

# Sydney Film Festival 2012—Part 1: To shine a light on reality or flee from it

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*This is the first in a series of articles on the recent Sydney Film Festival.*

This year's Sydney Film Festival screened 156 titles from 51 countries with a total of 12 features in the official competition. Much is written in the local press about the \$60,000 competition prize—Australia's richest cash award for film—most of it to promote the festival. Apart from the Taviana brothers' *Caesar Must Die*, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and *Monsieur Lazhar*—most of the competing features, including prize winner, the Greek absurdist drama *Alps*, directed by Yorgos Lanthimos and starring Aggeliki Papoulia, Aris Servetelis and Johnny Verkis, failed to impress.

What can be said about this year's winner, however, is that it further served to highlight a fundamental problem besetting many contemporary productions, that is, the inability of many filmmakers to base their artistic efforts on a serious exploration of the real world. *Alps*, in fact, appears to have done its utmost to flee social reality.

Lanthimos, who began his career directing videos for Greek dance groups before moving onto television advertising, experimental theatre and short films, is a leading figure in the so-called "Greek Weird Wave" that has emerged in the past four years.

The writer-director denies the existence of such a genre and insists that he and his collaborators—director Athina Rachel Tsangari, writer Efthymis Filippou and cinematographer Thimios Bakatatakis—have no unified artistic outlook and are just responding intuitively to social life.

This is no doubt true but their movies have many common features. All are set in contemporary Greece but tell us little or nothing about it and are characterised by a demoralised dark humour, a rejection of visual lyricism—cinematography is deliberately skewed—obtuse plot lines, and various references to pop culture icons and movies.

*Dogtooth* (2009), Lanthimos's first major feature, which was acclaimed by numerous critics, is about three teenagers—two girls and a boy—who are kept captive by their parents in an isolated but comfortable country home. The repressive father manages a nearby factory. The teenagers have no real understanding of the outside world and the only person allowed into the family household is Christina, the factory security guard. She is paid to have sex with the son.

Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg*, which was screened at last

year's Sydney festival, centres around Marina, a sexually inexperienced young woman who lives with her dying father. Unable to relate to other human beings she is infatuated by the wildlife documentaries of British television personality David Attenborough and acts out animal roles with her friend Bella, who also gives her sex education lessons. Marina later asks Bella to sleep with her dying father.

Lanthimos's latest movie is about a small group of people known as the Alps, after the mountain range, who are hired to play the roles of dead children, spouses or lovers by their grieving relatives or friends. They wear the clothes of the dead person and attempt to recreate their previous habits and roles. This involves various unusual scenarios and includes enduring persecution, abuse and even sexual demands. Alps members recite their lines for the grieving relatives and friends in mainly a deadpan and unconvincing fashion. The group's motto is "By the time we leave, you won't even notice they're gone."

While Alps members are paid for their services, it soon becomes apparent that in taking on other personalities they are also motivated by a need to escape their own lives and that personal relations and all social life is essentially play-acting. While Lanthimos's story unfolds cryptically via a series of short vignettes once the viewer grasps this basic and rather banal premise the movie quickly becomes a tedious experience.

While artistic and cultural endeavours always lag behind political and economic events, *Alps* is remarkable for its coldness and lack of any references—even in a metaphorical fashion—to contemporary Greek life, let alone the vast social changes that have occurred in that country in the past four years.

Not since the WWII Nazi occupation, has Greece undergone such a dramatic transformation. Under the dictates of the European financial aristocracy and the international banks, millions of Greeks have been driven into poverty, profoundly transforming all aspects of daily life and provoking mass resistance, as well as discussions amongst sections of the ruling elite of a return to military rule.

While Lanthimos and other like minded artists are free to make whatever movies they want, this group of filmmakers appear completely unaffected and uninterested in these events and display little inclination that they are prepared to confront the complex artistic challenges, and potential rewards, that these events pose for writers, dramatists and filmmakers. *Alps* tell us nothing about love, loss,

grieving or other human emotions. Characters and events are cold constructs and animated by a jaundiced view of the human condition.

### **A sensitive and optimistic work**

Director Philippe Falardeau's *Monsieur Lazhar*, which is set in contemporary Montreal, is also about the loss of loved ones and emotional healing. By contrast to *Alps*, director Falardeau's film is a sensitive and optimistic work that convincingly explores how its central protagonists overcome their problems and help each other to heal.

The 90-minute French-language feature centres on the plight of young school children traumatised by the death of their troubled teacher who had committed suicide at their school, and the difficulties facing the replacement teacher, Bashir Lazhar, a newly-arrived Algerian refugee. Lazhar (skilfully played by Algerian-French comedian Mohamed Fellag) discovered soon after reaching Canada that his wife, a teacher and writer, and their children, had been burnt to death in Algeria in a targeted political killing.

Lazhar not only has to overcome this tragic loss—and his sense of guilt for having left Algeria without them—but also how he can reach Simon (Émilien Néron) and Alice (Sophie Nélisse), the two most traumatised children in the class.

At the same time, Lazhar has to endure the frustration of navigating his way through the immigration bureaucracy in order to secure refugee status in Canada. While the students are puzzled and amused by his Algerian French and his old-fashioned teaching methods, Lazhar is eventually able to make an emotional connection.

Developed from *Bashir Lazhar* (2002) Évelyne de la Chenelière's one-character play, Falardeau has made an unsentimental but genuinely humane work, skilfully revealing the complexities of the central characters' lives and emotions. It avoids the usual the "teacher and students make good" clichés and has a healthy disrespect for Canadian education and immigration authorities. Sydney Film Festival audiences rightly voted it the most popular film at this year's event.

Some of the other competition features—their strengths and weaknesses—will be discussed in festival reviews.

### **Sexual repression and its consequences**

One of the noteworthy movies screened this year but not in competition was Oliver Hermanus's *Beauty*, an assured and unsettling work. *Shirley Adams*, the director's first feature, explored the plight of a working class Cape Town woman, whose entire life revolved

around the care of her severely paralysed and suicidal adult son. Hermanus's latest movie is about emotional denial and sexual repression and its consequences.

Its central character is Francois (Deon Lotz), a mid-40s Afrikaner, former soldier, and relatively successful owner of a small timber company in the South African regional city of Bloemfontein. Economically comfortable and on the surface a happily married man with adult children, Francois is unable to come to terms with his homosexuality, which is anathema in the middle-class and conservative Afrikaner community in which he lives. He engages in secretive homosexual orgies with other men from the regional city, all of them in denial. "Gays and blacks" are banned from these gloomy gatherings.

While Francois' is able to suppress his inner emotions and maintain appearances to some extent, his daughter's wedding brings him into contact with Christian (Charlie Keegan), the handsome, 23-year-old son of an old army friend. Francois is besotted and begins a desperate and tragic attempt to secure the young man's affections. When his overtures are predictably rejected, Francois erupts with shocking violence.

*Beauty* is a slow-paced and troubling work with entirely convincing characterisations and an extraordinary performance by Deon Lotz. The first few minutes of the daughter's wedding contain some striking cinematography and perfectly capture Francois's infatuation with Christian. In one media interview Hermanus described Francois's repressed emotional state as "apartheid of the mind." (See: "Filmmaker Oliver Hermanus discusses *Beauty*")

*To be continued*



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