countryside during his transfer to a secret prison. It's 83 tight minutes of pure cinema, with some bravado touches of Polish surrealism.

Death, one way or another, seemed to be everywhere in Venice. In Gallo's **Promises Written in Water**, an incurably ill young woman and a man who has promised to take care of her corpse after her death wait it out until it's time for her to die. In Tran's glacial cinematic prose poem **Norwegian Wood**, one suicide leads to another, leaving the sole survivor of an impossibly askew love triangle to pick up the pieces—unlike the other two, neither the here-and-now nor the hereafter mean enough to take extreme measures in the face of this loss. **Silent Souls**, Fedorchenko's surprising mix of low-key Russian realism, ethnographic essay, and Malick-esque lyricism, turns out to be told from the Merya beyond—narrated by a dead man at the bottom of a river. (In Meryan culture, the beds of all bodies of water are where the afterlife lies.) Naïve in the best sense of the word—kind, generous, free of malice and guile—Laura Amelia Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas's **Jean Gentil** slowly transforms from a hopeless search for work into a leisurely journey toward death, and finally home.

Marion Hänsel's hauntingly beautiful, weirdly chaste, and impossibly tender **Black Ocean** is centered on three young sailors who encounter death during a nuclear test on the Mururoa Atoll in 1972. They have joined the French navy in search of adventure, but what they find is a bitter maturity that no one would wish for. The image of the nuclear mushroom cloud, framed way in the back of the shot, with the stooped figures of seamen in sunglasses in the foreground, is almost banal—yet the sight of it leaves the soul of one of the protagonists shattered. Living in an archetypal, quietly dying Greek industrial town, the *démoiselles* in Athina Rachel Tsangari's perplexing **Attenberg** are roughly the same age as Hänsel's sailors and facing similar experiences: Bella (Evangelia Randou) is experimenting with love and sex and finds both interesting and fun, but



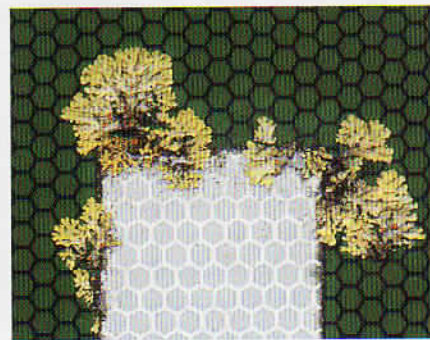
The Forgotten Space



Father

ultimately disappointing, while Marina (Ariane Labed) has to deal with her father's impending death. If you know the films of Yorgos Lanthimos (who co-produced **Attenberg**), Tsangari's fascination with rituals won't come as a big surprise, but where Lanthimos is obsessed with closed circuits, Tsangari experiments with a more open, fragile form. The moments between Marina and her father feel decidedly more psychodrama-realist, while the scenes between Bella and her makeshift lover (played by Lanthimos) are played out in a distanced register. The result is enchanting, cruel, and soothing; Marina's dance beside her dead father's bed was the festival's most moving moment.

A larger malaise loomed behind all these small, intimate stories, but remained in the background, awaiting closer readings of the films. For master narratives of cultures and countries collectively obsessed with death, it was necessary to watch de la Iglesia's **A Sad Trumpet Ballad** and Sion Sono's **Cold Fish**, two films full of grand gestures, narrative hyperbole, and vulgar symbolism. **Cold Fish** is two-and-a-half hours of full-throttle hysteria, splattered in eye-gougingly garish hues. Shamoto, the mild-mannered proprietor of a tropical fish



Robinson in Ruins



Road to Nowhere

store, finds himself and his family drawn into the orbit of a jovial fellow fish dealer named Murata, a serial killer who gleefully slaughters their business competitors and disposes of their remains; Shamoto reluctantly becomes the murderer's apprentice and his wife becomes Murata's sex toy. Beneath the film's copious helping of blood, bones, and innards lies a post-economic bubble *ero guro* parable about the ordinary fascism of contemporary Japan's middle class.

Much the same can be said about **A Sad Trumpet Ballad**. The action begins during the Spanish Republic's final days: everybody is called to arms, including a circus clown, who hacks several Falangist platoons to pieces with a machete before falling wounded. Following the clown's dying wish, his son continues in the same line of work. During the twilight years of Spanish fascism, he finds a job at a circus desperate for a sad clown; they already have a happy one—who's great with children but is otherwise a colleague-abusing, girlfriend-beating brute. Suffice to say that things get ever more grotesque and painful in this *tremendismo* surrealist tale that makes oblique allusions to key moments in the decline of the Franco regime while putting that era's cinema through the blender into the bargain.

VLADO SKAFAR'S *Father* IS THE DIAMETRICAL opposite of *A Sad Trumpet Ballad*. The film depicts a father and son spending a Sunday afternoon together after a long separation. The two cautiously reconnect in the woods and meadows of Slovenia's Prekmurje, a region in decline—factory workers are on strike, fathers no longer know how to provide for their children's future. An hour into this 71-minute film there's an abrupt break, with a title card describing the social realities in which the film was made; then, actual workers speak directly into the camera about their plight. In a final movement, the father sits among the workers, discussing the hardship ahead for all of them. The father is played by a semi-professional, Miki Ros, who may be one of the greatest actors on earth; the son is a nonprofessional, Sandi Salamon, whose presence is a gift from above; the cameraman, Marko Brdar, though still a student, has an eye for light and composition that's awe-inspiring; and Skafar is simply a poet who truly knows how to weave everything together.

To say that the subject of *The Forgotten Space* is the global transformation of labor caused by container cargo shipping is like saying that *Wagon Master* is a Western. Noël Burch and Allan Sekula's essay film is a journey around the world, to the ports of Rotterdam, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Bilbao—each a trove of stories, encounters, and observations at times angry and at times wry. The whole thing is held together by Sekula's adventure-happy, politically astute, partisan commentary, which itself is a masterpiece of nonfiction.

The same holds true for the narration

in Patrick Keiller's *Robinson in Ruins*, another journey through a world of hard times: an England ravaged by neoliberal economics. Like Keiller's previous *London* and *Robinson in Space*, the film consists solely of fixed shots, presenting the landscapes, sites, and spaces in which the story recounted by the voiceover took place; the footage has been allegedly shot and then left behind by the mysterious Robinson after he vanished following the 2008 economic crisis. Robinson/Keiller calls up instances of civil disobedience and insurrection throughout English history, while another level of history overlays the landscape, evoked by the buildings and structures that speak of the failures and repercussions of the 20th century's political and economic life. Robinson, whose tale is narrated by the incomparable voice of Vanessa Redgrave, takes comfort in the life and silent, unassuming growth of lichen. There's a lesson to be found in their persistence.

In the end the film that sums it all up was *Road to Nowhere*, Monte Hellman's feature comeback after two decades of failed projects and aborted dreams. Like his splendid segment of 2006's *Trapped Ashes*, "Stanley's Girlfriend," *Road to Nowhere* is a film about filmmaking: an eternal boy wonder sets out to shoot a true-crime noir using the actual locations where the events—political corruption, embezzlement, murder, and an apparent double suicide—originally took place. By chance, he finds an actress in a third-rate slashfest who uncannily resembles the real-life story's femme fatale, officially presumed dead... Hellman knows that mixing cinema and reality can be a dangerous game, so he handles his material as if it's a well-worn and familiar story. Now as then, he sculpts with light and movement, bodies and sounds, molding with an audiovisual plasticity that always goes by the same name: melancholia. If he pushes things further here than ever before, that has as much to do with the genre he works with (the meta-movie) as with his age and obvious lack of interest in playing the game; for that matter, he's too old to waste his time with conventions. Hellman goes for the essence: hurt and doubt—and if that means ditching realism in acting, pacing, etc., so be it. Enough compromises. ☐



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II. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete: (signed) Richard Chung, Business Manager

TOP 10 | VENICE

1. *Essential Killing* Jerzy Skolimowski, Poland/Norway/Hungary
2. *Father* Vlado Skafar, Slovenia
3. *Road to Nowhere* Monte Hellman, U.S.
4. *The Ditch* Wang Bing, France/Belgium
5. *Attenberg* Athina Rachel Tsangari, Greece
6. *The External World* David O'Reilly, Germany
7. *Jean Gentil* Laura Amelia Guzmán & Israel Cárdenas, Dominican Republic/Mexico/Germany
8. *Nainsukh* Amit Dutta, India/Switzerland
9. *The Forgotten Space* Noël Burch & Allan Sekula, Netherlands/Austria
10. *Guest* José Luis Guerín, Spain