

# 53rd Cannes Film Festival comes to an end

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Prizes were awarded Sunday at the Cannes film festival. In all 700 films from 75 countries were featured at this year's event. In the main competition section just 23 films were selected and the total reflected a tendency already visible at this year's Berlin film festival—a lack of representation by European countries with a strong film tradition. Germany, Italy and Spain were among European countries with no official entries for the competition. Britain featured with just one film, the new production by Ken Loach, *Bread and Roses*.

Four US films were represented in the competition including the new Coen Brothers film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, which failed to win a prize. *Nurse Betty* directed by Neil LaBute won the award for best screenplay and Amos Kollek's comedy *Fast Food, Fast Women* won the prize of the Ecumenical Jury. Interesting features outside the official competition included *Shadow of the Vampire*, about the making of F. W. Murnau's classic *Nosferatu* in 1922, and *Requiem for a Dream*, the new film by Darren Aronofsky (*Pi*).

Particularly strong representation in the festival competition came from Asia and the Middle East with a total of nine films—a number of which featured prominently when prizes were handed out. The best director award went to Taiwanese director Edward Yang for his film *Yi Yi (A One and a Two)* dealing with the tribulations over the period of a few weeks of a Taiwanese family.

The Jury Prize was shared by the Swedish satire *Sanger fran andra vaningen* by Roy Andersson and *Takhte Siah*, dealing with the plight of Kurds living in Iran, the new film by 20-year-old Iranian filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf. Further awards went to the Hong Kong film *In the Mood for Love* and the Japanese film *Eureka*.

The latter, directed by Shinji Aoyama, is an interesting film dealing with the trauma of three persons caught up in a tragedy. The trio, two children and a bus driver, are the only survivors of a violent hostage drama. The driver has drifted for two years until he decides to seek out the children. Together they attempt a journey aimed at

coming to grips with their common trauma. Shot in black and white with hardly any dialogue, the film differentiates itself radically from the Japanese mainstream, relying on long shots, a slow paced story and attention to detail in terms of the psychological development of its characters.

The Golden Palm prize for best picture went to Danish director Lars von Trier for his film *Dancer in the Dark* featuring in the lead role Icelandic pop singer Björg (who won best actress award). Von Trier is a favourite director at Cannes, having won prizes for his last two films, *Breaking the Waves* and *Idiots*. With *Idiots* von Trier declared that he was breaking with film convention and establishing new rules for non-elitist filmmaking. With his new film he has ditched most of his rules to produce what has been described as a mix of melodrama and musical.

The film polarised opinion amongst professional filmgoers and the press. Many members of the audience at the film's screening in Cannes were moved to tears by the story (set in post-war America) dealing with the tribulations of a young immigrant and her child. The woman (Selma) is threatened with the loss of her sight through an inherited disease. Her child suffers from the same complaint. The mother works in a factory and saves every penny for an operation to save the sight of her child. Her accumulated savings are stolen and in the attempt to retrieve her money she is involved in an accidental death and accused of murder.

To alleviate the travails of her everyday existence, Selma dreams of a world “where nothing bad ever happens”—a world of song and dance. *Dancing in the Dark* returns to a theme which von Trier (a convert to Catholicism some years ago) has already dealt in his film *Breaking the Waves*—martyrdom. Martyrdom is also the theme of one of von Trier's favourite films—*The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1927), the silent classic by Carl Theodor Dreyer.

In his recent films von Trier appears to be arguing that martyrdom is not just the reaction of specific personalities under given circumstances. For von Trier martyrdom

becomes the essence of the human condition. Life is bitter and unrelenting and the individual is powerless to do anything about it—apart from retreat into a fantasy world, a world where it is possible to sing and dance even if the path leads to execution.

Some commentators were less impressed than the Cannes audience and jury panel (which was headed by Luc Besson, the flashy and shallow French filmmaker). The German *Spiegel* magazine described the film as follows: “Melodramatic triviality in its purest form, and von Trier milks every tear from his audience, without granting them in return the respect to reflect on the contemporary significance of his material and idea of women.”

Dissent is not easy against a background of swaying palm trees, complacent media-representatives, fashion shows and armies of police and large men talking into their cuffs. American actor Nick Nolte struck a refreshingly sour note at the festival and lashed out at the Hollywood star system. Casting and the making of films in Hollywood, he stated, was currently dominated by the selection and financing of a tiny group of lead actors who can demand tens of millions of dollars per picture. Fees for a handful of actors are now approaching \$30 million per picture plus \$5 million for expenses. (John Travolta's standard film contract demands that he have a Lear jet on constant stand-by).

A handful of actresses are also now in the double-digit-millions bracket. (One of them, Uma Thurman, modestly conceded that due to her enthusiasm for the film she starred in the European production *Vatel*, with Gerard Depardieu, for a miserable \$1 million). The result is that the studios pick their lead players before they even have a script. At the same time prohibitive costs are forcing film companies to make fewer and fewer films.

A potential alternative to the monopolisation of production and distribution by the major studios was outlined in Cannes at a seminar devoted to new forms of filmmaking, in particular—the digitalisation of film. The accessibility of reasonably priced high-quality digital cameras enabling the filmmaker to edit film on his own computer is already making its presence felt in the film world. A number of prominent directors, including German filmmaker Wim Wenders, have announced their intention of integrating the new digital technology into their work.

The effects of the digitalisation will start to become truly felt in the next five to ten years and combined with the Internet will not only revolutionise film production,

but also film distribution, opening up the option of film groups, societies or even individuals to be able to download movies directly from the Internet.

A final salvo directed at the prevailing conformity of the Cannes festival was delivered by British director Ken Loach. With *Bread and Roses* Loach has made his first film in the US, dealing with the plight of low-paid immigrant workers in Los Angeles and their attempt to set up a trade union. At the festival Loach pointed out that wages for the cleaning workers he portrays in the film have halved from \$12 per hour to \$6 over the past 10 years.

He then went on to use his press conference to vigorously attack the British Labour government of Tony Blair and his Home Secretary, Jack Straw. He pointed out that social inequality and lack of trade union rights were not just limited to the United States: “In Britain we had a right-wing government, and now we have a government which claims to be on the left but actively continues the policies of the right. The people who masterminded it got to power on the back of a workers movement. But there are no more trade union rights.... The rights that have been fought for for generations are disappearing.” Loach went on to say that the Labour Minister responsible for law and order and immigration, Jack Straw's “instincts are quite repressive. He plays to a right-wing gallery.”

Regardless of what one thinks of his overall political orientation, Loach is a rare breed at an event such as Cannes—someone who has retained his principles and is not prepared to swim with the stream of self-complacency and thoughtlessness that continues to characterise so much of the official film industry represented at the festival.

Over the next weeks and months the *WSWS* will review more extensively a number of the most interesting and prominent films at Cannes. Later this week we will feature one of the most interesting new German films shown outside of the competition at Cannes, Oskar Röhler's *The Untouchable (Die Unberührbare)*.



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