David Walsh on the San Francisco International Film Festival--Part 5

Sixteen films, briefly

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Arturo Ripstein is a leading Mexican filmmaker. Born in Mexico City in 1943 and the son of a film producer, Ripstein grew up in the movie industry. While still at university he worked as an assistant to famed Spanish filmmaker Luis Buñuel on *The Exterminating Angel* (1962). At the age of 21 he directed his first film, based on a script by Gabriel Garcia Márquez and Carlos Fuentes. Since that time he has directed 20 more.

The San Francisco festival screened four of Ripstein's films, *The Realm of Fortune* (1986), *Woman of the Port* (1991), *The Beginning and the End* (1993) and *Divine* (1998). I saw *The Realm of Fortune*, about a poor man who rises and falls within the world of cockfighting, and *Woman of the Port*, a story of incest set in a port city. *Deep Crimson*, Ripstein's 1996 work about a murderous couple, based on the real-life "Lonely Hearts Club" killers of the late 1940s, I had seen previously.

According to a fellow director, Ripstein is the only current filmmaker who can be said "to have inherited Buñuel's mantle." I think this is a superficial judgment. True, Ripstein reproduces the poverty-stricken settings of Buñuel's Mexican films and he has an attraction for the grotesque, the abnormal, the deformed, as Buñuel did, but there, I believe the resemblance ends. Whatever Buñuel's shortcomings, and I am not his greatest admirer, he brought to bear on his work the considerable heritage of Surrealist aesthetic experimentation and European radical political thought. He concerned himself with serious matters--sexuality, poverty, religion, repression, class relations--and examined them, playfully, ironically; compassionate at times, cruel at others.

Try as I may, I don't see that in Ripstein. I see instead too many attempts to take shortcuts. He imagines that by reproducing one of Buñuel's grimy settings, with wretched and self-deluded characters, something profound or beautiful will emerge by itself. Truth is not so easily seduced into appearing. I find that the filmmaker too often condescends to his characters or sneers at them. He creates their miserable circumstances and then does not know what to make of them. They simply stew in their juices, going nowhere. The result, despite all the hectic goings-on, is strangely tedious and static.

Ennui (*Boredom*) is a film from France by Cédric Kahn. Kahn directed *Too Much Happiness* (1994), a film about French and immigrant teenagers that had some life to it. *Ennui* is a bad film about silly people whom I hope no spectator cares about more than I did.

Martin, a (wealthy) philosophy teacher, becomes involved with Cecilia, a 17-year-old. They have sex every day, but he wants to find out things about her, to understand her. She tells him there's nothing to know, nothing to understand. Martin is "searching" and "relentless" in his questioning and self-questioning; he is a French philosophy teacher, after all. He tells his ex-wife about Cecilia, "She bores me. I have no contact with her." Later, in the same vein, "She is making me a sadist, because she bores me." Cecilia meanwhile starts a relationship with an actor closer to her own age. Now Martin declares, "Cecilia's cheating on me because I'm dull." And so on. In the end he nearly dies in a car crash. He decides to "live at any price."

Martin (Charles Berling) and his ex-wife (Arielle Dombasle) are unpleasant and self-involved; Cecilia (Sophie Guillemin) merely dull. They may very well be intended to be unpleasant and self-involved or dull, but nothing interesting is made of them. Kahn based his film on a novel by Alberto Moravia. He can't really have wanted anyone to compare his *Boredom* with Jean-Luc Godard's beautiful and poetic *Contempt* (1963), also based on a Moravia novel, can he?

Olivier Assayas' *Late August, Early September* is another weak film from France. It's about a group of middle class friends in Paris. Gabriel, somewhat at loose ends, is a friend of Adrien, a writer who has had some smattering of success. Gabriel has just broken up with Jenny and is seeing Anne, who is impulsive and a little reckless. Adrien is secretly involved with a 15-year-old girl, Vera. Adrien's eventual death proves a turning-point in all their lives.

What distinguishes Assayas' films, which include *Cold Water* (1994) and *Irma Vepp* (1997), is their almost complete lack of spontaneity. Assayas, who has made a documentary about Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien, knows what a good film looks like. Instead of making a work that really means something to him, unfortunately, he seems to want to be thought highly of. His films, where everything is arranged for effect, sink under the weight of their self-consciousness. In *Late August, Early September*, only one performer, the young girl who plays Vera, escapes the "Assayas touch." She breathes life into the brief sequences in which she appears.

Claude Chabrol (born 1930) and Alain Resnais (born 1922) are veteran French filmmakers. Both have done important work in the past. Chabrol's most interesting films were made in the late 1950s and 1960s*: Le Beau Serge* (1958), *The Cousins* (1959), *Les Biches* (1967), *Le Boucher* (1969). In his latest film, *The Swindle*, two con artists specialize in emptying the pockets and bank accounts of conventioneers and such. When they go after bigger game, difficulties ensue. The two (Isabelle Huppert and Michel Serrault) may be husband and wife, father and daughter, or merely partners in crime--the relationship is deliberately ambiguous. The film seems to be about sex, crime and modern society, and what it is that excites people about one another, but it left me cold--although Huppert is delightful.

Resnais is best known for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), *La Guerre est finie* (1966), *Stavisky* (1974), *Providence* (1979) and *Mon Oncle d'Amerique* (1980). *The Same Old Song* is something of an homage to Dennis Potter (Resnais has consistently paid attention to English writers), whose characters lip-synch popular songs at moments of crisis. In his new film, Resnais employs the same technique with his characters--six Parisians in search of love or at least adultery. They burst into snippets of Maurice Chevalier, Johnny Haliday, Charles Aznavour and others. The film has its charms, but it is slight to the point of nearly disappearing.

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Manoel de Oliveira (born in 1908) must be the oldest living filmmaker still at work. The Portuguese director, who began in the silent era, divides his newest work, *Anxiety*, into three parts: an older man tries to convince his son to commit suicide so as to go out at the height of his powers; in the 1930s, a beautiful prostitute faces death on the operating table; in a folk tale, a girl with golden fingertips is transformed into the spirit of a river. I respect Oliveira's perseverance and sincerity, but I continue to feel, as I did confronted by *Voyage to the Beginning of the World* (1998), that he has managed such longevity through the relatively marginal character of his work.

Without meaning to be too unkind, I would deeply appreciate someone telling me what possessed David Mamet to revive *The Winslow Boy*. The film is an adaptation of a 1946 Terence Rattigan play, based on an incident that took place in 1913. A young British naval cadet is expelled for stealing a postal order and his father spends all he has, creating something of a crisis in his family, to prove his son's innocence. In 1948 Anthony Asquith directed a film version of the play, with Robert Donat (playing a barrister based on Sir Edward Carson), Cedric Hardwicke and Margaret Leighton.

Asquith, the son of the former prime minister, presided over a number of films in the post-war period, including *The Way to the Stars* (1945) and *The Browning Version* (1950), with Michael Redgrave, that could be qualified, without condescension, as "highly enjoyable middle-class British entertainment," as one film guide has it. He made, in the words of another critic, "tasteful, restrained and civilized quasi-documentary portraits of British life and manners."

In regard to his new film, Mamet has commented, "When does a fight for justice become an arrogant pursuit of personal rectitude? At what point does one give up the fight for an abstract principle?" Time and changes in social life have drained much of *The Winslow Boy*'s life and purpose; Mamet does the rest. The smug, self-referential style, which induces in me claustrophobia more than anything else, makes it difficult for the spectator to get anything out of this story. The sense of injustice, as slim as it may be in the original, is almost entirely missing here. Nigel Hawthorne, Rebecca Pidgeon, Gemma Jones and Jeremy Northam act out this little drama, whose tastefulness and restraint the director has retained, as quietly and insignificantly as they can.

Run Lola Run is an 81-minute German film about a girl, with orange hair, who has 20 minutes to come up with 100,000 marks for her beleaguered boyfriend. Tom Twyker's film uses various tricks, comes to a stop, begins again, comes to a stop, begins a third time. *Run Lola Run*, starring "two of Germany's hottest young actors," is about to be released in the US. It's a little sad that the "New German Cinema" should come to this. The film has the feel about it of an episode of *The Monkees* television show, for those of you who remember that.

A *True Mob Story* (or *True Crime Story*), I'm afraid, reinforces my prejudice against Hong Kong cinema. The film follows the activities of Wai Cheung-dee, a low-level operative for one of Hong Kong's crime syndicates. In the course of saving his boss's life, he wounds a dangerous enemy and sees his wife killed. His boss makes him his right-hand man, in which position Cheung-dee is subject to continual humiliation. Meanwhile he tries to raise his son and make something of his life.

Director Wong Jing (born 1956) is a veteran of the Hong Kong film industry, which produces mostly cynical and flashy works. And there is something cynical about this effort, a film chocked full of martial arts sequences posing as a "realistic" look at criminals and the underworld. If only the drama were more complex, more involving I might be persuaded that the film's makers had had something other than commercial motives.

Khrustialov, My Car!, directed by Alexei Gherman, is further proof that post-Soviet intellectuals are still overwhelmed by events in that country. In 1953 in Moscow anti-Semitic purges are under way and Stalin is dying. The film takes place, as far as one can figure out, in the household of General Glinsky, a military surgeon. Everything is grotesquerie and desperate farce in this piece, shot in "Expressionist" black-and-white.

Reducing Stalinist totalitarianism to a kind of black comic absurdity has long been a preferred method of those Eastern European and Soviet or Russian artists incapable of making heads or tails out of events in that part of the world. It continues. Someone writes approvingly that Gherman's work is a "masterpiece of disorientation." That's an unhappy reality, not a compliment.

Break Even (*Plus-Minus Null*) and *Barrio* are two perfectly likable works from Germany and Spain, respectively. In the first, by Irish-born director Eoin Moore, Alex is a part-time construction worker and petty thief who becomes involved with two prostitutes, one of them from Bosnia, in contemporary Berlin. The film was shot in 12 days on Digital Video. It is not earth-shaking, but it has a certain sensitivity. Andreas Schmidt is appealing as Alex.

In an interview, Moore explains: "For me, Berlin is one gigantic construction site. Everything is changing and many people are unsettled--like the builder Alex, or in transit--like Svetlana [the Bosnian]. In Berlin, you are permanently confronted with the increasing polarization of poverty and wealth. Strangely, both are represented in the construction sites of the new power centers of the city. The relationship of these 'small' people to their city is an important subject of the film." He mentions Mike Leigh as an influence.

Javi, Rai and Manu are three teenagers stuck in Madrid for the summer, in Fernando León de Aranoa's *Barrio*. They're bored, without much money and impatient to get on with their lives, or at least have sex. The film is quite amusing in its own dead-pan manner. One of the trio gets a job delivering pizzas. Because he doesn't have a motor-scooter as he claims, he delivers them, in all sorts of outlying districts, by public transportation. Another of the boys wins a contest, after sending in 20 (stolen) container tops. The prize is a jet-ski, which the three can only stow in his bedroom and gaze at. Unfortunately, the film has a violent ending, somewhat clichéd, which does not flow from the rest of the film.

On the Ropes is a documentary about trainer Harry Keitt and three of his boxers in the impoverished Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, New York. *Hoop Dreams*, the film that followed the lives of two high school basketball players, comes inevitably to mind. *On the Ropes* does not add much. Life is miserable in the neighborhood, everyone has the desire to escape as an individual, no one criticizes the situation as a social problem. The filmmakers, Brett Morgen and Nanette Burstein, needed to add more of their own viewpoint. The result is thin and not engaging enough.

Hathi is a somewhat condescending fiction film about elephant trainers in India, directed by French-born Philippe Gautier. In *Under California: The Limit of Time* (directed by Carlos Bolado), an "environmental artist" of Mexican descent, but living in California, leaves his pregnant wife behind to visit the town in Mexico where his family came from. He makes an arduous trek through Baja California and arrives at some kind of spiritual truths. I kept thinking about his poor wife. The film, like the character, is self-involved, and little more than an attractive travelogue.

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