

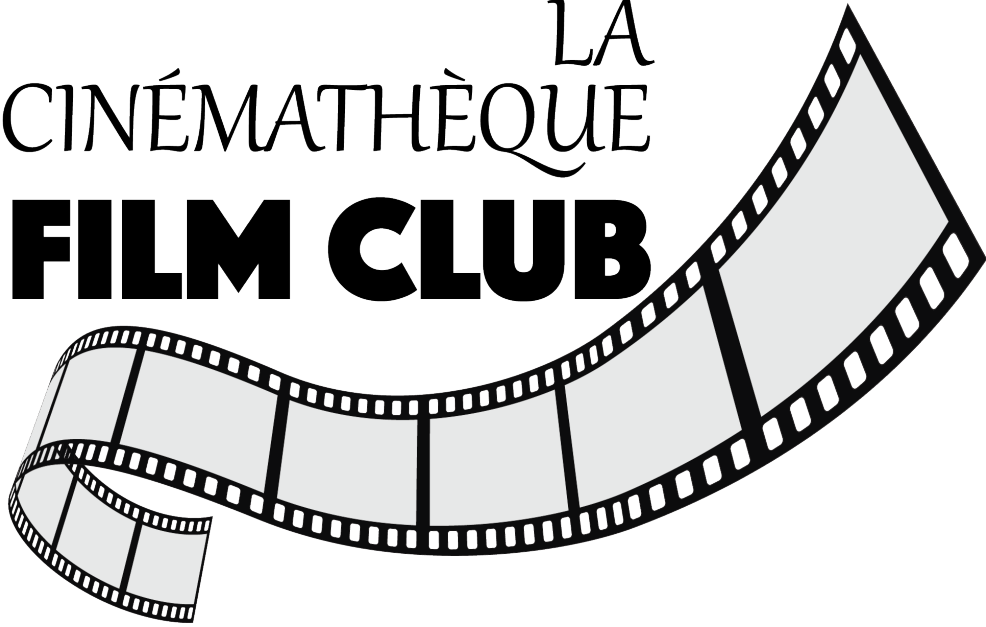
LA
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Women Film Directors
Series One
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Fall 2017-Spring 2018

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Women Film Directors
Fall 2017

Agnès Varda
b. 1928

Cleo from 5 to 7
1962

Agnès Varda

From *The Criterion Collection* website: <https://www.criterion.com/explore/178-agnes-varda>

The only female director of the French New Wave, Agnès Varda has been called both the movement's mother and its grandmother. The fact that some have felt the need to assign her a specifically feminine role, and the confusion over how to characterize that role, speak to just how unique her place in this hallowed cinematic movement—defined by such decidedly masculine artists as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut—is. Varda not only made films during the *nouvelle vague*, she helped inspire it. Her self-funded debut, the fiction-documentary hybrid 1956's *La Pointe Courte* is often considered the unofficial first New Wave film; when she made it, she had no professional cinema training (her early work included painting, sculpting, and photojournalism). Though not widely seen, the film got her commissions to make several documentaries in the late fifties. In 1962, she released the seminal *nouvelle vague* film *Cléo from 5 to 7*; a bold character study that avoids psychologizing, it announced her official arrival. Over the coming decades, Varda became a force in art cinema, conceiving many of her films as political and feminist statements, and using a radical objectivity to create her unforgettable characters. She describes her style as *cinécriture* (writing on film), and it can be seen in formally audacious fictions like *Le bonheur* and *Vagabond* as well as more ragged and revealing autobiographical documentaries like *The Gleaners and I* and *The Beaches of Agnès*.

Visages, Villages review – Agnès Varda, people person, creates a self-referential marvel

Jordan Hoffman • 19 May 2017

Article sourced from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/may/19/visages-villages-review-agnes-varda-jr-documentary-cannes-2017>

Working for the first time with a co-director, French artist JR, the veteran documentary maker makes a near-perfect study of 'faces and places'



“Chance has always been my best assistant,” Agnès Varda tells her first-ever co-director, the French photographer, installation artist and human whimsy machine known as JR. Varda, who turns 89 in just a few days, befriended the young art scene celeb in the last few years, though both are coy about how it happened. “It wasn’t at a disco,” they each recall in voiceover, as we watch a false reenactment; he jerking his gangly body in his sunglasses and fedora, she, with her two-toned hairdo, grooving and smirking. Eventually this film will partially unmask their camera-ready personas, but not until after they get on the road.

Visages, Villages is a movie about itself: the subjects are so warm and wonderful it's a wise move. Varda and JR travel to small French towns in his van, which is decorated like an enormous camera. Inside is a photo-booth and large format prints spit out the side. Is there actually an assistant dropping the images out? Yes, probably, but while this movie is about the process of making art, it doesn't want to destroy the magic entirely.

The pair travel and take pictures, and paste gigantic portraits on the sides of old houses and city walls. The people – ex-miners, waitresses, factory workers, spouses of dockworkers – reflect upon seeing themselves, but also just speak their mind about other topics. It can be funny, it can be melancholy. All that Varda and JR seem to care about is that it is honest.

Watching great artists at work is always a treat, but in the wrong hands can feel like a public television short. No one familiar with Varda (whose previous work includes *Cléo From 5 to 7*, *Vagabond* and *The Gleaners and I*) need worry about depth. The woman known for her “great eye” has sight problems, and we watch her undergo her regular eye injections. She and JR visualise this by creating a life-sized eye test chart. People hold giant letters on an outdoor staircase. With both of these artists, it always comes back to people.

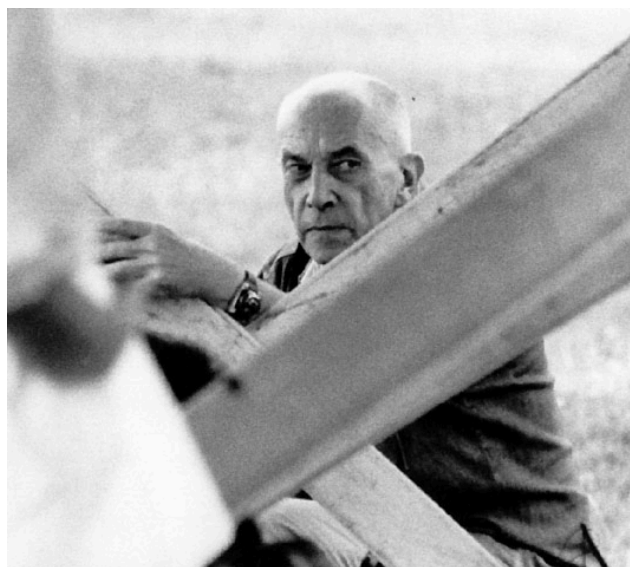
While they are clearly kindred spirits, that doesn't mean they don't bicker. JR needles her a bit (“your wrinkles have muscles!”) and Varda's deadpan glances to the camera rival Jack Benny's. We meet JR's 100-year-old grandmother; we watch Varda try to recreate a photo she took of a young man in her youth. (Nature isn't having it, the image is literally washed away.) There's a tangent about whether goat farmers should remove their animals' horns. (Clearly the answer is no.) The pair sing 70s hits in the van, shop for fish, visit Henri Cartier-Bresson's grave and Jean-Luc Godard's home (he was a friend years ago, not so much any more.)

Godard stands up the crew and comes off as a real jerk as a result, but JR (whose ubiquitous sunglasses are very much a reminder of the great Swiss director) suggests that it may be for the betterment of the film. If there's a message in *Visages, Villages* (both to us, and from Varda to her young friend) is that one does not need to be a tortured and nasty person to make great art. She is living and still-working proof.

Marker, Resnais, Varda: Remembering the Left Bank Group

Robert Farmer • September 2009

Article sourced from Senses of Cinema: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2009/feature-articles/marker-resnais-var-da-remembering-the-left-bank-group/>



1. A Brief History of the Left Bank Group

The Left Bank Group are one of the most unjustly overlooked groups in the history of European cinema. Perhaps this is due to the fact that their films tended to be politically, aesthetically and intellectually demanding; perhaps it is because they have been seen, unjustly, as being a highly literary, as opposed to cinematic, group; or perhaps it is simply because their existence as French filmmakers in the late 1950s and early 1960s was chronologically concurrent with, and thus overshadowed by, the most famous of all movements (or moments) in the past fifty years of cinema, the French New Wave. Whatever the reason, it remains the case that although innumerable books have been written about the French New Wave¹, there are no volumes in English at all dedicated to the Left Bank Group². Nevertheless, the group has been discussed

since the 1960s, when the ‘Left Bank’ term was first used to describe their work.

From whence the term ‘Left Bank’ came is the subject of about as much uncertainty as which filmmakers rightly belong to the group. James Monaco names Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, Agnès Varda and Jacques Demy as belonging to the group, and suggests that it was Jean-Luc Godard who first suggested the term, “Left Bank New Wave”. The Harvard Film Archive and Chris Darke claim the critic Richard Roud first coined the term, and cite Marker, Resnais and Varda as being the most important of the Left Bank directors. Sandy Flitterman-Lewis claims that it was Claire Clouzot who named the group, and who included alongside Marker, Resnais and Varda the “American expatriate in Paris”, William Klein. Alongside the principal three directors, Richard Neupert adds both Demy and Henri Colpi to the list, and, although Neupert does not discuss the origin of the term Left Bank Group, he notes that their existence as a distinct group was noticed as early as 1960 when Raymond Lefevre named them the, “*Nouvelle vague* 2”. Ginette Vincendeau briefly mentions the Left Bank directors in her *Companion to French Cinema*, and again cites Marker, Resnais and Varda as comprising the group. It is only Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell who do not name Marker when discussing the group, including instead Georges Franju alongside Resnais and Varda.

Clearly, it is not of paramount importance who first coined the term Left Bank Group, but it is important to establish that despite the lack of monographs and collections on the subject, the Left Bank Group is, and has been for nearly fifty years, a definitely acknowledged, if not widely studied group of filmmakers, with Resnais, Marker and Varda at its core, and with Colpi, Demy, Franju and Klein as directors on the periphery of the group.

Just as the most important of the French New Wave directors (Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette) were all associated through their work as film critics for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, and by some instances of collaboration it could be argued that the Left Bank directors formed just as strong a group, especially since they worked together more frequently than their *Cahiers* contemporaries. The most well-known collaborations are between Marker and Resnais, who together made *Le Statues meurent*

¹ Some of the key works about the French New Wave that spring to mind include Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), Michel Marie, translated by Richard Neupert, *The French New Wave, An Artistic School* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), Genevieve Sellier, translated by Kristin Ross, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), Dorota Ostrowska, *Reading the French New Wave: Critics, Writers and Art Cinema in France* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007) and Naomi Greene, *The French New Wave: A New Look* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007).

² Much has been written about the individual directors over the years, some of the best studies available being in the French Film Directors series published by Manchester University Press. However, there is no one book dedicated to a study of the Left Bank Group as a group.

aussi (*Statues also Die*, 1950-3), and between Varda and Resnais, Resnais having edited Varda's first feature, *La Pointe Courte* (1954). Varda and Marker worked together on Marker's *Dimanche à Pékin* (*Sunday in Peking*, 1956), and all three collaborated on the collective film *Loin du Viêt-nam* (*Far from Vietnam*, 1967), although, as Alison Smith points out, Varda's contribution to the film was not used, though she is still credited.

Outside of the inter-relationships between the main three directors, Colpi edited films for Varda, Resnais and Marker/Resnais; Demy was married to Varda, although their only official collaboration was on *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (*The Young Girls of Rochefort*, 1967); and Klein, who appears in Marker's *La Jetée* (*The Pier*, 1962), also worked on the collaborative film with Varda, Marker and Resnais, *Loin du Viêt-nam*.

It is still not universally accepted that the Left Bank directors actually constitute a coherent group. Monaco says that distinction between the Left Bank and Right Bank-*Cahiers* group "melts under scrutiny". Smith claims that, "the 'Groupe Rive Gauche' (Left Bank Group) [...] never formed anything like the coherent group based at *Cahiers*", and "Varda maintains that there was never anything more shared by the group than friendly conversation and a love of cats." However, I think that the discussion above suggests that this is not the case. What is really at issue is whether the Left Bank Group is merely a subgroup of the French New Wave, or whether it can be considered as a group in its own right, which can be thought about not simply by its otherness to the *nouvelle vague*.

Frequently, the Left Bank Group as a group are absent from discussions of French cinema, although the principal directors are always talked about. Sometimes, the group are mentioned, but only as a vague collective without any real coherency. More recently, the group have been discussed as a subgroup of the French New Wave, as a kind of intellectual, political, feminist, literary and/or avant-garde wing of the *nouvelle vague*.

Vincendeau affirms that the French New Wave directors

*lacked an interest in political or social issues, concentrating on personal angst among the (male) Parisian middle class (although another less media-prominent band of filmmakers known as the 'Left Bank' group – Chris Marker, Alain Resnais and Varda – showed greater political awareness). On the whole, the New Wave did not significantly challenge traditional representations of women.*³

Thompson and Bordwell note that the Left Bank Group were, "[m]ostly older and less movie-mad than the *Cahiers* crew, they tended to see cinema as akin to the other arts, particularly literature" (17).

Neupert says of the Left Bank directors that,

*[d]efinitions of this active cluster of young directors often concentrate on their differences from the *Cahiers* critic-turned-filmmakers and stress their deeper involvement in aesthetic experimentation, their connections to documentary practice, overt political themes, and increased interest in other arts beyond cinema.*⁴

And Claire Clouzot remarks that,

*[t]he filmmakers of the Left Bank are inspired by artistic eclecticism. As creators they are interested in the flow of mental processes, rather than cinephilic fanaticism. It is not theoretical criticism which draws them to the cinema, but an interest in filmic writing, and the relations this might have with literary production.*⁵

³ Vincendeau, p. 110.

⁴ Neupert, p. 299.

⁵ Claire Clouzot, quoted in Flitterman-Lewis, p. 262.

While it is undeniable that these quotes can be seen to reinforce the notion that the Left Bank Group is indeed the intellectual/political/feminist/literary/avant-garde wing of the French New Wave, and, whilst most writers on French cinema would be quite happy to leave it there, it is Clouzot who goes on to provide a much more radical reading of the Left Bank Group.

Clouzot considers the Left Bank group, “not as a faction of the New Wave, but, rather, as a distinct group in opposition to it”. Clouzot’s is a literary emphasis; she takes “authorship” literally in her discussions to mean the “essentially novelistic preoccupations with time, memory, narration, and form that characterise the group”. It is, for Clouzot, that the Left Bank directors are to be seen as authors more than *auteurs*, as they were more concerned with responding to the traditions of literature and the *nouveau roman* (new novel), than with responding to the history of cinema: whereas the Right Bank-*Cahiers* directors are well known for being primarily critics and cinéphiles, and for their work being a response to the prevailing tradition of French cinema, labelled by the Cahiers group as, “*le cinéma de papa*” or “old fogeys’ cinema”. As shall be seen when discussing the films of the Left Bank group, Clouzot is quite right to foreground the literary preoccupations of the group, and to see it as one of the most important defining features: Marker, a writer and novelist as well as a filmmaker, famous for his exquisitely constructed and highly literary voice-over commentaries; Varda, for whom the Jean Astruc’s idea of the *caméra-stylo* (camera pen) is highly important, as is her own notion of *cinécriture* (cinematic writing); and Resnais, whose first two, and most important, feature films were collaborations with two of France’s most important new novelists, Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet.



Regarding the Left Bank Group, Clouzot goes on to say,

[t]he shadow of Brecht and the New Novel hovers over their themes. The anonymity of certain characters, the ‘flux’ of situations [...] the distancing of the spectator in relation to those depicted on screen, the simultaneous time of action and time of thought, all this is taken up. The ‘Left Bank current’ affirms itself as a cinema of non-identification.⁶

Finally, although it is not my intention to discuss the French New Wave in a lot of detail, I think it is important to note, before moving on to discuss some of the key films of the Left Bank Group, that much of the current thinking about the Right Bank-*Cahiers* French New Wave dispels the myth that it was a highly radical and political cinema. Vincendeau notes that,

[t]he New Wave was neither a truly revolutionary nor a cohesive ‘movement’. To opponents such as Bernard Chardère of Cahiers rival Positif, it was ‘rather vague and not that new’ [...] these films lacked an interest in political or social issues [...] did not significantly challenge traditional representations of women [...] [and] although some film presented ‘unconventional’ heroines [...] others were downright misogynist.⁷

Vincendeau’s charge of misogyny against some New Wave directors is supported by articles written at the time in the *Cahiers* rival journal, *Positif*. Neupert notes that Godard was labelled by *Positif* as “a disgusting misogynist” and Chabrol was charged with being “*petit bourgeois* [...] and] militantly misogynist”.

Vincendeau’s general view that the French New Wave is less revolutionary than popularly supposed is supported by Susan Hayward, who writes that,

⁶ Clouzot, quoted in Flitterman-Lewis, p. 262.

⁷ Vincendeau, p. 110.

[a]nother myth that needs examining is the belief that because this cinema [the French New Wave] was controversial or different in style it was also a radical and political cinema. This is predominantly not true: the New Wave filmmakers were largely non-politicized.⁸

However, it is important to note that Hayward distinguishes between two periods of the French New Wave. The first period, 1958-62, which coincides with the most important period of activity of the Left Bank Group, and the second wave of the *nouvelle vague*, 1966-68. The first wave is a definitely non-politicized cinema, whereas the second wave was more politicized, but was just as much about a reflexive attitude towards the filmmaking process as it was about politics. As Hayward says,

[t]he tendency has been to conflate the two movements of its production (early and late 1960s). This has meant that the first New Wave (1958-1962), which was anarchic only in relation to the cinema that preceded it (*le cinéma de papa*), has become imbricated into the more ostentatiously political cinema of the second New Wave (1966-68).⁹

The distinction made by Hayward is a useful distinction in terms of this discussion of the Left Bank filmmakers, because to answer the question properly it makes sense to concentrate on a comparison with the first period of the *nouvelle vague*, 1958 to 1962, as this was the one that was temporally simultaneous with the most important years of the Left Bank Group.

2. The Key Films of the Left Bank Group (1958-1962)

The filmmakers of the Left Bank Group had all started making films well before the ‘birth’ of the French New Wave in 1958, films that were highly regarded right from the outset. Resnais and Marker both began with documentaries, Varda with a feature.

Resnais was the first of the Left Bank filmmakers to begin making films, and, unlike his Right Bank contemporaries, James Monaco notes that Resnais had had a practical, rather than theoretical, training. He had enrolled in the IDHEC (the French national film school) and had worked as an actor, camera operator and editor before being commissioned to make his first professional documentary in 1948. In total, Resnais had made 26 short documentaries before making his first feature film, *Hiroshima mon amour*, in 1959, and had gained a reputation as a highly accomplished documentary maker, the most important of his documentaries being *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*, 1955). As is well documented, *Hiroshima mon amour* was initially intended to be another short documentary, not a fiction feature. Additionally, and unlike many New Wave projects, all Resnais’ documentaries had been commissioned, including what was to become *Hiroshima mon amour*.



Between 1958 and 1962, Alain Resnais made his last short documentary, *Le Chant du Styrene* (*The Song of Styrene*, 1958) and two fiction feature films, *Hiroshima mon amour* and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961). In many ways, these two features are the finest and most important works of Resnais’ career, and are still the best known and most discussed of his films, especially *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, which provided much inspiration for Peter Greenaway’s film, *The Draughtsman’s Contract* (1982), and which has

lost none of its power to provoke, confuse and baffle an audience.

Hiroshima mon amour remains a complex and deeply thoughtful work that explores Resnais’ preoccupation with the themes of time and memory. However, it is also a highly political and literary work, and it sets the tone for much of Resnais’ later works. The film was scripted by Marguerite Duras, who, at the time, was one of France’s most well respected new novelists, and the film is set both in Japan and in France, with both a Japanese actor, Eiji Okada, and a French actor, Emmanuelle Riva. The outward story itself is not especially difficult to comprehend; it is set in the present (late 1950s Japan), and concerns a love affair between two unnamed married

⁸ Hayward, p. 146.

⁹ Susan Hayward, *French National Cinema, 2nd Edition* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 205.

people, 'he' (Okada) and 'she' (Riva), who meet at various points during the woman's final twenty-four hours before she returns to France. She is an actor, making a film set in Hiroshima about peace (a film that we never see, but which exists within *Hiroshima mon amour* as a testament to the idea of the unmakeable film about Hiroshima), and he is an architect.

Within the main narrative about the love affair, there is entwined another love affair, this time set in France, in the town of Nevers, towards the end of World War II, and told in a series of flashbacks seemingly remembered by the woman. However, as Emma Wilson points out, there is nothing in the structure of the film or in the grammar of the editing that conclusively makes the Nevers story her remembrances; they could just as plausibly be either his or her imaginings or fantasies.

The second love affair is the story of her affair with a young German soldier (Bernard Fresson) during the occupation. Their affair is uncovered, he is shot and she is publicly humiliated by the townspeople – as was the custom with French girls who had affairs with German soldiers and which is well documented in Marcel Ophüls' film, *Le chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*, 1969) – and imprisoned in a cellar by her parents. At the end of the war, her parents allow her to leave in the dead of night.

Within these two stories is also entwined footage of Hiroshima, some of it newsreel footage taken shortly after the bomb dropped, and some of it footage of artefacts collected from the bombsite on display in museums.

Clearly it is all but impossible to make a film about what really happened at Hiroshima, to encapsulate the vast scale of destruction and suffering that occurred; and this was something that Resnais was aware of when making the film, and why he turned down the opportunity to make a documentary on the subject. However, whilst being about Hiroshima, *Hiroshima mon amour* is not about Hiroshima in any conventional sense – a useful comparison may be made with Shohei Imamura's film about the bombing of Hiroshima, *Kuroi ame* (*Black Rain*, 1989), which has a much more conventional narrative structure; it is the story of a family trying to rebuild their lives in the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima and the effects of the fallout; it is about Hiroshima in a more straightforward way.

Resnais' film is more about the universal human experience of suffering, and he entwines the two stories together to show how our memories of our own suffering, which still cause us pain, are the things that allow us to know how it feels when others suffer. This is perhaps what he means when he tells her that she saw nothing at Hiroshima (which is perhaps true for everyone, for, unlike the Holocaust, the bombs dropped at Hiroshima effaced all witnesses): she did not see or know directly the suffering of others, but she knew her own suffering and imagined it multiplied. But she is also like one of the victims of the Hiroshima fall-out, the scenes of her having her hair cut off are reminiscent of the scenes in *Kuroi ame*, where the young Japanese girl's hair falls out due to radiation sickness. She loved a man who is now dead, she suffered, she was humiliated, imprisoned and exiled; but as time passes memories fade, and she begins to forget. For *Hiroshima mon amour* is also a film about the future and the impermanence of memory, the inability to keep memories of the past alive. She says in present tense voice-over, as if to her young German lover, "I betrayed you this evening with this stranger ... look how I'm forgetting you ... Look how I've forgotten you." As Emma Wilson remarks, "[t]he merger of Nevers and Hiroshima comes in the realisation that both are condemned to forgetting, forgetting in betrayal of the past and in the hope of survival in the future."

As well as the complex themes and ideas explored in *Hiroshima mon amour*, it is also a particularly remarkable film for its striking use of modernist aesthetics, especially concerning flashbacks, voice-over narration and ellipsis. It is the case for films made in the classical Hollywood style that we know what is occurring, who is speaking and how the dialogue relates to the pictures. However, Resnais breaks with these codes, and we are frequently at a loss to know how the sound and images relate, whether the narration is a fragment of dialogue spoken in the present, or in the past, or even spoken only as part of an interior monologue. Also, we do not necessarily know what is true and what is fiction as regards voice-over and the accompanying flashbacks, or even to whom the flashbacks properly belong. Resnais also only shows us the middle of the story; we never see how he and she met, or how their affair ends. He keeps the characters at a distance from us; they remain cold and aloof, distant from the audience, forcing the spectator to adopt a more critical and intellectual position, very much in line with Brechtian notions of alienation or distanciation. "The protagonists with no names remain obscure art film characters [... and] *Hiroshima* remains a stubbornly open ended film."

According to Monaco, Resnais' next feature, another film in which the characters remained nameless, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*,

created even more of a stir among progressive, educated audiences than had *Hiroshima mon amour* two years earlier [... i]t was quickly recognized as a masterpiece of perceptual prestidigitation, and throughout the sixties served as the very model of the modern avant garde in narrative film.¹⁰

However, not all critics were as positive. John Russell Taylor, writing only three years after the film's premiere at the Venice Film Festival, described it as "less of a film than an intellectual trap" (35) and, although he admits that, "what is being done is being supremely well done", he goes on to ask, "but [...] was it worth doing at all in the first place?"

Like *Hiroshima mon amour*, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* was scripted by another of France's new novelists, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and again deals with themes of time and memory, and of truth and fiction. To describe *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* is not a particularly easy task, as the narrative defies a straightforward description, but the basic plot outline appears as follows. Within the setting of a baroque French château, an unnamed who is usually referred to as X (Giorgio Albertazzi) tries to persuade a woman, A (Delphine Seyrig), that they met last year in Marienbad – or, as he tells her, perhaps it was Karlsbad or Frederiksbad. There is the implicit sense, from X at least, that they had an affair in Marienbad, and have met up again in order to be together. However, A denies ever meeting X; she tells him that he must have mistaken her for somebody else. X tries a number of times to persuade A that they did in fact meet up last year. He shows her a photo that he has of her; he describes her room and some of her clothing that she wore the previous year. However, A continually refuses to acknowledge that the meeting ever took place, despite X's continual attempts to persuade her.

As well as a number of peripheral characters, there is a third important character in the film, M (Sacha Pitoëff). M is probably A's husband and, although he watches X and A in conversation, he does not intrude upon their conversations. However, towards the end of the film he shoots A, but this ending is denied by X, who says, "I must have you alive." The film ultimately ends with X and A leaving together.



Just as *Hiroshima mon amour* contained another film, her film about peace, Vincendeau draws our attention to the fact that *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* contains not another film, but a play: Ibsen's *Rosmerholm*. It is about a clergyman, Johannes Rosmer, which begins exactly one year after the suicide of Rosmer's wife, Beata.

Vincendeau also notes the spectre of sexual violence in both *Rosmerholm* and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. Robbe-Grillet even scripted a scene in which X rapes A, although whether this was an actual occurrence or a fantasy remains unclear. Resnais refused to shoot the rape scene, but Vincendeau writes that one interpretation of A's denial that she ever met X was the repression of such an act of sexual violence.

A more romantic interpretation is given by Peter Cowie, who believes that the film alludes to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice: "X may be Orpheus and A his Eurydice, with M representing Death."

Throughout the film, the strongest sense is one of unreality and impossibility, and Resnais creates this sense in the following ways: he visually overwhelms us with the ornate *mise en scène* and Sacha Vierny's beautiful black-and-white cinematography; he does not give us a plot that we can make sense of; he does not give us characters whose motivations we can comprehend; he creates a deliberately fantastical setting in which the characters move and behave without emotion; he does not maintain spatial continuity; he gives us voice-over narration which is at best based upon unreliable memory, and at worst upon complete fantasy; he does not indicate whether the scenes that we see are set in the past, present, or future; and he does not signal whether the scenes we see depict actual events or fantasies/wishes conjured by the characters. In this sense *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* can be

¹⁰ Monaco, p. 53.

seen as an exercise in the complete denial of the classical Hollywood continuity style, a reading that is emphasised by Monaco. David Bordwell notes that the film is constantly “teasing us to construct a fabula but always thwarting us”. It provides us with the belief that there is a story (diegesis/fabula) to be decrypted or deciphered, but does not provide enough information, or provides contradictory information, in the plot (discourse/syuzhet) to make this possible. As he goes on to say:

[t]he syuzhet is so wrought as to make it impossible to construct a fabula. Clues are either too few or contradictory. One order of scenes is as good as any other; cause and effect are impossible to distinguish; even the spatial reference points change.¹¹

It is, for Bordwell, a film that is “constructed like a *nouveau roman*” (43) and Neupert echoes this when he says that it “owes as much to the New Novel as to the New Wave” (44).

Chris Marker, who remains the most enigmatic and least well known of the three, was the next of the Left Bank directors to begin making films, although he started his career as a writer, and from 1947 published a highly diverse range of articles in various journals, including *Esprit*, on a wide variety of subjects. Catherine Lupton notes that in the years between 1947 and 1950 he produced,

poetry, a short story, political and cultural essays, book and film reviews [...] short, pithy reflections on current events and debates that were sometimes transposed as imaginary fables. [He also wrote] a well received novel, *Le coeur net* [*The Forthright Spirit*, 1949], and an extended critical essay on the French playwright Jean Girardoux. (45)

Little is known of Marker’s early life, but amongst the more interesting of the unverifiable ‘facts’ about him is that he studied Philosophy with Jean-Paul Sartre in the late 1930s and served in the French Resistance during the occupation. However, what is known about him is that it was Resnais who brought Marker to filmmaking with their three-year collaboration on *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1950-3), and that prior to 1958 Marker also made another two documentaries.

Marker was more prolific than both Resnais and Varda between 1957 and 1962, producing five works in six years: *Lettre de Sibérie* (*Letter from Siberia*, 1957), *Description d’un combat* (*Description of a Struggle*, 1960), *Cuba Si!* (1961), *La Jetée* (1962) and *Le Joli mai* (*The Lovely May*, 1963). However, Marker’s early work is notoriously difficult to view, as Lupton points out, “Marker himself will no longer endorse public screenings of most of the films he made before 1962 – a constant source of frustration to Marker enthusiasts.” (46) And Sarah Cooper notes that the years between 1950 and 1961 are “what Chris Darke terms the ‘lost period’ of his oeuvre” (47). Thus, it is no surprise that most of these early films are not commercially available; but fortunately Marker’s most famous work, *La Jetée*, has been widely available for many years. Prior to Gilliam’s film *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), a ‘sort-of remake’ of *La Jetée*, *La Jetée* was still probably the most well known of Marker’s films, thanks in no small part to its unique method of construction. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind



that *La Jetée* is Marker’s only pure fiction film, and as such it is not necessarily representative of his work: but given Marker’s vast and diverse output no such representative work exists, although Marker’s interest in the themes of time, memory and culture is visible in all his work.

The most remarkable and most immediately noticeable fact about *La Jetée* is that it is composed from a series of still photographs: nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that these images did not move. Marker uses the images in a very cinematic way, zooming in and out of them, panning across them, fading in and out and dissolving between them, and varying the rhythm of the cutting; all of these serve to create a very real sense of movement. There are probably more shots and a greater sense of movement in *La Jetée* than in some ‘moving’ films; Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *Kôhî jikô* (*Café Lumière*, 2003), for

¹¹ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 232.

example. Marker also uses music, naturalistic and supposedly diegetic sounds, and a voice-over narration in *La Jetée*, all of which converge to make the audience rapidly forget that the principal instrument of its construction was a Pentax stills camera.

La Jetée is the story of a 'twice lived fragment of time' – of a man (Davos Hanich) "marked by an image of his childhood". It is a story that ends at the beginning, with a boy witnessing the death of a man: we enter and exit the film at the same point, the pier at Orly airport where the boy witnesses the man's death. The man and the boy are the same person, the moment at Orly airport is the twice-lived fragment of time, and only when it is too late does the man realise this. Thus, *La Jetée* immediately conjures ideas of Ouroboros, the arcane image of the serpent eating its own tail, or the perfect immortal being described by Plato in *Timaeus*. It also calls to mind Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the eternal recurrence. Perhaps the man is the first of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, for he has witnessed the moment of his own death, yet in denying the offer from the men of the future to escape, and choosing to go back to the woman (Hélène Chatelain) he loves he has "expressed his unconditional acceptance of existence to point where he wills that everything should be repeated, exactly as it has been, in eternal cycles". And, had he not have done so, the future of all mankind would have been doomed, for the image of his childhood that secured his passage through time, that allowed the present to call to the past and the future for assistance, would not have been created.

Like Marker, Agnès Varda did not come straight to film, but initially worked as a professional photographer; also, like Marker, she studied philosophy. In many ways it is Varda who is the most interesting of the three directors, for not only is she the only woman director in either the Left- or Right-Bank groups (and is now regarded as one of the most important female directors in the world), and not only because her first feature, *La Pointe Courte* (1954), was made four years before Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge*, yet was later championed by Georges Sadoul as the first film of the French New Wave, because Varda made *La Pointe Courte* completely outside of the French film industry, with no professional training, using money from an inheritance, and had made the film having seen virtually no other films at all. Unlike the Right Bank-*Cahiers* filmmakers and, as Clouzot noted, Varda was not influenced by other films, but by literature: as she discusses in the introduction to the film, it was William Faulkner's novel, *The Wild Palms*, that was "the intellectual basis for the film". It is interesting to note that, whilst Varda was making her first film in 1954, Godard was also making his first film: but whereas Varda's earned her the reputation as the "grandmother of the new wave", Godard's documentary about the construction of a dam, *Opération béton (Operation Cement)*, is described as being, "a very conventional document".

Central to any discussion of Varda must be her own concept of *cinécriture*, literally meaning cinematic writing. This is a concept derived from Astruc's notion of the *camera-stylo*, the camera pen, and goes well beyond the conventional notion of the director as *auteur*. What Varda's notion signifies is that the film has been authored by someone who not only writes, directs, edits, scouts locations, casts, etc., but that all aspects of the film have been chosen deliberately in order to create specific meanings that the *cinécriviste* is aware of. This goes beyond the conventional notion of the *auteur*, which, in terms of making meaning, is considerably more passive than Varda's intellectually active idea of *cinécriture*. Varda's commitment to *cinécriture* is very apparent in her interviews and in her discussions of her own work where her attention to detail and thoughtfulness are always very evident. As she says,

A well written film is also well filmed, the actors are well chosen, so are the locations. The cutting, the movement, the points-of-view, the rhythm of filming and editing have been felt and considered in the way a writer chooses the depth of meaning of sentences, the type of words, number of adverbs, paragraphs, asides, chapters which advance the story or break its flow, etc. In writing it's called style. In the cinema style is cinécriture.¹²

Between 1958 and 1962, Varda made two short documentaries, *L'Opéra mouffe* (1958) and *Du côté de la côte* (1958), and her most well known fiction feature film, *Cléo dé 5 à 7 (Cleo from 5 to 7, 1961)*. *Cléo dé 5 à 7* is the ninety-minute story of a beautiful young woman, a somewhat narcissistic singer, told in real time (its title should really be *Cleo dé 5 à 6:30*) who waits for the results of test, results that may indicate that she has a fatal illness. The central concern of the film is the move of Cléo (Corinne Marchand) halfway through the film from object to subject, which arises through her anxiety in waiting for the test results. As Flitterman-Lewis puts it,

Cléo's transformation hinges on a turn of phrase: 'How do I look?' This question, traditionally connoted as feminine, is displaced from its passive, objectified meaning ('How am I seen, how do I

¹² Neupert, p. 208.

*appear in the eyes of the world?') to its active complement ('How do I see, how is the world viewed by me?')*¹³

Varda is also very clear on this transformative moment in the film, a moment that occurs precisely at the halfway point of the film, and is signalled visually by Cléo's change of appearance: she removes her white clothing, and returns wearing a simple black dress. She pulls off her wig, at the same time remarking, "If only I could pull my head off too!" Varda says of this transformative moment in the film:

*In the middle of the film I wanted a clean cut, a sharp change. Forty-five minutes into the film, the beauty feel herself cracking. The baby doll, the blond starlet, everything cracks. She rips off her negligee, her wig. She leaves. At this point, she begins to look at others. She looks at people in the streets, in cafés, she looks at her friend, and then the soldier. I consider this a feminist approach. I wanted to focus on her as a woman who defines herself through others' vision. And at some point, because she's the one looking, she changes. She redefines herself on her own.*¹⁴

As well as being about the object and subject of the look, *Cléo dé 5 à 7* is also about the perception of time, about the subjective and objective experience of time. Divided into thirteen chapters, all of which state the time, we are constantly reminded of the regular and unstoppable progression of time, yet this contrasts sharply with Cléo's subjective experience of time, which for her is slowing down as her frustration and anxiety build up, each second seemingly longer than the last. Varda also draws us into Cléo's subjective world, an example of which is a short sequence in Chapter XIII of the film, which Neupert describes as, "demonstrating Varda's radical approach to time". In the sequence, as Cléo leaves a café and walks down a street it appears that she is being stared at by everyone, something that would have brought her pleasure in the first half of the film, yet she seems almost horrified by the gazes, as if realising for the first time what they really represent. She ends up running away, as the man with the skewer through his arm prophetically shouts, "Open your eyes." Yet although Varda does not explicitly signal this, we have the impression that Cléo is not really being watched in so obvious a manner by the people on the street. The shameless gazes that we see are the gazes as Cléo experiences them; raw, oppressive and judgemental. These shots, intercut with shots that can only be Cléo's memories, skilfully take us from reality into Cléo's subjective inner world.



3. Towards a Legacy of the Left Bank Group

It is to be hoped that this all-to-brief discussion of the history, context and key films of the Left Bank Group has served to demonstrate the wide and, most important, innovative approach to filmmaking taken up by Marker, Resnais and Varda. As well as being radical filmmakers of the late 1950s and early '60s, it should be noted that all three continue to make highly regarded and highly innovative films. Alain Resnais won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 2006 for his film *Cœurs (Private Fears in Public Places, 2006)* and his new film, *Les Herbes folles (Wild Reeds)* is due for release in 2009.

Chris Marker's beautiful and innovative 1983 documentary, *Sans Soleil (Sunless)*, won many awards, and, thanks to the fact that it was released on the same DVD as *La Jetée* in both the UK and USA, it is perhaps one of his more widely seen works. His 1998 CD-Rom, *Immemory*, was, and still is, a most remarkable synthesis of art, photography, film, literature and multimedia technology¹⁵, all the more incredible when one considers that

¹³ Flitterman-Lewis, p. 269.

¹⁴ Agnès Varda, *Cléo dé 5 à 7: Remembrances* (video), in *4 x Agnès Varda*, DVD, The Criterion Collection, 2005.

¹⁵ For Francophones, *Immemory* is (or was) available for both PC and Mac from the Centre Georges Pompidou. For English-speaking monoglots, *Immemory* is only available for Mac users, although it has at last been made available again in an OSX compatible version from Exact Change.

Marker created it when he was seventy-seven. In recent years, there has been something of a Marker revival, with three books being published about him since 2004, and many of his films at last being released on DVD.

Sans toit ni loi (*Vagabond*, 1985), which won the Golden Lion, did much to revive Varda's reputation as both a great filmmaker and to remind the world of her importance as a feminist filmmaker. Her documentary *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse* (*The Gleaners and I*, 2000), which won numerous awards, reminded audiences that she was also a great documentary maker. It can only be regretted that Varda has said that her film, *Les Plages d'Agnès* (*The Beaches of Agnès*, 2008), which won the Best Documentary Award in the 2009 Césars, will be her last.

As well as continuing to produce important and innovative works for more than fifty years, we must also, if somewhat briefly, note the influence of the Left Bank Group on modern film theory, particularly as regards Gilles Deleuze's work on cinema and the time image. For Deleuze, Resnais (along with Stanley Kubrick) forms a new kind of intellectual cinema, a cinema of the brain.

Also, in recent years, both Susan Hayward and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis have sought to increase our understanding of Varda's importance for feminist film theory.

Ultimately, the legacy that is most strongly supported by the above discussions is that whilst the Right Bank-*Cahiers* group of filmmakers were seemingly (and very visibly) creating a radical cinema in the first period of the New Wave, it was Marker, Resnais and Varda, the Left Bank Group, who were genuinely, and more quietly, creating a truly radical cinema that variously embraced the ideas of philosophy, politics, history, time and memory, feminism, literature and the *nouveau roman*, the ambiguous relationship between fiction and reality and between the past, present and future, unreliable narration, and complex narrative structures. It is clear then that the achievements of the Left Bank Group were both radical and remarkable, and it is to be hoped that in time their work will come to be more widely admired and celebrated than that of their more famous contemporaries.

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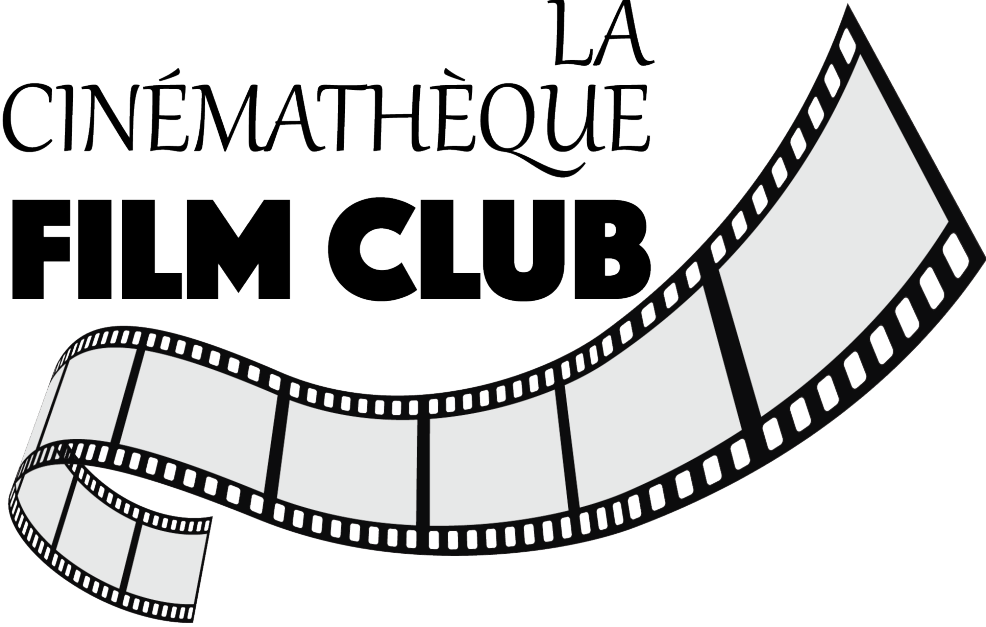
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Women Film Directors
Fall 2017

Lina Wertmüller
b.1928

Seven Beauties
1975

Commedia all'italiana – Comedy Italian Style

Gino Moliterno • July 2014

Article sourced from Senses of Cinema: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2014/2014-melbourne-international-film-festival-dossier/commedia-allitaliana-comedy-italian-style/>

To think about Italian cinema in the immediate postwar era is almost inevitably to conjure up heartrending images from the classic neo-realist films like Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945) and Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948). Yet, as the better-informed historians of Italian cinema have never ceased to point out, for all its critical acclaim at home and its prestige as art cinema abroad, neo-realism never gained much purchase over Italian audiences themselves who, having just lived through the traumatic experiences of the war, naturally gravitated to the happier fare of either Hollywood films or home-grown comedy and other lighter escapist genres.¹ Comedy had, in fact, always occupied pride of place in Italian cinema, even during the Fascist period, and in the postwar era the genre would rise to become one of the major pillars of national cinema production and the one contributing most to Italian films finally, if only briefly, being able to compete successfully on Italian screens with the Hollywood juggernaut.

Truth to tell, neo-realist films themselves often included some comic elements. One remembers, for example, how, leading up to one of the most tragic moments in *Roma città aperta*, that of Pina's death, Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi), in a desperate move to keep the old man (Turi Pandolfini) quiet as the Fascists and Germans search the building, has to whack him, in true slapstick fashion, on the head with a frypan. In retrospect, of course, it's difficult not to credit such a comic touch to Federico Fellini's collaboration on the screenplay. As time went on, however, and even as neo-realism experienced the brief flowering of its spring, Italian audiences made ever clearer their preference for laugh-out-loud comedy. So, tellingly, in 1948 *Bicycle Thieves*, critically acclaimed at home and soon to also receive an Oscar nomination, could only manage eighth place at the Italian box office, bettered in first and fourth place by two films starring the popular comic actor Totò.² Reading the writing on the wall, neo-realist directors were soon working towards a lighter and more entertaining variation of the form which came to be known, rather pejoratively in leftist critical circles, as *neorealismo rosa* or "pink" (or "rose-coloured") neo-realism. Yet, even what came to be regarded as the flagship film of this sort of "neo-realism lite", Giuseppe De Santis' *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, 1949) only managed to achieve fifth place at the box office for 1949 – in spite of it being one of the most popular and highest-grossing of all the neo-realist films – beaten in third and fourth place by two other films starring Totò. In 1952 De Sica's *Umberto D*, nominated that year for the Grand Prize at Cannes and subsequently nominated for an Academy Award, failed to even make it into that year's top ten highest-grossing films. The box office for the year was headed by the first of what would eventually become six *Don Camillo* films, which transferred to the screen the endless comic tussles in a small

¹ See, among others, Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, Continuum, New York and London, 2009, pp. 65-66.

² The calculations of box office receipts are notoriously rubbery but here I'm relying on the annual top ten lists supplied by Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones in *A New Guide to Italian Cinema*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2007, pp. 171 ff. Bondanella puts *The Bicycle Thief* (as it was called in America) in 11th place for the 1948-49 season (p. 65).

town of the Po Valley between a pugnacious parish priest and his nemesis, the Communist mayor, Peppone, portrayed in the popular novels of Giovanni Guareschi.

Firmly established through all these successes, the comedy genre was set to increase its domination of Italian screens even further in the following years as high rating comedies now came ready-made to generate their inevitable sequels. In 1953, just as Julien Duvivier's *Il ritorno di Don Camillo* (*The Return of Don Camillo*) gave signs of repeating the huge box office success of its predecessor, Luigi Comencini released *Pane, amore e fantasia* (*Bread, Love and Dreams*), a perfectly-fashioned exemplar of "rosy" neo-realism. Set in a poor rural village in central Italy and starring Gina Lollobrigida in one of her first substantial roles, the film was able to show an Italy afflicted with almost Third World poverty while at the same time offering only love and dreams as consolation. The film was so popular, topping the box office for that year, that it immediately generated an



equally popular sequel, *Pane, amore e gelosia* (*Bread, Love and Jealousy*, aka as *Frisky*, 1954), also directed by Comencini, which repeated the successful elements of the formula well enough to come in second at the box office that year, only slightly behind Mario Camerini's Hollywood-inflected blockbuster,

Ulisse (*Ulysses*, 1954). Given its proven success, the formula – with the setting moved to seaside Sorrento and Lollobrigida substituted by the up-and-coming Sophia Loren – was taken up again a year later by director Dino Risi in *Pane, amore e...* (*Scandal in Sorrento*, 1955) which was able to beat the third Don Camillo film, *Don Camillo e l'onorevole Peppone* (*Don Camillo's Last Round*, Carmine Gallone, 1955) for first place at the Italian box office for that year. A year later Risi himself initiated an urban version of the consolatory *Bread and Love* formula with his *Poveri ma belli* (*Poor But Beautiful*, 1956), which topped the annual box office, its commercial success effortlessly repeated a year later by its sequel in a feminine key, *Povere ma belle* (*Pretty But Poor*, 1957).

I soliti ignoti

These *were* all generically home-grown "Italian" comedies, of course, but 1958 saw the advent of a film that appeared to herald a distinctively new, and much more mordant, style of comedy that would later be characterised as *commedia all'italiana* or comedy Italian style. The film was *I soliti ignoti*.

Directed by Mario Monicelli, a prolific screenwriter-director who had already, among other things, been responsible for half a dozen of the Totò films, *I soliti ignoti* – in America rather haphazardly titled *Big Deal on Madonna Street* but better translated as something like *The Usual (Unknown) Suspects* – breathed in a new comic air. An obvious but inventive parody of the French heist-gone-wrong film *Du rififi chez les homes* (*Rififi*, Jules Dassin, 1955), itself influenced by the American crime film, *I soliti ignoti* followed the doomed plan of five petty thieves from the lower quarters of Rome to set themselves up for life by breaking into the safe of a local pawnbroker's shop. The dismally planned robbery is predicated on the motley gang's ability to break through the wall of an adjoining apartment, something that they hilariously fail to do, having to content themselves in the end with

some leftover pasta and chickpeas from the apartment fridge. Thanks to a brilliant screenplay by Monicelli and screenwriting duo Age and Scarpelli, whose screenplays would from then on be synonymous with the genre, the characters are equally comic stereotypes in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte* and finely drawn individuals whose basic humanity we recognise and even sympathise with. At the same time, Piero Umiliani's cool jazz score and the stunning black-and-white cinematography of Gianni Di Venanzo combined to give the film an unprecedented modern look. Thus, with perhaps only the slightest benefit of hindsight, the cameo appearance of veteran comic actor Totò, playing the role of senior advisor to the gang, would subsequently be read as an allegorical passing of the comic baton from the older and more innocent "pink neo-realist" comedies to this decidedly more streetwise, and indeed more cynical, comedy "Italian style". A premonition of how ruthless and hard-edged this new comedy could become in wielding its bitter satirical scalpel was given by the presence of death in the film, explicitly shown in an early scene where Cosimo, the monumentally-inept but original mastermind of the scheme, meets his end under the wheels of a speeding tram.

Over and above the great success of *I soliti ignoti* at the Italian box office, and its well-deserved Oscar nomination in the following year, one of the film's greatest achievements proved to be the blinding revelation of Vittorio Gassman's previously-unsuspected natural aptitude for comedy. Buoyed by this revelation, Monicelli paired Gassman with Alberto Sordi, the other actor who had begun to display a great capacity for bittersweet comedy, to make the first major milestone of *commedia all'italiana*, *La grande guerra* (*The Great War*, 1959). Aided once again by a brilliant screenplay by Age and Scarpelli, Monicelli was able to lay bare the petty vices and character weaknesses of ordinary Italians (Sordi and Gassman play Roman and Milanese recruits, respectively, and for much of the film display the stereotypical prejudices of Northern and Southern Italians), although these clearly paled into insignificance when measured against the officially-sanctioned insanity of the war itself. *La grande guerra* topped the box office in 1959, well above Rossellini's last serious attempt at neo-realism, *Il Generale della Rovere* (*General Della Rovere*, 1959), which came in at ninth place. Nevertheless, the two films shared the Golden Lion at Venice that year, showing that comedy was finally coming to be critically accepted as "quality" cinema. The success of Monicelli's use of comedy to revisit one of the most tragic events of Italian history prompted Comencini to follow suit in exploring the debacle of the Italian armistice with the Allies in 1943 in his *Tutti a casa* (*Everybody Go Home*, 1960). The armistice, negotiated secretly with the Allies by the King and Marshall Badoglio and only eventually communicated to Italians via a public radio broadcast, had in fact been a monumental true-life comedy of errors – indeed, a classic case of comic-if-it-hadn't-been-so-tragic for ordinary Italians – and the clever screenplay by Age and Scarpelli milked it for all the tragicomedy it was worth.

A year later Risi extended *commedia all'italiana*'s gloss on recent Italian history to the threshold of Italy's so-called "economic miracle" of the late 1950s with *Una vita difficile* (*A Difficult Life*, 1961), in



which an ex-partisan, played by Alberto Sordi in one of his finest performances, finds all his hopes for a better Italy progressively and comprehensively crushed as the country begins its shift into affluence.

It's at this time, then, that the *commedia all'italiana* enters something of a classical phase as it begins, in the words of film historian Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, "to perform an analytical form of 'social autopsy'" on the anthropological changes being wrought by the "economic miracle".³

Il sorpasso

A high point of the genre during this period is undoubtedly Risi's *Il sorpasso* (*The Good Life*, 1962). Featuring Gassman in one of his most accomplished performances and iconic roles, the film is a profoundly amusing but also disturbing portrayal of the euphoric cynicism generated by the economic "boom". As the first real Italian road movie – the country's autostrada network was only just coming into being at the time – the film presents an allegory of a rapidly changing Italy, hurling itself down the road to affluence and consumerism. Tellingly, for all of Gassman's effervescent bravado, the film ends with the tragic death of Roberto (Jean-Louis Trintignant), the poor student whom he has picked up and transported all over Italy.

But perhaps one of the best exemplifications of the *commedia all'italiana*'s ability to use bitter satire to engage critically with the moral dilemmas and social contradictions generated by the advent of the "economic miracle" was provided a year later by the veteran team of De Sica and Cesare Zavattini with their aptly-titled, *Il boom* (1963). Pushed to the edge of bankruptcy by the need to keep up the appearance of financial success, small-time Roman businessman, Giovanni Alberti, played in inimitable style by Sordi, is soon inescapably confronted with the stark and unenviable choice of either losing his family and putative friends or having to sell one of his eyes. The chilling logic of the film's conclusion exemplifies what remained a distinguishing feature of the *commedia all'italiana* with respect to comedy more generally, that is, the absence, indeed the impossibility, of a happy ending.⁴



2008, p. 50. See also his "Chronicles of a Hastened Modernisation: The Cynical Eye of the *Commedia all'italiana*", *The Italian Cinema Book*, ed. Peter Bondanella, BFI, London, 2014, pp. 188-194. The two most comprehensive histories of the genre in Italian, which also cover this classic phase, remain Enrico Giacovelli, *La commedia all'italiana: La storia, i luoghi, gli autori, gli attori, i film*, Gremese Editore, Rome, 1995, and Masolino d'Amico, *La commedia all'italiana: il cinema comico in Italia dal 1945 al 1975*, 2nd ed., il Saggiatore, Milano, 2008.

⁴ See Giacovelli, pp. 10 ff.

Divorce Italian Style

By now one of the acknowledged masters of the genre, Risi furnished a veritable rogues gallery and kaleidoscope of the perverted values of the new moral landscape in his multi-episode film *I mostri* (*The Monsters*, 1963). By this time, too, Pietro Germi, a Genovese director who had been the author of a half-dozen small neo-realist masterpieces during the immediate postwar period, had relocated himself to Sicily where he created a distinctly regional version of the new comedy with his critically acclaimed *Divorzio all'italiana* (*Divorce Italian Style*, 1961). He followed this film three years later with its quasi-sequel, *Sedotta e abbandonata* (*Seduced and Abandoned*, 1964). The genre continued to reflect – and to reflect upon – the mutating social mores of a rapidly changing Italy in films like Alessandro Blasetti's *Io, io, io e gli altri* (*Me, Me, Me and the Others*, 1965) and Risi's *Il profeta* (*The Prophet*, 1968). Although undoubtedly less incisive than many of Risi's previous efforts at bitter social satire, *Il profeta's* hermit protagonist, played predictably by Gassman, does manage to effectively lampoon the vapid revolutionary aspirations of the youth and hippie movements in Italy at the time.

As the genre began to grow stale in the early 1970s it nevertheless acquired new life in the hands of Lina Wertmuller. Having already dabbled in the genre in the mid-1960s when she had answered Ettore Scola's *Se permettete parliamo di donne* (*Let's Talk about Women*, 1964) with her *Queste volta parliamo di uomini* (*This Time Let's Talk about Men*, 1965), Wertmuller now went on to give the genre a new mordancy and something of a feminist inflection in films like *Mimì metallurgico ferito nell'onore* (*The Seduction of Mimì*, 1972), *Tutto a posto e niente in ordine* (*All Screwed Up*, 1974) and *Pasqualino Settebellezze* (*Seven Beauties*, 1975).

By general consensus, however, the genre reached its culmination in Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amati* (*We All Loved Each Other So Much*, 1974) – a perfect film which manages to present an amusing and profoundly moving history of both postwar Italy and postwar Italian cinema. As well as a sentimental history of postwar Italian society, the film also presented a touching homage to De Sica who appeared in a cameo in the film but then died at the time it was being edited. But these were now darker times in Italy with the “economic miracle” only a vague memory and the country caught in the grip of the political violence and social conflict that would lead to this period being commonly known as *gli anni di piombo* (years of lead).

With a certain insouciance Monicelli, Risi and Scola came together to present an updated rogues gallery in the portmanteau film *I nuovi mostri* (*The New Monsters*, 1977), drawing splendid performances from Gassman, Sordi and Ugo Tognazzi. Yet the final episode of the film, in which Sordi presides at the funeral of a veteran comic, presages a valediction for the entire genre.

In the same year the irreconcilable contradictions now lacerating Italian society found an echo in Monicelli's *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* (*An Average Little Man*, 1977) in which Sordi, brilliant as always, plays a lower middle-class Italian father who, following the accidental death of his son at the hands of a young radical student, turns from a mild-mannered family man (the *petit bourgeois* of the title) into a ferocious torturer and killer.

In 1980, Scola, as one of the grand old practitioners of the *commedia all'italiana*, sought to bring together a who's who of the genre in *La terrazza* (*The Terrace*, 1980) in what appeared to be an attempt to sum up the genre. However, times had definitely changed and even faithful aficionados were forced to admit that rather than a summa of the genre *La terrazza* appeared to merely write its epitaph.

Filmography

Director (32 credits)	Hide ▲
Roma, Napoli, Venezia... in un crescendo rossiniano (Documentary short)	2014
Mannaggia alla miseria! (TV Movie) (as Lina Job Wertmuller)	2009
Too Much Romance... It's Time for Stuffed Peppers	2004
Francesca and Nunziata (TV Movie)	2001
Ferdinando e Carolina	1999
The Blue Collar Worker and the Hairdresser in a Whirl of Sex and Politics	1996
The Nymph	1996
L'encyclopédie audio-visuelle (TV Series documentary) (1 episode) - Vivaldi (1993)	1993
Ciao, Professore!	1992
Saturday, Sunday and Monday	1990
12 registi per 12 città (Documentary) (segment "Bari")	1989
Up to Date	1989
Il decimo clandestino (TV Movie)	1989
Imago urbis (Documentary)	1987
Summer Night with Greek Profile, Almond Eyes and Scent of Basil	1986
Camorra (A Story of Streets, Women and Crime)	1985
Sotto... sotto	1984
A Joke of Destiny, Lying in Wait Around the Corner Like a Bandit	1983
E una domenica sera di novembre (TV Movie documentary)	1981
Blood Feud	1978
A Night Full of Rain	1978
Seven Beauties	1975
Swept Away	1974
All Screwed Up	1974
Love & Anarchy	1973
The Seduction of Mimi	1972
Il mio corpo per un poker (as Nathan Wich)	1968
Non stuzzicate la zanzara (as Lina Weltmuller)	1967
Rita la zanzara (as George H. Brown)	1966
Let's Talk About Men	1965
Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca (TV Series) (8 episodes) - Addio giornalino (1965) - Giannino in collegio (1965) - Giannino in casa Maralli (1965) - Giannino in casa Collalto (1965) - I razzi nel caminetto (1965) Show all 8 episodes	1964-1965
I basilischi	1963

Biography

Hal Erickson

Article sourced from AllMovie: <https://www.allmovie.com/artist/lina-wertm%C3%BCller-p116446>

The daughter of an aristocratic Swiss family, Lina Wertmuller harbored dreams of becoming a lawyer, but this notion fell by the wayside when she entered the Academy of Theatre in Rome in 1947. Thanks to a few valuable connections--one of her school chums was the wife of actor Marcello Mastroianni--Wertmuller found work as a performer/writer with Maria Signorelli's Puppet Troupe. She went on to function as actress, writer, set designer and publicist in a variety of theatrical and broadcast endeavors, entering films in 1962 as Federico Fellini's assistant on the set of *8 1/2*. She made her directorial debut the following year with *The Lizards*. With actor Giancarlo Giannini, a friend and co-worker from her theater days, Wertmuller formed Liberty Films, turning out a series of fascinating, iconoclastic feature films, with Giannini-invariably cast as a Chaplinesque loser--starring in all but one film (*All Screwed Up*). The first Wertmuller effort to receive an American release was *Love and Anarchy* (1973). Three years later, she scored her biggest international hit with *Seven Beauties* (1976), a trenchant, surreal, darkly comic tale of survival and compromise that earned her a Academy Award nomination for "Best Director" (the first such honor bestowed upon a woman). On the strength of *Seven Beauties*, Warners signed Wertmuller to a four-picture contract--an agreement that was abruptly cancelled after the poor box-office showing of her first Warners project, *The End of the World in Our Usual Bed in a Nightful of Rain* (1976). During her heyday, Wertmuller was effusively praised for her championing of the underdog, her staunch feminism and her anarchistic approach to her material. Once her vogue had passed in the U.S., however, she was taken to task for the "hollowness" of her vision and her lack of compassion for her characters. Undaunted, she continued making films for the European market, enjoying a brief resurgence of critical approval with one of her most atypical films, *Ciao Professore* (1994). Lina Wertmuller's most recent film, completed in 1996, bears the typically lengthy cognomen *Metalmeccanico e parrucchiera in un turbine di sesso di politica*.

Biography

Article sourced from Turner Classic Movies: <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/person/204382%7C0/Lina-Wertmuller/>

This European director's grotesque/comic treatments of weighty political, social and sexual themes earned her a sizeable cult following in the mid-1970s.

Wertmuller was born to a family of Swiss aristocrats; her father, a lawyer, dominated his family and young Lina constantly fought with him. A product of a Roman Catholic education, Wertmuller brought her domestic battles into the classroom and, as she approached college age, could boast of having been thrown out of fifteen schools. Her father wanted her to attend law school but Wertmuller decided, at the instigation of a friend, to enroll in theater school. After her graduation in 1951 she became an itinerant theatrical jack-of-all-trades, traveling through Europe as a producer of avant-garde plays, puppeteer, stage manager, set designer,

publicist and radio/TV scriptwriter. Through an acquaintance with Marcello Mastroianni, Wertmuller was introduced to Federico Fellini, who offered her a production position on his film "8 1/2" (1962).

Through her work on this production Wertmuller developed a desire to direct her own film. Enlisting the services of several technicians from "8 1/2", Wertmuller (with the financial backing of Fellini) made her first film, "The Lizards," in 1963. A second film, "Let's Talk About Men" (1965), performed decently at the box office, but when she had difficulty obtaining funding for a third film, Wertmuller returned to her work in the theater and TV.

Wertmuller re-emerged as a major film director through her friendship with actor Giancarlo Giannini, who had already established a reputation as a popular stage star. Wertmuller directed him in a TV production, "Rita the Mosquito" (1966); Giannini then recommended a play she had written, "Two Plus Two Are No Longer Four," to Franco Zeffirelli, who agreed to produce it with Giannini starring. The critical and financial success of this production was the breakthrough Wertmuller needed.

Giannini and Wertmuller now agreed to collaborate on films. Their first production, "The Seduction of Mimi," a comic examination of sexual role-playing and political maneuvering, garnered Wertmuller the best director award at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival. Their next film, "Love and Anarchy" (1973), won Giannini the best actor award at Cannes and, booked for distribution in New York in 1974, gave American critics a first look at a new directorial sensibility. Its success prompted the release of "The Seduction of Mimi" in the USA.

The release of these films created an almost instantaneous cult around Wertmuller, which was fueled by the release of "All Screwed Up" (1974) and "Let's Talk About Men" and culminated with the release of "Swept Away" (1974) and "Seven Beauties" (1975). These films combined heavy-handed caricature with extended, often violent, political and sexual debate. Wertmuller's satirical thrust was so broad that both feminists and anti-feminists, liberals and conservatives flocked to her films. On the whole, however, Wertmuller's women characters were treated with contempt--from the shrill, ultra-chic Mariangela Melato in "Swept Away" and "Summer Night" (1986) to the Felliniesque, wide-angle exaggerations of "The Seduction of Mimi" and "Seven Beauties." Her male characters were not much more sympathetic, but their broad, macho posturing and chauvinism was tempered by the Chaplinesque pathos of Giannini's performances--particularly his pathologically comic Pasqualino in "Seven Beauties."

After "Seven Beauties," Wertmuller's reputation took a sharp downward turn. Her first American film, "The End of the World in Our Usual Bed in a Night Full of Rain" (1978), was both a critical and financial flop and her subsequent, sporadic productions have failed to recapture her audience.

LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



Women Film Directors
Fall 2017

Sophia Coppola
b.1971

Lost In Translation
2003

Lost in Translation

Roger Ebert • August 4, 2010

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-lost-in-translation-2003>



Bill Murray's acting in Sofia Coppola's "Lost in Translation" is surely one of the most exquisitely controlled performances in recent movies. Without it, the film could be unwatchable. With it, I can't take my eyes away. Not for a second, not for a frame, does his focus relax, and yet it seems effortless. It's sometimes said of an actor that we can't see him acting. I can't even see him *not* acting. He seems to be existing, merely existing, in the situation created for him by Sofia Coppola.

Is he "playing himself"? I've known Murray since his days at Second City. He married the sister of a girl I was dating. We were never friends, I have no personal insights, but I can fairly say I saw how he behaved in small informal groups of friends, and it wasn't like Bob Harris, his character in the movie. Yes, he likes to remain low key. Yes, dryness and understatement come naturally to him. Sharing a stage at Second City with John Belushi, he was a glider in contrast to the kamikaze pilot. He isn't a one-note actor. He does anger, fear, love, whatever, and broad comedy. But what he does in "Lost in Translation" shows as much of a reach as if he were playing Henry Higgins. He allows the film to be as great as Coppola dreamed of it, in the way she intended, and few directors are so fortunate.

She has one objective: She wants to show two people lonely in vast foreign Tokyo and coming to the mutual realization that their lives are stuck. Perhaps what they're looking for is the same thing I've heard we seek in marriage: A witness. Coppola wants to get that note right. There isn't a viewer who doesn't expect Bob Harris and Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) to end up in love, or having sex, or whatever. We've met Charlotte's husband John (Giovanni Ribisi). We expect him to return unexpectedly from his photo shoot and surprise them together. These expectations have been sculpted, one chip of Hollywood's chisel after another, in tens of thousands of films. The last thing we expect is... what would probably actually happen. They share loneliness.

One of the strengths of Coppola's screenplay is that her people and everything they do are believable. Unlike the characters in most movies, they don't quickly sense they belong together, and they don't immediately *want* to be together. Coppola keeps them apart for a noticeably long time. They don't know they're the Girl and the Boy. They don't have a Meet Cute. We grow to know them separately.

We understand Charlotte loves her husband, and we understand how he wounds her, and why she cries on the phone. There's no possibility he will cheat on her with the Other Woman, the ditzy "star" Kelly, played by Anna Faris. John is simply a moth fluttering around her fame. That's what hurts Charlotte; he leaves her alone in the hotel for silly reasons that betray him as callow. We understand that Bob loves his wife and especially his children at home in America, but after years and years he knows and says that marriage and children are "hard." So they are. We know that. Few movie characters know it in the sense he means.

After they start talking, Johansson is instinctive in striking the right note of tentative friendliness. She knows Bob is a star, but doesn't care. Earlier their eyes met in the kind of telepathic sympathy strangers share when they know they're thinking the same thing about something happening in a room. Now they can't sleep and it's in the middle of the night in a hotel bar. She isn't flirting, and she isn't not flirting. He isn't flirting. He's composed and detached. He doesn't give away one hint of emotion. Without making it a big deal, he's almost studiously proper, as if making it clear he's *not* coming on to her. Of course he finds her attractive. He did when he saw her in the elevator and she didn't notice him. Or are we simply assuming he'd feel the same way we'd feel? Maybe he noticed her because they were the two tallest people in the elevator.

I can't tell you how many people have told me that just don't get "Lost in Translation." They want to know what it's about. They complain "nothing happens." They've been trained by movies that tell them where to look and what to feel, in stories that have a beginning, a middle and an end. "Lost in Translation" offers an experience in the exercise of empathy. The characters empathize with each other (*that's* what it's about), and we can empathize with them going through that process. It's not a question of reading our own emotions into Murray's blank slate. The slate isn't blank. It's on hold. He doesn't choose to wear his heart on his sleeve for Charlotte, and he doesn't choose to make a move. But he is very lonely and not without sympathy for her. She would plausibly have sex with him, casually, to be "nice," and because she's mad at her husband and it might be fun. But she doesn't know as he does that if you cheat it shouldn't be with someone it would make a difference to.

There is wonderful comedy in the film, involving the ad agency's photo shoot for the Suntory Scotch commercial and Bob's guest shot on the "Japanese Johnny Carson." But Coppola remains firmly grounded in reality. The Japanese director seems to be spouting hysterical nonsense until you find a translation online and understand what he's saying and why. He's not without humor. The translator seems to be simplifying, but now we understand what she's doing. There's nothing implausible about the scene. Anyone who watches Japanese TV, even via YouTube, knows the TV show is straight from life. Notice the microscopic look Murray gives the camera to signal "just kidding."

What is lost in translation? John understands nothing of what Charlotte says or feels, nor does he understand how he's behaving. (Ribisi's acting in the scene where he rushes out saying he loves her is remorselessly exact). Bob's wife and assistant don't understand how desperately indifferent he is to the carpet

samples. And so on. What does get translated, finally, is what Bob and Charlotte are really thinking. The whole movie is about that act of translation taking place.

The cinematography by Lance Acord and editing by Sarah Flack make no attempt to underline points or nudge us. It permits us to regard. It is content to allow a moment to complete itself. Acord often frames Charlotte in a big window with Tokyo remotely below. She feels young, alone and exposed. He often shows Bob inscrutably looking straight ahead (not at the camera; not at anything). He feels older, tired, patient, not exposed because he has a surer sense of who he is. That's what I read into the shots. What do you get? When he brings them together they are still apart, and there is more truth in a little finger touching the side of a foot than a sex scene.

Catherine Lambert, who plays the singer in the hotel bar, is every pretty good lounge act in the world. It's more or less a foregone conclusion that they will sleep with one another. It won't mean anything to either one of them. When Charlotte discovers the singer is in Bob's room, she's startled but not angry or heartbroken. Sex wasn't what she and Bob were about, and he made that clear. When they meet next, they step carefully around that glitch and resume their deeper communication.

So much has been written about those few words at the end that Bob whispers into Charlottes' ear. We can't hear them. They seem meaningful for both of them. Coppola said she didn't know. It wasn't scripted. Advanced sound engineering has been used to produce a fuzzy enhancement. Harry Caul of "The Conversation" would be proud of it, but it's entirely irrelevant. Those words weren't for our ears. Coppola (1) didn't write the dialog, (2) didn't intentionally record the dialogue, and (3) was happy to release the movie that way, so we *cannot* hear. Why must we know? Do we need closure? This isn't a closure kind of movie. We get all we need in simply knowing they share a moment private to them, and *seeing* that it contains something true before they part forever.

Filmography

Director (12 credits)	Hide 
La Traviata	2017
The Beguiled (directed by)	2017
A Very Murray Christmas (TV Special)	2015
The Bling Ring	2013
Somewhere	2010
Marie Antoinette	2006
VOID (Video Overview in Deceleration) (Video) (segment "This Here Giraffe")	2005
Lost in Translation	2003
Un matin partout dans le monde (TV Short)	2000
The Virgin Suicides	1999
Lick the Star (Short)	1998
Bed, Bath and Beyond (Short)	1996

Sofia Coppola Discusses ‘Lost in Translation’ on Its 10th Anniversary

Marlow Stern • September 12, 2013

Article sourced from The Daily Beast: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/sofia-coppola-discusses-lost-in-translation-on-its-10th-anniversary>



There are a handful of films that have carved out prime real estate in the hearts of millennials. During one of your *many* aimless trips to the mall, you may have nabbed the movie’s poster from f.y.e. to grace the wall of your dorm room or moseyed over to Tower Records to cop the soundtrack. You may have even taken your fandom on the road, annoying the rest of your family mid-vacation with eager observations like “Oh, this is the place where _____ kissed!”

Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation*, which was released theatrically on Sept. 12, 2003, is one of those films.

Bill Murray plays Bob Harris, an aging American actor who is in Tokyo to shoot a whiskey commercial, for which he’s being paid \$2 million. Bob isn’t happy. His career is on the downslope, and the fire in his marriage has long been out. Also in Tokyo is Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson), a young college graduate whose hipster husband (Giovanni Ribisi) is a celebrity photographer on assignment in the city. Much to her chagrin, he seems more interested in palling around with a young American actress, Kelly (Anna Faris), than spending time with her.

The two marooned Americans keep running into each other at night in the hotel bar, and soon a relationship begins to form. In each other, these two lost souls have found exactly what they’d been missing, and they bust out of their hotel-prison to explore the vibrancy of Tokyo. Many millennials, in particular, connected with *Lost in Translation*’s themes of loneliness and ennui, and the movie grossed \$120 million worldwide—against a budget of just \$4 million—and was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Director, and Best Original Screenplay, with Coppola winning the latter.

In honor of the 10th anniversary of the movie, Coppola spoke to The Daily Beast about the making of the film, her favorite memories of hanging out with Bill Murray in Tokyo, and much more.

Where did you come up with the idea for *Lost in Translation*?

I spent a lot of time in Tokyo in my 20s. I had a little clothing company with a friend, so we went there a few times a year. I was living in L.A. at the time, and I always thought about the little cultural differences between the two places. I put a lot of things in that really happened. And since I was in my 20s and didn't really know what I wanted to be doing, I think it's my most personal movie because it's about what I was going through at the time. And then Bill Murray, my fantasy hero, just swooped in.

I know how hard it is to even try and nab Bill for an interview—going through his lawyer, etc.—so how did you corral him?

When I was writing it I was picturing him and he really inspired it, and I wasn't going to make the movie without him, so I was determined to convince him. I spent about a year trying to track him down and was asking random people who knew him through golf. I was on a mission. And he didn't have an agent at that time, so he was very elusive. I showed my friend Mitch Glazer, who's a writer, a *very* early version of the script, and he thought it had something and liked that I saw Bill in that way, so he helped introduce us. We went to Japan without knowing if Bill was going to show up—he wouldn't even tell us what flight he was on because he's so elusive—so it was nerve-racking, but he showed up right before we started shooting.

Also, with Scarlett, she was a relatively green actor at the time. How did you arrive at her, and what made you feel she and Murray would have such great chemistry together?

I just liked her from that movie *Manny & Lo*, and she was 17, but I had this idea of her being this young Lauren Bacall-type girl. I loved her low voice. You can't really gauge the chemistry unless you do tests before you start shooting, and I don't think they even met before we did, so I just picked someone I liked and hoped that it worked. And Bill is *so* lovable.

One of the film's many accomplishments is that, despite the big age difference, the relationship between Bob and Charlotte doesn't come off as creepy.

I'm glad! I think it's a lot to do with the casting. There were certain actors that people mentioned for the Bill part, and if they were lying in bed, that could have been creepy, but it's just something about how Bill is that it never came off lecherous. Maybe because he's such a kid.

How autobiographical is the story? There have been all the rumors that Giovanni Ribisi's character is based on your husband at the time, Spike Jonze, and that Anna Faris's character is based on Cameron Diaz.

The character of the actress was based on a bunch of people—just that *type*. I could probably name eight people that she was based on, just that bubbly, extroverted blonde that you see on talk shows. It was the opposite of the Scarlett character, where I was feeling very introverted and didn't know what I was doing. It was just a certain

actress type that I was hanging around sometimes. It wasn't a slight at anyone in particular. But the character of the husband, I was just married and trying to figure it out, so that relationship was based on what I was going through at the time.

The opening shot of Scarlett lying on the bed in her underwear is one of the film's great images. What inspired that shot?

There's a painter called John Kacere who does paintings of girls in different underwear, so it's taken from one of his paintings. When I started the movie, I had a reference book of different images that came to mind with the movie. I always collect reference pictures to make a book that I can show, and they were just snapshots around Tokyo, looking out the taxi and seeing neon lights going by, and I used to stay at the Park Hyatt Tokyo, so there were pictures of the view from the hotel bar. And the redheaded singer [in the film] was actually a singer I saw performing at the Park Hyatt Tokyo, and we got the manager to track her down.

One hilarious moment is the "lip my stocking!" scene with Bob and the Japanese woman in the hotel room. Where did that come from?

That came from a story of a friend of mine who was working in Japan and had this story of, I don't know if it was a prostitute or a co-worker, and thought she wanted some bondage thing, but it was a misunderstanding. And I was looking for stories of misunderstandings.

The "Suntory Time" commercial shoot is so hilarious. I read that it was based on a real-life commercial that your father shot with Kurosawa?

Yeah. My dad and Kurosawa did a Suntory commercial which they shot at our house in San Francisco. But going to Japan, you'd always see ads of people like Kevin Costner or someone promoting coffee. It's this heightened, Japanese idea of Western culture. And I was cracking up the whole time during that shoot. That was a real photographer, and I was sitting with the photographer and I would say things to him and he would repeat it to Bill, so he was yelling things like, "Rat pack!" at Bill, and Bill would respond. And Bill improvised that entire scene.

Any favorite memories of hanging with Bill during the making of *Lost in Translation*?

He's just so much fun. I remember he would throw the hotel housekeeper lady over his shoulder and walk around with her. He was so funny and so fun.

Bill's been known to crash the occasional karaoke party. Did you know about his love of karaoke before making him sing it in the movie?

I knew he sang because I remember that character on *SNL* of the lounge singer, and we all went out with the crew and would sing karaoke. That was definitely a highlight. I feel like Bill was kind of a classic rock guy, but I can't remember what songs we did!

I also heard that the crew was almost arrested a couple of times for filming in public in Tokyo—

We didn't have permits and would just go into the subway or on the street, and I think there was some Yakuza mix-up at some point. Apparently, we were on some Yakuza territory that we didn't know about. That shot where Scarlett is crossing the street, there was a Starbucks upstairs so we just snuck up there, bought a coffee, and shot it from above. Nobody seemed to notice. And we got shut down a few times on the street but just moved on.

Problems with the cops and the Yakuza aside, what was toughest scene for you to film?

The scene where [Bill and Scarlett] are lying in bed talking and the TV is on, it's just really intimate. That was just off. I don't know if they just weren't in a good mood, but they weren't getting along and it wasn't going well. So we just stopped and tried again the next day. I just remember it being a bit tense, but it's just such an intimate moment. And we shot the film in 27 days and it was super low budget, so the whole thing was tough, and there was a language barrier with the crew and cultural misunderstandings there as well. It was a messy adventure, but it was fun.

The film has a great soundtrack, too. It was the first time many Americans had heard Phoenix.

I always liked Phoenix, but they weren't really known here until recently. They were just songs I liked and had been listening to, and Brian Reitzell would help me out and make me Tokyo dream-pop mixes. Phoenix's "Too Young," just the lyrics and the whole feeling of it, I loved it for that scene. Thomas [Mars, lead singer of Phoenix] did a song with Air called "Playground Love" that was in *The Virgin Suicides*, and he performed it with them at Sundance, so we met a long time ago. But he lived in France, so I didn't get to know him until I lived in France for *Marie Antoinette*.

I feel like this film inspired a generation of young women to visit Japan. Are you a VIP in Japan now for life?

That's so funny. Probably the hardest thing was convincing the Park Hyatt hotel to let us shoot a movie there, because they didn't want a movie shot there. They would only let us shoot in the hallways and the communal places at 3 or 4 in the morning, so we didn't disturb any guests. We were always sneaking around the hotel. But now I've heard they have *Lost in Translation* tours there. I should go back and stay at the hotel!

I heard that the kiss at the end between Bill and Scarlett was sprung on her, and she didn't know it was coming.

It was always meant to be this tender goodbye where they both knew that they had touched each other in some way. And I remember sometimes he would always spring things on her, and it was fun to get her reaction.

Is the statute of limitations up on what Bill whispers to Scarlett at the end?

No, I still love that Bill says it's between them!

Do you think Bob and Charlotte would ever cross paths again?

That's so funny...I've never thought about that! I have different fantasies of what would happen to them, but I'd like people to form their own.

***Lost in Translation* gained such a huge cult following. Why do you think it's held up so well?**

For me, I was just writing these little notes about stuff that happened to me, or what I thought, and I didn't think anyone was going to be interested, so it's really a surprise to me that that many people have seen it and that it did as well as it did. I felt like it was really indulgent, so yeah, it was a surprise. And it's still surprising to me.

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Women Film Directors
Fall 2017

Agnieszka Holland
b. 1948

Europa Europa
1991

MOVIE REVIEW : 'Europa Europa': True Tale of Holocaust Survival

PETER RAINER • July 26, 1991

Article sourced from Los Angeles Times: http://articles.latimes.com/1991-07-26/entertainment/ca-170_1_europa-europa

Solomon Perel grew up in Germany as the fourth child in a Jewish family. The first moments of "Europa Europa"--Agnieszka Holland's gruesomely comic movie set between 1938 and 1945 and based on Perel's autobiography--recount the boy's circumcision, an event he claims to remember. (It opens today at the Park.)

Certainly as his story develops, his circumcision becomes the one defining, unalterable event in his life. No matter how hard he tries to rearrange his identity to save himself from the Nazis, the brute physical fact of that circumcision keeps tripping him up, taunting his efforts at impersonation.

It's an incredible story, as only true stories can be. Separated from his family and on the run from the Nazis, Solly, through a chain of remarkable happenstance, becomes first a model Soviet student in an orphanage devoted to Stalinist indoctrination and then a model Hitler Youth.

For nearly seven years Solly (Marco Hofschneider) lives in a state of constant alert. He is like an actor who is forever primed for performance; his survival instincts are so heightened that he finds himself merging with the characters he's playing. Solly's double life is a nightmarish joke: In one of the film's key sequences, he sobs real tears when he and his fellow Hitler Youth receive the news that the Nazis have been defeated at Stalingrad.

Holland lays Solly's story out without any fuss or editorializing. He is perceived without blinkers, as someone who did what he had to do to survive. The incidents bounce along so rapidly that we don't have time to be judgmental; we're too busy gasping at the twists and turns in Solly's odyssey. We're constantly reminded of what is uppermost in his mind--that the only alternative to his impersonations is death.

Holland's neutral tone takes some getting used to, but it turns out to be a remarkably judicious approach to such difficult material. She allows the story to emerge in all its ghastly permutations.

Solly's survival owes a lot to luck but it also derives from his genius for locating the sympathy in people. In the course of the film, he puts his life in danger by opening up to few select Germans about his Jewishness, and his instincts prove correct--these people don't betray him.

What's remarkable about Solly is that he makes these life-or-death determinations almost instantaneously, as if they had completely bypassed his thought processes. Marco Hofschneider is excellent casting for the role. His face has an avid handsomeness untroubled by the furrows of thought; it's an emblematic handsomeness, which is perhaps why Solly succeeds so well in the anonymous, placard-filled atmosphere of the indoctrination camps. When a Nazi teacher measures Solly's skull with calipers in order to show him off before his class as having the requisite "Aryan" dimensions, the film (rated R for nudity) hits a black comic high note.

Solly's stirrings of pride at his success are all jumbled up with his sexual stirrings. He has a dalliance with Leni (Julie Delpy), a young German girl who, unbeknown to Solly, wants to conceive a child for the Fuehrer. He can't consummate the relationship because his circumcised state would give him away, and it tears him apart.

If Solly had been an Orthodox Jew, his predicament would have been short-lived. But because he is not devout, he survives, and at the end of the movie we see the real Solomon Perel. At 65, living in Israel since the war, he faces us without accusation. He looks bewildered still, as if he didn't know what to make of the fact that he survived. This man whose family was almost entirely wiped out must feel like he's the recipient of a great cosmic joke, with his survival as the punch line. "Europa Europa" does justice to the joke.

Partial Filmography

- Grzech Boga (Jesus Christ's Sin, 1970)
- Wieczór u Abdona (Evening at Abdon's, 1975)
- Obrazki z życia: dziewczyna i "Akwarius" (Pictures from Life: A Girl and Aquarius, 1975)
- Aktorzy prowincjonalni (Provincial Actors, 1978, International Critics Prize at Cannes Film Festival)
- Gorączka (Fever, 1980)
- Bittere Ernte (Angry Harvest, 1985, Germany, Academy Award nominee for the best foreign language film)
- To Kill a Priest (1988)
- Europa, Europa (1990, Academy Award nominee for the best screenplay)
- Olivier, Olivier (1992)
- The Secret Garden (1993)
- Total Eclipse (1995)
- Washington Square (1997)
- The Third Miracle (1999)
- Shot in the Heart (2001)
- Golden Dreams (documentary, 2001)
- Julie Walking Home (2002)
- Copying Beethoven (2005)
- Ekipa (2007)
- Janosik. Prawdziwa historia (2009)
- In Darkness (2011) (nominee for Best Foreign Language Film award at the 84th Academy Awards as Polish entry)
- Rosemary's Baby (2014)
- Spoor (2017)

A Life Stranger Than the Movie, 'Europa, Europa,' Based on It

Stephen Engelberg • February 19, 1992

Article sourced from *New York Times*:

<http://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/19/movies/a-life-stranger-than-the-movie-europa-europa-based-on-it.html>

LODZ, Poland— The truth of Solomon Perel's life is even stranger than the movie. Mr. Perel was the inspiration for the film "Europa, Europa," the tale of a young German Jew trapped by the shifting front lines of World War II who passes himself off as Aryan and ends up in the Hitler Youth.

The film version is bizarre enough. It opens with the deportation of a Jewish family to Poland in 1936. Three years later, the hero flees east from the advancing German Army, takes refuge in a school for young Communists in the Soviet Union, learns Russian and the Marxist-Leninist catechism.

Captured by the Germans in 1941, he poses as an ethnic German born in Russia, becomes a translator for a German Army unit, is adopted by its commander as his son and eventually returns to Germany for training at a Hitler Youth barracks.

All these events, Mr. Perel said in a recent interview, are accurate depictions of his own experiences. But the film ends in 1945. After the war Mr. Perel moved to Israel, where he opened a zipper factory, and in 1987, he attended the reunion of the Wehrmacht unit that unknowingly adopted him as its mascot.

During a train ride to Lodz for the premiere of "Europa, Europa" in that city, Mr. Perel, who assumed the name Josef Jupp during his years in the German ranks, offhandedly recounted yet another surreal turn in his life. A compact man whose bald pate is ringed by an unruly shock of white hair, Mr. Perel spoke in fluent Polish about that experience: "They sent out an invitation card to all the veterans. It said: 'We also invite our translator, Jupp.' They all came with their wives to see this miracle. Really, it was all quite nice." Meeting a Teacher

The movie, he said, also doesn't cover his meeting shortly after the war with one of the teachers from the Hitler Youth academy. In the movie, this teacher calls young Perel/Jupp to the front of the class to explain why Jews are genetically inferior. Jupp parrots the Nazis' pseudoscientific claptrap and is rewarded with compliments from the teacher about his Aryan features.

After the war, Mr. Perel said, he met the teacher again, quite by chance, and disclosed his true identity. "I must say, sir, you made a mistake." I said to him. "That's not correct, what you said about me. I'm Jewish." At first his face turned white, like paper, then the colors returned, like a rainbow. He said: "Never mind, I knew all along, but I didn't want to make trouble."

Mr. Perel acknowledged that a few of the scenes in "Europa, Europa" amount to "poetic freedom." The movie's final moments, when Mr. Perel in his Nazi uniform is saved from death at the hands of Russian soldiers because his long-lost brother coincidentally is on the scene, did not actually happen. Mr. Perel said he found his brother in the Dachau concentration camp after the war.

But he passionately defends the Polish director, Agnieszka Holland, for producing a movie that is true to the spirit of his wartime experiences. Mr. Perel said he worked closely with Ms. Holland on its filming on location in Poland. No Oscar Nomination

"Europa, Europa" has been at the center of a bitter dispute over a German film committee's decision not to nominate it for an Academy Award. The controversy intensified when the movie won the Golden Globe Award from Los Angeles film critics. A group of prominent German film makers organized their own protest.

The film, which has opened in Berlin, has met with a perplexing response in Germany. Der Spiegel called the main character "opportunistic and cynical," while a radio reporter questioned his morality during a round-table discussion.

"She asked about morality," Mr. Perel recalled. "What is there in this situation about morality? You think only about how to survive. If I had shot others, that would be different. When the Russian Army came near Berlin and the SS officers took off their uniforms and changed into the clothes of death camp inmates, now that was immoral."

Mr. Perel, who unquestionably survived the war on the strength of his icy nerve, modestly casts himself more as Everyman than hero. All of his elaborate deceptions, he insisted, were the simple consequence of a moment in 1941 when German Army soldiers searched and checked the papers of Russian refugees, looking for Jews. 'I Am Volksdeutsche'

"I had an instinct for survival," he said. "I hid my documents in a hole in the ground I made with my shoe. The documents said I was a Jew, my name is Solomon. I heard the rumors that the Germans weren't going to take Jews to camps, that they would liquidate them on the spot. I knew that if they realized I was a Jew I was certainly dead.

"The soldier, he was wearing a belt buckle that said 'God is with us.' At that moment, I thought about God. I froze. This is the moment in the movie when the sun shines through the clouds. He searched my clothes, and then this small miracle. As soon as he touched me, my paralysis ended. I could speak. I said strongly in German, 'I am Volksdeutsche.'

"It was the single moment when I thought about what to say. After that, everything that happened was inevitable. That was the important moment, my answer, and what came after was a consequence. I decided my future, and after I felt like I was an extra in my own life."

At a meeting with high school students in Lodz, Mr. Perel was treated like a returning celebrity. The crowd warmed to their guest as he slipped into Polish usage common in the prewar period when he learned the language. Several of the students afterward promised to tend the grave of Mr. Perel's father in Lodz's Jewish cemetery. Question of God's Will

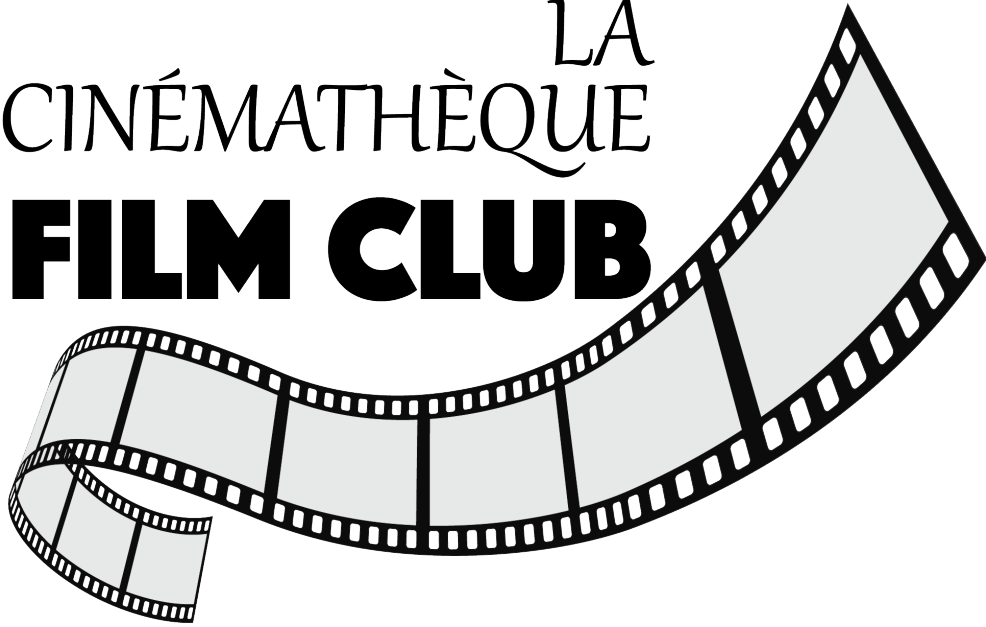
Struggling to come to grips with a seemingly incomprehensible set of experiences, several of the teachers asked Mr. Perel whether he saw it all as "God's will." The question implied an oft-heard interpretation of the Holocaust in Poland, a country steeped in Roman Catholic theology.

At first, Mr. Perel politely deflected the query, but when it came up again, he told a wrenching story.

During the Christmas period of 1943, Mr. Perel said, he returned to Lodz from Germany. Wearing his Hitler Youth uniform, he slept for 12 nights in the main train station, riding the city tram over and over through the Jewish ghetto. The tram was sealed to prevent any contact between Jews and local Poles. Each day, Mr. Perel said, he looked up at the apartment windows, hoping against hope that his mother would catch a glimpse of him in his uniform and see he was safe.

"Passing through this ghetto, surrounded by Germans and seeing all the Germans look through the windows at the awful landscape, like people passing through a big garden with flowers, I asked, 'Oh, God, why did you accept this?' It was then, in the Lodz Jewish ghetto, that I lost contact with God."

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Women Film Directors
Fall 2017

Deniz Gamze Ergüven
b. 1978

Mustang
2015

Deniz Gamze Ergüven: ‘For women in Turkey it’s like the middle ages’

Rachel Cooke • 15 May 2016

Article sourced from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/15/deniz-gamze-erguven-mustang-turkey-interview-rachel-cooke>

The Turkish director talks about her Oscar-nominated film *Mustang* – and why reaction to it at home made her take her talents elsewhere

Not too long after the film *Mustang* was released in Turkey last October, its director and co-writer, Deniz Gamze Ergüven, was interviewed by the



Nobel prize-winning writer Orhan Pamuk. “He was curious about how I’d lived through its reception,” she says, with a characteristically wide-eyed smile. “Well, I was gloomy. I explained how I’d been attacked. I’d had some very aggressive, negative critiques there [in Turkey], the kind of thing I hadn’t received anywhere else. So I loved his response. First of all, he said that lots of people around him had seen it, and liked it. Then he said: ‘But you *will* be attacked.’ And he explained why. After all, he knows: he’s had plenty of violent criticism himself. ‘Don’t get depressed,’ he told me. What he was saying was: keep going.”

Ergüven is certainly doing that. *Mustang*, nominated for best foreign language film at the 2015 Oscars and the winner of four César awards in France, has opened countless new doors for its director and, as a result, her appetite for work is more voracious than ever. Even so, she finds it hard to imagine working in Turkey again.



Her second feature, which she is shortly to start shooting, is an English-language picture set in Los Angeles at the time of the 1992 riots. “I detested the response [to *Mustang*] in Turkey, and so I withdrew from it.”

Not that such a turning away is a new experience for her: “My father was a diplomat in the 80s, at a time when there were many assassinations, when the country had problems with every one of its neighbours, when there was a permanent sense of conflict. Every once in a while, I do feel like taking a break and going to the other side of the world.”

The extraordinary *Mustang* is set in rural Turkey. It tells the story of five orphaned sisters, who live with their grandmother in a large and remote house. The family is not poor, but it is conservative, and when the girls are seen by neighbours splashing around in the sea on the shoulders of a group of local boys – the gossip is that they have been “pleasuring themselves” on the boys – an uncle steps in, telling his mother (the girls’ grandmother) that things must change. The family’s respectability is at stake.

The sisters, having first been beaten for their misdemeanour, are removed from school, and thereafter kept like prisoners at home, where they are taught to cook and to sew the frumpish “shit-coloured” clothes with which they must now cover their bodies. One by one, it seems, they are to be married off, whether they like it or not. The older girls can do little to resist. But Lale, the youngest, is rebellious and courageous and increasingly determined not to submit. Some critics have likened the film, with its dream-like intensity and mostly female cast, to Sophia Coppola’s *The Virgin Suicides*. Its director, though, thinks it’s more like *Escape from Alcatraz* – with frocks.

Where did it come from, this story? Ergüven, talking from her home in Paris, says she had long had an abstract desire to tackle the question of what it is to be a woman in Turkey. “But it only became concrete when one of my cousins married. Everything that happened around the wedding was beautiful, synergetic, especially the vividness of the young Turkish people who were present at the celebrations.”

Suddenly, the film’s opening section came to her, an image of carefree, innocent girls perched laughingly on the shoulders of boys: a scene taken from life. “I’m the youngest in a family in which two generations are constituted of girls, so there are many little details that are true. There are no forced marriages in my family, but we always had conservative figures. There was one father-in-law who was very conservative: an unmarried couple could not enter his house, and I never, ever told him I had a boyfriend – or not until I was 56. [She laughs: she is 37.] The little scandal in the film did take place in my family, albeit not as violently. The girls being beaten in order of age: that was something that happened in my mother’s generation.”

What, then, does her family make of her film? “People’s relationship with fiction and reality and the connection between the two is interesting, and surprising. In my generation, every girl knows what I am talking about. But in my mother’s generation, they regard it as fiction. There are some things they just can’t see, perhaps because they have no distance.”

Five of the keys to *Mustang*’s success are Güneş Şensoy, Doğa Doğuşlu, Elit Işcan, Tuğba Sun Guroğlu, and İlayda Akdoğan – the girls who play the sisters – only one of whom had ever acted before. “It took us nine months to cast. I saw Elit, the only one who’d acted before, straight away. I found Tuğba in an airport, and then the others auditioned. I was indifferent to training, and to experience. I was looking for certain qualities. They had to be great listeners, and I had to see both the scope of their imagination, and the limits of it. I needed to know the capacity of their ability to dive into a scene, and stay in it for a long time.

“After they were cast, we did two boot camps: one to give them acting tools, and the other to immerse them in the story. We spoke about the backstory, about what happened between scenes, and we played games and did other exercises. It was very playful. It was about group building. And it worked. The solidarity between them was amazing, the way they protected each other. They became one body with five heads: a single rebellious entity.”

Did she ever worry for them? She must have known the film would attract heat in Turkey. “Yes. The one time I was really unhappy, we’d had threats that involved them. But they were proud of what they were doing, and I never had the impression we were stealing from them. On the contrary. There are directors who steal something from [young] actors, and it is problematic. What Larry Clark [the director of the controversial *Kids*] does upsets me. But we always had their consent, and that of their parents.”

Mustang's international success has brought with it some extraordinary experiences for its young stars. Ergüven wasn't able, in spite of her best efforts, to bag them tickets for the Oscars (they had to stay back at the hotel). But at least they managed to get themselves photographed with George Clooney at the Toronto film festival.



Ergüven was born in Ankara, but when she was six months old she moved to Paris with her father, a diplomat, where she remained for the next nine years. “Then we went back to Turkey, after which there were a few years that were extremely important: me and my sister were out on the streets all the time, window-breaking creatures, hardened criminals.” She grins. “We went back to live in France later, but we spent all our holidays and many weekends in Turkey. My family life was completely Turkish.”

She studied literature and African studies at university, after which she enrolled at film school in Paris, one of only two women in her class (the other was *Mustang*'s co-writer, Alice Winocour).

Is it harder to get a movie made, even in France where the film industry is still subsidised, if you're a woman? “I never feel like complaining about it but, yes, I think it is. There is something animal in the way we evaluate people. And I have a soft voice, and I wear clothes with flowers on, and heels, and I come across as fragile, even if that is not the case at all. If I had the body and the voice of an alpha male, it would be easier. It took nine years from leaving film school until *Mustang* was screened at Cannes, and those years were demoralising. It's difficult not to be affected. You work for the minimum, to have your roof and four walls, so you can write. It's not super fun. But it's more than demoralising. I think [she jabs at her forearm] I took my ego out, literally. It's gone. After a while, I was almost stammering, as if my voice had disappeared.”

What about the awards? Didn't her ego rampage straight back? “Not really. My mother taught me good lessons. You have to keep your core intact, unmoved, regardless of whether you are praised or criticised.” Still, she has the impression that she has “passed through the glass in the mirror” at last. Things that were impossible for years are now possible: “Actors are actually coming to me.”

Meanwhile, she worries for Turkey, increasingly autocratic under its present leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. “The one good thing is that Turkey was a democracy – yes, you can say it in the past tense now. It remains [as a result] extremely vigorous. The population is youthful, and literally simmering. Its cross-currents are moving deeply. You can feel that it will go in one direction, or another. The current government doesn't tolerate any kind of criticism, not even the smallest joke. People come and go, and he [Erdoğan] will go eventually, too. But the problem is what he's doing to the fabric of the country. He's polarising, making people hate each other. We were always a heterogeneous country, but we lived together in peace. Now he's attacking that. His corruption has been revealed, but he hits back harder and harder, repeating as a mantra absolute lies, and eventually people might start believing him. He's messing with people's minds.”

The situation for women in Turkey is, she believes, now very grave, for which reason she is happy for her film to be regarded as a contribution to the increasingly muscular and conflicted debate surrounding their rights, their freedom. “The way he [Erdoğan] speaks: he makes them [women] fragile with his messages, whether

subliminal or explicit. There is a certain way, he says, of being a woman: you have to be a mother and at home, and that's all. When you see a man, you should blush and look down. It's like something from the middle ages. The subtext is that women are only seen as sexual. That's why they must cover every inch of their skin. This is dangerous because it generates more violence against them, it makes it OK for men to act like assailants. Rapes happen everywhere, but in Turkey women come out on to the streets to protest because such attacks only seem to echo what the government is saying.”



This, she notes, is exactly what happened last year, after the murder of Özgücan Aslan, a university student who was murdered in Mersin after attempting to resist rape by a minibus driver, his father and his friend; protesters were furious at what they saw as the government's inadequate response to the crime, and to its supposed normalisation of rape, particularly with regard to non-conservative women. Astonishingly, Erdoğan in turn attacked protesters for their behaviour; some of them, un-Islamically, had been seen dancing.

Ergüven's voice as we discuss all this is light, but somehow it is steely, too, her smile a distraction. My guess is that she will one day make another film in Turkey. For all her watchfulness behind the camera, she is not, I think, one of life's bystanders. When her country calls – as it did during the Gezi Park protests of 2013 – she tends to come running. “Film is my tool,” she says, more firmly now. “It's how I switch people's minds on to something. It's how I participate.”

Mustang Filmmaker Deniz Gamze Ergüven on Women in Film and Her Oscar-Nominated Feminist Escape Movie

Lindsay Zoladz • February 22, 2016

Article sourced from Vulture: <http://www.vulture.com/2016/02/conversation-mustang-director-deniz-gamze-erguven.html>

In the beautiful and bracing film *Mustang*, the trouble begins with a chicken fight. Five teen- and tweenage Turkish sisters take the long way home after the last day of school, goof off with some male classmates against the spectacular cerulean backdrop of the Black Sea, and eventually end up in the water indulging in that childhood pool game, sitting atop the boys' shoulders and trying to knock one another off. By the time the girls get home, a nosy neighbor has already told their grandmother about it, and she interprets their game as an act of sexual deviance. "My granddaughters!" she cries, "Pleasuring themselves on boys' necks!"

So she locks them up. She takes them out of school, gives them a uniform of frumpy, "shit-colored" dresses, and turns the house into what the youngest and most spirited sister, Lale, calls "a wife factory." The plan is to marry them off one by one, to once again convince the neighborhood that they are Good, Respectable Girls — but naturally, the sisters have other plans. *Mustang* is at once feisty, poetic, hilarious, and gut-wrenching. It's like a feminist *400 Blows*, or if the punk teens from *We Are the Best!* were cast in a remake of *The Great Escape*.

It's also cleaning up during awards season. The day before I get 37-year-old director Deniz Gamze Ergüven on the phone, it's announced that *Mustang* has received a pack-leading nine nominations for the César Awards (French film's highest honor), and that's not to mention its Golden Globe nod or its Oscar nomination in the hotly competitive Best Foreign Film category. *Mustang* is one of only two female-directed films nominated for an Oscar this year (the other is Liz Garbus's documentary *What Happened, Miss Simone?*), and, true to the spirit of her film, Ergüven had plenty to say about the state of women in the film industry. We also talked about the movie's controversial reception in Turkey, the Oscars' diversity problem, and, of course, that time the *Mustang* sisters met George Clooney.

First of all, congratulations on the film's success. It's been great to see the attention it's getting here in the States. The first time I went to see it here — and this was before the Oscar nomination — it was so popular that I had to go back another day. How has the whole awards-season experience been for you?

Wonderful. Really, the best scenario you could dream of for a first feature. And it's been quite dynamic because in the beginning, after the release in Turkey, people said "I love it" or "I hate it," but there was no debate about it. The opinions were very polarized, but they were about exactly what's at stake in the film — you'd have people saying, "I hate seeing girls wiggling in front of the camera for an hour and a half. It makes me sick to my stomach." But now it's shaking up a little bit more public debate. It's extremely exciting that *Mustang* speaks emotionally to people in very different cultures. It means that we're touching a very delicate point about something wrong in our societies today regarding the place of women.

You shot the film in Turkey, with Turkish actresses, but it's a French co-production and now France's entry in the Oscars' foreign-language category — most people are calling it a French film. Do you think that has anything to do with the polarized reaction in Turkey?

Actually, Turkey right now is terribly polarized. The country is going through a very particular time, politically. We have more journalists in jail than any other country in the world. [*Ed. note: This statistic refers to a 2013 study; Turkey is now the country with the fifth-most jailed journalists.*] You really can question what's happening with democracy. There are literally two camps in Turkish society about a lot of things. The question of the place of women is very central in these debates — it's a choice between two different possible societies.

Can you speak more about your take on the political climate in Turkey right now, particularly as it relates to women?

Turkey is a society where women have been voting ever since the 20s, very early on. The laws of the country and the institutions of the country protect women. Women *were* free there, and now we're taking a few steps backwards.

It's there every day. Not long ago, there was a rape in a very well-known place in Istanbul, and it happened at three in the morning. And people came out saying, "What the hell was this girl doing out in the street at three in the morning?" which was not something you could say in Turkey ten, 15 years ago. Generally, in Istanbul, after it's dark, you just don't see women without headscarves out in the streets. There's a conservative vision of society, which is that girls are at home.

The members of the government are always very vocal, they speak almost every single day, and they say things about the place of women in society. The vision of conservatives in Turkey sexualizes everything that girls are and do, and that's what the film is tackling. The very first scene of the film, when the girls sit on the shoulders of the boys and they're accused of doing something sexual when they're not — that's exactly the central debate of the place of women. Which is extremely sad because, as I told you, it's a country which has seen very luminous periods of freedom and democracy.

The actresses are all so natural onscreen and give such powerful performances. They're all Turkish, right? And I think I read that only one of them had acted on film before?

Yes. It was a very long process of auditioning and then working with them, engaging them in an environment of trust and warmth and a very playful way of acting. They expected a director to be someone like a schoolteacher who would shout at them and wave a stick. But it was the opposite; it was a very safe haven, and very playful.

That comes through in the film — it's part of what so many people are responding to. There's also something about the way that you film their bodies that feels very matter-of-fact. Neither denying them their sexualities nor wholly defining them by that.

Yes, that was absolutely central. The fact of looking at them, showing them at every possible angle — even when they're, like, dressed in bathing suits or bikinis — in a completely neutral way. Which, as I told you before, they start being seen as sexual and nothing else from pre-teenager years onwards.

We tend to talk about the "male gaze" and "female gaze" in abstract and theoretical terms, but when you're directing and you're trying to get that more feminine perspective across, what sorts of decisions are you making, in terms of framing and camera placement?

It's something you see even in the way someone holds the camera. For example, there was this shot when Sonay [the oldest sister] was cleaning the window and she's looking at her boyfriend, and my [cameraperson] was a man. When I thought the shot was lingering a little too long someplace, [*laughs*] I would just say, "This is looking at her through the eyes of little sisters." Whether it's a look lingering too long on one spot, or even just the length of the shot, you feel the point of view.

You co-wrote the script with the French filmmaker Alice Winocour. You went to film school together, and I read that she was your only female classmate. I'm curious about how the experience of being one of the only women in a male-dominated space affects your perspective as a filmmaker.

Well, there's this huge debate about diversity right now. We're coming from societies where women had much lower positions than men, and we're coming from societies with racism. We're moving towards something that is more equal — we're on the way, but right now there are still repercussions.

I started film school in 2002, and Alice and I were always the only girls, both at school and in every development program for first-time filmmakers. Filmmaking is very much like a little military structure, and because of that, you're really responding to preconceived ideas of who's powerful and authoritarian. I even remember girls saying that when you're too powerful as a woman, it's not very *pretty*. I remember preconceived ideas like that. Now it's more central in the debate, and it's changing, but we're not anywhere close to equality just yet.

There's something about cinema that literally shapes the world we live in, and the fact is that in its history, cinema has been mostly made by men. We have been used to seeing the world through the eyes of men, and that makes us miss out on the perspective of half of humanity. As a woman, I've sometimes felt like, "Oh, nobody told me *this* specific part of the experience." You know, breast-feeding, for instance. I started thinking about that when I had a baby: *I've never seen any breast-feeding scenes.*

Because of all this, women are considered objects, and very rarely subjects. That's really confusing because in some societies, men will conceive of women as a complete mystery, or it can lead to a misunderstanding about many things. Even in Turkey, when people react to the film badly, it's a good thing that they've been sitting there, seeing the world through the eyes of a 13-year-old girl. It generates compassion, empathy — it opens a breach into a new point of view.

A lot of people have compared the film to *The Virgin Suicides*, but you've said you feel like it's closer to a prison-escape movie.

I wrote the script really in one breath, and then when I *looked* at it, the closest script I could think of was *Escape From Alcatraz*. From then on, I was watching escape movies. Maybe you have those thousands of references of films, books, people's lives around you, and when you write or when you make a film with actors, it's all there, available. So you just tap into it. Only afterwards I was thinking, *Oh yeah, it looks like the action movies I saw when I was a kid.*

Have you been following the #OscarsSoWhite controversy? What's your take on that?

I have. Before *Mustang*, I wrote a script that took place in South Central Los Angeles, with mostly African-American characters. I remember, when I spoke with producers, people very candidly said that a film with

African-Americans is an urban film, and that's a more restricted audience. It went way further than just the frontiers of the U.S.! I remember a producer telling me, "I can't sell a film with African-Americans to Japan or German television." I remember exactly those sentences.

Where really proactive steps must be taken is in the beginning, at production. That's where you have real power to change things, and that's where you can choose to have women in parts that aren't generally perceived as women parts, or members of minorities. There are so many wrong things in the perceptions we have of women and different minorities, but that's where you can change it, in production. But I don't think the solution is to boycott, because if people suffer from limited visibility, boycotting is almost unfair. Oscar diversity is an echo of something that was already problematic way, way, way before.

How have the girls dealt with the success of the film?

It's like a dream. We've been together a lot accompanying this film around, and they're even more like a litter of kittens. They really became like sisters — and they take it as a responsibility as well. I feel responsible towards France right now, and they feel responsible, mostly, towards the girls who live lives close to the ones pictured in the film.

They're just so conscious of so many things. Even when they were on Hollywood Boulevard, they always took their leftover food and gave it to the homeless. Turkey puts them in contact with poverty and problems with war, so they're very young and free, enjoying their youth, but at the same time, they're very conscious of the world they live in.

Sometimes they also redo scenes from the film. When we were in New York, they were in a car with the top open, and of course they had to redo the bus scene.

Sounds like they're getting a lot out of the experience. I saw a picture of them with George Clooney ...

That was so funny. It was at the Toronto Film Festival, and at some point they heard screams and they were like, "Can we go, can we go?" They left, and when they came back, they were like ... you know the scene [in *Mustang*] when they run to the football game? It was exactly like that scene. They were so excited, shouting. Just the vision of them running like that towards me, I thought I was going to faint of laughter. They had their picture, and they couldn't even speak.

Are they going to the Oscars?

Unfortunately, no. They'll be in Los Angeles, just next door to us. I'm doing my best, but it's not possible. We say that our character has five heads, but there's a very precise amount of Oscar tickets for each film, and they decided to all be together.

Review: *Mustang*

Christy Lemire • November 20, 2015

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mustang-2015> *able link [Garamond, 11pt., italic, underlined, blue hyperlink]*

Five beautiful and beguiling young sisters become imprisoned in their own home, forbidden by their controlling, conservative elders from having any contact with the outside world—especially boys.

The premise of “Mustang” may sound familiar—and visually, director and co-writer Deniz Gamze Ergüven does seem to have borrowed a few cues from Sofia Coppola’s stirring 1999 debut, “The Virgin Suicides,” in making her own feature film debut. But “Mustang” grabs you with its own sense of haunting melancholy, as well as an increasing feeling of urgency and outrage.

Set in a coastal town in northern Turkey, “Mustang” puts a cultural spin on stories of teen-girl angst and sexual blossoming that probably will seem infuriating to many viewers in its closed-mindedness, its archaic inflexibility. But while it takes place in a very specific part of the world, its emotions are universally recognizable, as is the powerful yearning of its young, female characters to establish their own identities and assert their own desires.

Ergüven very quickly and efficiently establishes who these girls are and what their dynamic is in the script she co-wrote with Alice Winocour, both with each other and with the outside world. They are a tribe unto themselves with their long, brunette tresses, plaid schoolgirl uniforms and a shared conspiratorial vibe. And so when “everything turns to shit,” as free-spirited, youngest sister Lale (Günes Sensoy) so aptly puts it in the film’s opening voiceover, we have a sense of why this matters. There’s a tangible weight to the shift that occurs.

And yet, Ergüven maintains a light, gauzy intimacy as she chronicles the girls’ increasing imprisonment in their house—and includes enough bursts of energy to suggest that their collective rebel spirit could blow the doors off at any moment.

It all begins innocently enough on the last day of school with an expression of adolescent jubilation that will resonate with viewers regardless of ethnicity or age. Lale and her older sisters—Sonay (Ilayda Akdoğan), Selma (Tugba Sunguroglu), Ece (Elit İscan) and Nur (Doga Zeynep Doguslu)—dash down to the beach to frolic in the Black Sea with a few of their male classmates. As they splash, swim and engage in chicken fights, the mood is playful but infused with an underlying tension, thanks in part to the hum of a low-key, synth score.

After a walk through what turns out to be a symbolic apple orchard, the girls return home to a tirade and individual beatings behind closed doors from their grandmother (Nihal G. Koldas), who’s raised them since their parents died a decade earlier. Turns out an elderly neighbor saw the sisters playing on the beach and misinterpreted their innocuous romping as something far more depraved. “*Everyone is talking about your obscene behavior,*” she shouts. And so she and the girls’ old-fashioned, judgmental uncle, Erol (Ayberk Pekcan), quickly lock up the grounds and round up anything in the house that could possibly corrupt them further, including phones, the computer, photos and magazines. (Although, to Ergüven’s credit, she gives “Mustang” a timeless feel by not making it clear exactly when the story takes place. It could be 20 years ago. It could be this week.)

Grandma sews them frumpy, shapeless frocks to wear and invites the village’s elder women over to teach them how to serve tea, stuff comforters and make dolmas. “*The house became a wife factory that we never came out*

of,” Lale laments as our clear-eyed narrator and guide. And sure enough, neighboring families start arriving to offer their sons as the girls’ husbands, one by one.

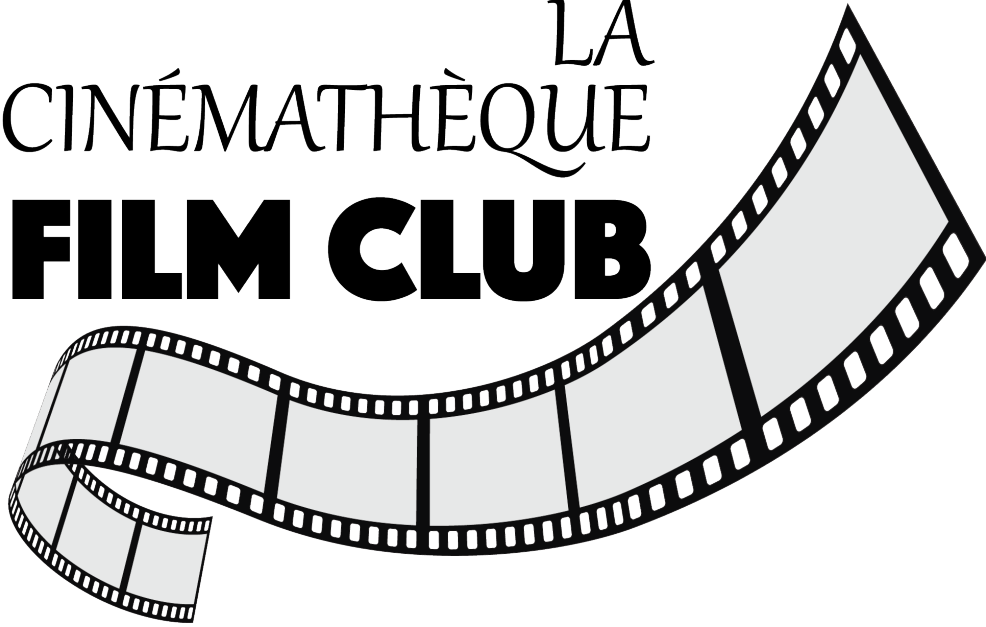
As depressing as all this sounds—and as quietly damning as “Mustang” is in its depiction of patriarchal oppression—the way the girls react to the tightening of the vice around them provides a consistent source of surprise and even hope. Each responds differently, from acquiescence to defiance, but their loyalty to each other and the strength of their sisterly bond remains true. They’re such a cohesive unit that it’s sometimes hard to tell them apart, such as when they’re goofing off on the bedroom floor in a tangle of wavy hair, long limbs and giggles. And the fact that Ergüven chose non-professional actors to play these five vibrant young women gives the film an added layer of authenticity.

She leaves some questions unanswered, though: how do the sisters feel about their parents’ absence, especially as their current living situation grows increasingly grim? And a couple of the middle sisters get lost in the shuffle, personality-wise. But their collective story adds up to a deeply moving whole, and its conclusion brings the narrative full-circle with an image that’s simple but powerful in its sense of possibility.

Filmography as Director

- **The Lifeboat** (announced)
- **Kings** (2017)
- **Mustang** (2015)
- **A Drop of Water** (2006, short)
- **Mon Trajet préféré** (2006, short)

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Women Film Directors
Fall 2017

Icíaar Bollaín
b.1967

Take My Eyes
2003

Review: *Take My Eyes*

Roger Ebert • April 20, 2006

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/take-my-eyes-2006>

I knew a woman who stayed for years with a man who abused her. He couldn't help himself. Neither could she. I think she was addicted to the excitement. She was the center of his world, the focus of his obsessions, the star of his disease. Some of the reviews of Iciar Bollain's "Take My Eyes" can't understand why Pilar returns to Antonio after his violent explosions. That's the point of the movie: Logic becomes irrelevant when she's caught in the drama. Just as he goes to therapy groups to learn how to guard against his anger, she flees to her sister to hear what a bastard Antonio is. Then some dread tidal force draws them together again.

The movie is not neutral. Pilar (Laia Marull) has a problem, but Antonio (Luis Tosar) has a much graver one. He is a sick man, whose insecurity and self-hatred boils up into violent outbursts against his wife. Even kicking a soccer ball around with his son, he finds himself kicking it too hard, thinking about his wife and taking it out on the kid. It is clear that Pilar should leave him and never return.



What makes the movie fascinating is that it doesn't settle for a soap opera resolution to this story, with Pilar as the victim, Antonio as the villain, and evil vanquished. It digs deeper and more painfully. The film opens with Pilar desperately waking her young son, grabbing a few clothes, and fleeing in the night to the home of her sister Ana (Candela Pena). In a sane world, this would be the end of the story, with Pilar getting a protection order and Antonio forever out of the picture.

But he pleads to return. He promises to change. He goes into counseling and therapy. He talks sweet. Her deep feelings for the man begin to stir. We saw this process in "What's Love Got to Do with It" (1993), with Tina Turner finally breaking free from Ike. In "Take My Eyes," which is about middle-class people in Toledo, Spain, the story is less sensational but trickier, because Antonio is a complex man. As we follow his attempts to reform, as we see that he's really serious about controlling his anger, we begin to feel sympathy for him. We even pity him a little as we see how, step by step, his defenses fall, his lessons are forgotten, and rage once again controls him.

Pilar has not asserted herself much in the marriage, but now in a period of independence, she gets a job as a volunteer in an art museum, and quickly reveals an aptitude for talking about art. Soon she is a tourist lecturer; Antonio haunts the shadows of the museum, and as his wife describes the passions in paintings, he imagines she is focusing on men in her audience, sending them signals. She isn't, but never mind: The point is that anything that Pilar does in the outside world, any skill she demonstrates or independence she shows, is a challenge to him. He cannot bear the possibility that she could live without him, could exist as herself and not as his possession.

The movie doesn't go in for elaborate set-pieces of beatings and bloodshed. He is violent toward her, yes, but what's terrifying is not the brutality of his behavior but how it is sudden, uncontrollable, and overwhelming. There is a time, after she has returned to him once again, where his anger grows and grows until

finally he strips her down to a brassiere and shoves her out onto the balcony, to be seen by the neighbors, since after all that's what she wants, isn't it? To parade before strange men?

Laia Marull is powerful as Pilar, a woman who slowly, through hard lessons, is learning that she must leave this man and never see him again and not miss him or weaken to his appeals or cave in to her own ambiguity about his behavior. She may think (and some viewers of the film might think) that she is simply a victim, but when she returns to him, she gives away that game. She knows it's insane, and does it, anyway.

As Antonio, Luis Tosar gives a performance comparable to Laurence Fishburne's in "What's Love Got to Do With It?" or Temuera Morrison's in "Once Were Warriors" (1994). He makes his anger absolutely convincing, and that is necessary, or this is merely a story. The difference is that Marull's Pilar is less confident, more implicated, than the strong women played by Angela Bassett and Rena Owen in the other two films. That creates a complex response for us. We sympathize at times with both characters, but curiously enough, we are more willing to understand why Antonio explodes than why Pilar returns to him. Surely she knows she's making a mistake? Yes, she does. They both know they're spiraling toward danger. If only knowledge had more to do with how they feel and why they act.

Filmography (as director)

- **Yuli** (2018)
- **The Olive Tree** (2016)
- **En tierra extraña** (2014) documentary
- **Katmandú, un espejo en el cielo** (2011)
- **Even the Rain** (2010)
- **Mataharis** (2007)
- **¡Hay Motivo!** (2004) segment "Por tu propio bien"
- **Take My Eyes** (2003)
- **Amores que matan** (2000) short
- **Flowers from Another World** (1999)
- **Hola, ¿estas sola?** (1995)
- **Los amigos del muerto** (1993) short
- **Baja corazón** (1992) short

Take My Eyes (Spanish)

Eric D. Snyder • March 17, 2006

Article sourced from *EricSnider.com*: <https://www.ericdsnider.com/movies/take-my-eyes/>

Icíar Bollain's searing Spanish drama "Take My Eyes" does what few films before it have managed: It depicts domestic violence without making the abuser a one-dimensional monster and without becoming a suspense-thriller.

Reflect a moment on other films that have dealt with this topic. The elements are usually sensationalized: The husband isn't just angry that his wife has left him; he hunts her down, and she generally winds up being obligated to kill him in self-defense. It is usually unclear what she ever saw in him to begin with, and there seems to be nothing drawing her to him now. He is a tyrant, an ogre, often an adulterer, and when she insists she loves him, we can't for the life of us imagine why.

Now consider "Take My Eyes," which brings everything back to reality. Antonio (Luis Tosar), an appliance salesman, suffers from profoundly low self-esteem (one scene between him and his brother explains a lot), and his first thought when his wife doesn't answer her cellphone is "that she's forgotten me." In a sincere effort to keep Pilar (Laia Marull) from divorcing him, he attends anger-management therapy and sees a counselor.

Pilar, for her part, leaves Antonio and takes their young son Juan (Nicolás Fernández Luna) with her to her sister Ana's (Candela Peña) house. Ana is engaged to a loving Scotsman, providing contrast to Pilar and Antonio's failed marriage, and making Pilar long for happier days. Ana and Pilar's mother, a traditionalist, wants a huge church wedding for Ana and tells Pilar, "A woman is never better off alone." Under these circumstances, you can see why Pilar would be tempted to give Antonio another chance.

The genius of this film is so obvious it's a wonder more filmmakers don't try it: It's realistic, and thus more compelling, because we don't know how it's going to end. Real people often reconcile, and they often reconcile even when they shouldn't. People don't do that in Hollywood films dealing with this subject, because Hollywood films, for all their color, are still pretty black and white. Real life, you may have noticed, has a lot of gray areas.

And so Pilar does accept Antonio's apologies and does try living together again, even as she knows, deep down, that it's not going to work. Laia Marull, a lovely actress with sad eyes, perfectly enacts the behavior of a woman in an unhealthy relationship — the shame that makes you keep it a secret, the anger at friends who "don't understand."

Luis Tosar is equally powerful as Antonio, a hairy, brutish man whose faults can be traced and whose desire to make Pilar love him is genuine. What we feel for him is not sympathy, exactly; more like recognition. His abusive actions are the outgrowth of psychological and emotional problems that we've encountered. He has traits that we've seen in ourselves.

Eventually, there is a turning point, when it becomes clear the marriage either will or will not work. (I wouldn't dream of spoiling it for you.) Even as that moment is dizzying in its intensity, it remains grounded in human nature. There's no melodrama anywhere in the film, only drama, with every single moment superbly acted and startlingly believable.

When Violence Happens: Exploring Domestic Violence in Icíar Bollain's *Take My Eyes*

Anna Battista • November 2004

Article sourced from Erasing Clouds: <http://www.erasingclouds.com/1130bollain.html>



Shooting a film about domestic violence must be quite difficult: how are you going to approach this dreadful topic? Are you going to show the acts of violence? Will there be space in your film also for more positive and uplifting moments and for love? A Spanish film just released in Great Britain manages to answer all these questions and to do even more. The film is *Take my Eyes* (*Te Doy Mis Ojos*, 2003) directed by Icíar Bollain and co-written by Bollain and Alicia Luna. *Te Doy Mis Ojos* is

Bollain's third film: her filmography also includes quite a few shortcuts and two feature-length films *Hola, ¿Estás Sola?* (1995) and *Flores de Otro Mundo* (1999), which won the 1999 International Critics' Award at Cannes. Bollain's latest film is in a way a development and an in-depth analysis of the main theme, domestic violence, of her shortcut *Amores Que Matan* (2000).

When *Take My Eyes* opens, Pilar (Laia Marull) is running away from her family home with her son Juan (Nicolás Fernández Luna), after countless beatings by her husband Antonio (Luis Tosar, who also starred in *Amores Que Matan*). She takes refuge for a while at the house of her sister Ana (Candela Peña). Antonio starts going to an anger management group and, after a while, convinces Pilar that he has changed and that she can come back home. When she gets a job as a museum guide, though, Antonio, fearing of losing Pilar, relapses into violence. Antonio's violence, which is the product of his own fears, of the fear of even losing the monotonous stability in his life, climaxes to a brutally humiliating scene and finally shatters Pilar's dreams of leading a happy life next to the man she married and loved.

Bollain doesn't show us much physical violence on the screen, she indeed focuses her attention on psychological violence. We don't see what Antonio does to Pilar at the beginning of the film, but we understand that there has been violence from her fearful actions and words, such as the sentence "...me he venido en zapatillas!" (I came in my slippers), that she repeats like a mantra to Ana soon after she runs away from her house and discovers she is still wearing her slippers. We understand there has been violence and there is fear in Pilar's mind when Antonio implores her to open the main gate of Ana's house and to let him in, but only manages to terrorise her more. We finally comprehend what violence has done to Pilar when she goes to the police to report

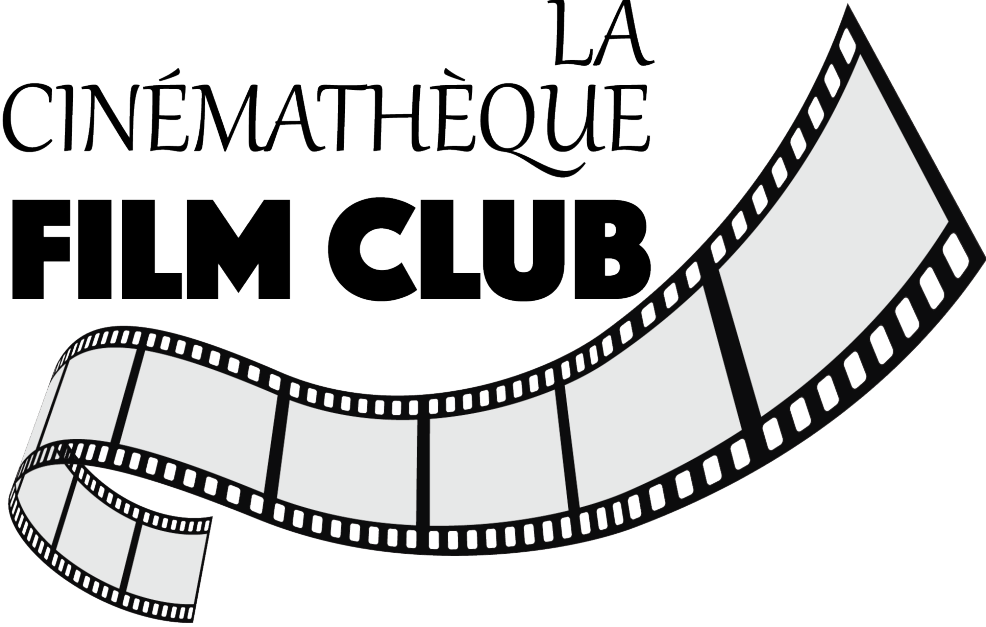


Antonio and answers the policeman asking her where her husband hurt her, saying that the damages are not outside, they are not visible on her body, but they are inside her.

Take My Eyes, which features very good performances (Laia Marull's Pilar is superb) and an excellent script, has also got funny glimpses: the comradeship between Pilar and her new colleagues at the museum, their jokes and their happiness; the scene in which Pilar's mother (Rosa María Sardá) asks Ana's Scottish boyfriend where he's thinking he will be buried one day since their family tomb is quite small and there won't be place for him as well; the two men at the therapy group Antonio is attending, role-playing a short chart between husband and wife with comical results. Bollaín also presents glimpses of optimism, such as the scene in which Antonio and Pilar make love, resuming a game they used to do many years before, which consists of Pilar giving her whole body, her legs, arms, mouth, nose and eyes, as a present to Antonio.

Icíar Bollaín and Alicia Luna carried out a research on the theme of domestic violence before starting to shoot *Te Doy Mis Ojos*, and Luna also interviewed Spanish psychologist Enrique Etxebarua, specialised in treating men with a history of domestic violence. Their research definitely contributed to make of this film a psychological exploration of love, fear, violence, and of the contrasting emotions haunting the minds of those who perpetrate violence and of their victims.

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West Orange
Classic Film Festival
2018

Lina Wertmüller
b.1928

Love and Anarchy
1973

Commedia all'italiana – Comedy Italian Style

Gino Moliterno • July 2014

Article sourced from Senses of Cinema: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2014/2014-melbourne-international-film-festival-dossier/commedia-allitaliana-comedy-italian-style/>

To think about Italian cinema in the immediate postwar era is almost inevitably to conjure up heartrending images from the classic neo-realist films like Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945) and Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948). Yet, as the better-informed historians of Italian cinema have never ceased to point out, for all its critical acclaim at home and its prestige as art cinema abroad, neo-realism never gained much purchase over Italian audiences themselves who, having just lived through the traumatic experiences of the war, naturally gravitated to the happier fare of either Hollywood films or home-grown comedy and other lighter escapist genres.¹ Comedy had, in fact, always occupied pride of place in Italian cinema, even during the Fascist period, and in the postwar era the genre would rise to become one of the major pillars of national cinema production and the one contributing most to Italian films finally, if only briefly, being able to compete successfully on Italian screens with the Hollywood juggernaut.

Truth to tell, neo-realist films themselves often included some comic elements. One remembers, for example, how, leading up to one of the most tragic moments in *Roma città aperta*, that of Pina's death, Don Pietro (Aldo Fabrizi), in a desperate move to keep the old man (Turi Pandolfini) quiet as the Fascists and Germans search the building, has to whack him, in true slapstick fashion, on the head with a frypan. In retrospect, of course, it's difficult not to credit such a comic touch to Federico Fellini's collaboration on the screenplay. As time went on, however, and even as neo-realism experienced the brief flowering of its spring, Italian audiences made ever clearer their preference for laugh-out-loud comedy. So, tellingly, in 1948 *Bicycle Thieves*, critically acclaimed at home and soon to also receive an Oscar nomination, could only manage eighth place at the Italian box office, bettered in first and fourth place by two films starring the popular comic actor Totò.² Reading the writing on the wall, neo-realist directors were soon working towards a lighter and more entertaining variation of the form which came to be known, rather pejoratively in leftist critical circles, as *neorealismo rosa* or "pink" (or "rose-coloured") neo-realism. Yet, even what came to be regarded as the flagship film of this sort of "neo-realism lite", Giuseppe De Santis' *Riso amaro* (*Bitter Rice*, 1949) only managed to achieve fifth place at the box office for 1949 – in spite of it being one of the most popular and highest-grossing of all the neo-realist films – beaten in third and fourth place by two other films starring Totò. In 1952 De Sica's *Umberto D*, nominated that year for the Grand Prize at Cannes and subsequently nominated for an Academy Award, failed to even make it into that year's top ten highest-grossing films. The box office for the year was headed by the first of what would eventually become six *Don Camillo* films, which transferred to the screen the endless comic tussles in a small

¹ See, among others, Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema*, Continuum, New York and London, 2009, pp. 65-66.

² The calculations of box office receipts are notoriously rubbery but here I'm relying on the annual top ten lists supplied by Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones in *A New Guide to Italian Cinema*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2007, pp. 171 ff. Bondanella puts *The Bicycle Thief* (as it was called in America) in 11th place for the 1948-49 season (p. 65).

town of the Po Valley between a pugnacious parish priest and his nemesis, the Communist mayor, Peppone, portrayed in the popular novels of Giovanni Guareschi.

Firmly established through all these successes, the comedy genre was set to increase its domination of Italian screens even further in the following years as high rating comedies now came ready-made to generate their inevitable sequels. In 1953, just as Julien Duvivier's *Il ritorno di Don Camillo* (*The Return of Don Camillo*) gave signs of repeating the huge box office success of its predecessor, Luigi Comencini released *Pane, amore e fantasia* (*Bread, Love and Dreams*), a perfectly-fashioned exemplar of "rosy" neo-realism. Set in a poor rural village in central Italy and starring Gina Lollobrigida in one of her first substantial roles, the film was able to show an Italy afflicted with almost Third World poverty while at the same time offering only love and dreams as consolation. The film was so popular, topping the box office for that year, that it immediately generated an



equally popular sequel, *Pane, amore e gelosia* (*Bread, Love and Jealousy*, aka as *Frisky*, 1954), also directed by Comencini, which repeated the successful elements of the formula well enough to come in second at the box office that year, only slightly behind Mario Camerini's Hollywood-inflected blockbuster,

Ulisse (*Ulysses*, 1954). Given its proven success, the formula – with the setting moved to seaside Sorrento and Lollobrigida substituted by the up-and-coming Sophia Loren – was taken up again a year later by director Dino Risi in *Pane, amore e...* (*Scandal in Sorrento*, 1955) which was able to beat the third *Don Camillo* film, *Don Camillo e l'onorevole Peppone* (*Don Camillo's Last Round*, Carmine Gallone, 1955) for first place at the Italian box office for that year. A year later Risi himself initiated an urban version of the consolatory *Bread and Love* formula with his *Poveri ma belli* (*Poor But Beautiful*, 1956), which topped the annual box office, its commercial success effortlessly repeated a year later by its sequel in a feminine key, *Povere ma belle* (*Pretty But Poor*, 1957).

I soliti ignoti

These *were* all generically home-grown "Italian" comedies, of course, but 1958 saw the advent of a film that appeared to herald a distinctively new, and much more mordant, style of comedy that would later be characterised as *commedia all'italiana* or comedy Italian style. The film was *I soliti ignoti*.

Directed by Mario Monicelli, a prolific screenwriter-director who had already, among other things, been responsible for half a dozen of the Totò films, *I soliti ignoti* – in America rather haphazardly titled *Big Deal on Madonna Street* but better translated as something like *The Usual (Unknown) Suspects* – breathed in a new comic air. An obvious but inventive parody of the French heist-gone-wrong film *Du rififi chez les homes* (*Rififi*, Jules Dassin, 1955), itself influenced by the American crime film, *I soliti ignoti* followed the doomed plan of five petty thieves from the lower quarters of Rome to set themselves up for life by breaking into the safe of a local pawnbroker's shop. The dismally planned robbery is predicated on the motley gang's ability to break through the wall of an adjoining apartment, something that they hilariously fail to do, having to content themselves in the end with

some leftover pasta and chickpeas from the apartment fridge. Thanks to a brilliant screenplay by Monicelli and screenwriting duo Age and Scarpelli, whose screenplays would from then on be synonymous with the genre, the characters are equally comic stereotypes in the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte* and finely drawn individuals whose basic humanity we recognise and even sympathise with. At the same time, Piero Umiliani's cool jazz score and the stunning black-and-white cinematography of Gianni Di Venanzo combined to give the film an unprecedented modern look. Thus, with perhaps only the slightest benefit of hindsight, the cameo appearance of veteran comic actor Totò, playing the role of senior advisor to the gang, would subsequently be read as an allegorical passing of the comic baton from the older and more innocent "pink neo-realist" comedies to this decidedly more streetwise, and indeed more cynical, comedy "Italian style". A premonition of how ruthless and hard-edged this new comedy could become in wielding its bitter satirical scalpel was given by the presence of death in the film, explicitly shown in an early scene where Cosimo, the monumentally-inept but original mastermind of the scheme, meets his end under the wheels of a speeding tram.

Over and above the great success of *I soliti ignoti* at the Italian box office, and its well-deserved Oscar nomination in the following year, one of the film's greatest achievements proved to be the blinding revelation of Vittorio Gassman's previously-unsuspected natural aptitude for comedy. Buoyed by this revelation, Monicelli paired Gassman with Alberto Sordi, the other actor who had begun to display a great capacity for bittersweet comedy, to make the first major milestone of *commedia all'italiana*, *La grande guerra* (*The Great War*, 1959). Aided once again by a brilliant screenplay by Age and Scarpelli, Monicelli was able to lay bare the petty vices and character weaknesses of ordinary Italians (Sordi and Gassman play Roman and Milanese recruits, respectively, and for much of the film display the stereotypical prejudices of Northern and Southern Italians), although these clearly paled into insignificance when measured against the officially-sanctioned insanity of the war itself. *La grande guerra* topped the box office in 1959, well above Rossellini's last serious attempt at neo-realism, *Il Generale della Rovere* (*General Della Rovere*, 1959), which came in at ninth place. Nevertheless, the two films shared the Golden Lion at Venice that year, showing that comedy was finally coming to be critically accepted as "quality" cinema. The success of Monicelli's use of comedy to revisit one of the most tragic events of Italian history prompted Comencini to follow suit in exploring the debacle of the Italian armistice with the Allies in 1943 in his *Tutti a casa* (*Everybody Go Home*, 1960). The armistice, negotiated secretly with the Allies by the King and Marshall Badoglio and only eventually communicated to Italians via a public radio broadcast, had in fact been a monumental true-life comedy of errors – indeed, a classic case of comic-if-it-hadn't-been-so-tragic for ordinary Italians – and the clever screenplay by Age and Scarpelli milked it for all the tragicomedy it was worth.

A year later Risi extended *commedia all'italiana*'s gloss on recent Italian history to the threshold of Italy's so-called "economic miracle" of the late 1950s with *Una vita difficile* (*A Difficult Life*, 1961), in



which an ex-partisan, played by Alberto Sordi in one of his finest performances, finds all his hopes for a better Italy progressively and comprehensively crushed as the country begins its shift into affluence.

It's at this time, then, that the *commedia all'italiana* enters something of a classical phase as it begins, in the words of film historian Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, "to perform an analytical form of 'social autopsy'" on the anthropological changes being wrought by the "economic miracle".³

Il sorpasso

A high point of the genre during this period is undoubtedly Risi's *Il sorpasso* (*The Good Life*, 1962). Featuring Gassman in one of his most accomplished performances and iconic roles, the film is a profoundly amusing but also disturbing portrayal of the euphoric cynicism generated by the economic "boom". As the first real Italian road movie – the country's autostrada network was only just coming into being at the time – the film presents an allegory of a rapidly changing Italy, hurling itself down the road to affluence and consumerism. Tellingly, for all of Gassman's effervescent bravado, the film ends with the tragic death of Roberto (Jean-Louis Trintignant), the poor student whom he has picked up and transported all over Italy.

But perhaps one of the best exemplifications of the *commedia all'italiana*'s ability to use bitter satire to engage critically with the moral dilemmas and social contradictions generated by the advent of the "economic miracle" was provided a year later by the veteran team of De Sica and Cesare Zavattini with their aptly-titled, *Il boom* (1963). Pushed to the edge of bankruptcy by the need to keep up the appearance of financial success, small-time Roman businessman, Giovanni Alberti, played in inimitable style by Sordi, is soon inescapably confronted with the stark and unenviable choice of either losing his family and putative friends or having to sell one of his eyes. The chilling logic of the film's conclusion exemplifies what remained a distinguishing feature of the *commedia all'italiana* with respect to comedy more generally, that is, the absence, indeed the impossibility, of a happy ending.⁴



2008, p. 50. See also his "Chronicles of a Hastened Modernisation: The Cynical Eye of the *Commedia all'italiana*", *The Italian Cinema Book*, ed. Peter Bondanella, BFI, London, 2014, pp. 188-194. The two most comprehensive histories of the genre in Italian, which also cover this classic phase, remain Enrico Giacovelli, *La commedia all'italiana: La storia, i luoghi, gli autori, gli attori, i film*, Gremese Editore, Rome, 1995, and Masolino d'Amico, *La commedia all'italiana: il cinema comico in Italia dal 1945 al 1975*, 2nd ed., il Saggiatore, Milano, 2008.

⁴ See Giacovelli, pp. 10 ff.

Divorce Italian Style

By now one of the acknowledged masters of the genre, Risi furnished a veritable rogues gallery and kaleidoscope of the perverted values of the new moral landscape in his multi-episode film *I mostri* (*The Monsters*, 1963). By this time, too, Pietro Germi, a Genovese director who had been the author of a half-dozen small neo-realist masterpieces during the immediate postwar period, had relocated himself to Sicily where he created a distinctly regional version of the new comedy with his critically acclaimed *Divorzio all'italiana* (*Divorce Italian Style*, 1961). He followed this film three years later with its quasi-sequel, *Sedotta e abbandonata* (*Seduced and Abandoned*, 1964). The genre continued to reflect – and to reflect upon – the mutating social mores of a rapidly changing Italy in films like Alessandro Blasetti's *Io, io, io e gli altri* (*Me, Me, Me and the Others*, 1965) and Risi's *Il profeta* (*The Prophet*, 1968). Although undoubtedly less incisive than many of Risi's previous efforts at bitter social satire, *Il profeta's* hermit protagonist, played predictably by Gassman, does manage to effectively lampoon the vapid revolutionary aspirations of the youth and hippie movements in Italy at the time.

As the genre began to grow stale in the early 1970s it nevertheless acquired new life in the hands of Lina Wertmuller. Having already dabbled in the genre in the mid-1960s when she had answered Ettore Scola's *Se permettete parliamo di donne* (*Let's Talk about Women*, 1964) with her *Queste volta parliamo di uomini* (*This Time Let's Talk about Men*, 1965), Wertmuller now went on to give the genre a new mordancy and something of a feminist inflection in films like *Mimì metallurgico ferito nell'onore* (*The Seduction of Mimì*, 1972), *Tutto a posto e niente in ordine* (*All Screwed Up*, 1974) and *Pasqualino Settebellezze* (*Seven Beauties*, 1975).

By general consensus, however, the genre reached its culmination in Scola's *C'eravamo tanto amati* (*We All Loved Each Other So Much*, 1974) – a perfect film which manages to present an amusing and profoundly moving history of both postwar Italy and postwar Italian cinema. As well as a sentimental history of postwar Italian society, the film also presented a touching homage to De Sica who appeared in a cameo in the film but then died at the time it was being edited. But these were now darker times in Italy with the “economic miracle” only a vague memory and the country caught in the grip of the political violence and social conflict that would lead to this period being commonly known as *gli anni di piombo* (years of lead).

With a certain insouciance Monicelli, Risi and Scola came together to present an updated rogues gallery in the portmanteau film *I nuovi mostri* (*The New Monsters*, 1977), drawing splendid performances from Gassman, Sordi and Ugo Tognazzi. Yet the final episode of the film, in which Sordi presides at the funeral of a veteran comic, presages a valediction for the entire genre.

In the same year the irreconcilable contradictions now lacerating Italian society found an echo in Monicelli's *Un borghese piccolo piccolo* (*An Average Little Man*, 1977) in which Sordi, brilliant as always, plays a lower middle-class Italian father who, following the accidental death of his son at the hands of a young radical student, turns from a mild-mannered family man (the *petit bourgeois* of the title) into a ferocious torturer and killer.

In 1980, Scola, as one of the grand old practitioners of the *commedia all'italiana*, sought to bring together a who's who of the genre in *La terrazza* (*The Terrace*, 1980) in what appeared to be an attempt to sum up the genre. However, times had definitely changed and even faithful aficionados were forced to admit that rather than a summa of the genre *La terrazza* appeared to merely write its epitaph.

Filmography

Director (32 credits)

Hide ▲

Roma, Napoli, Venezia... in un crescendo rossiniano (Documentary short)	2014
Mannaggia alla miseria! (TV Movie) (as Lina Job Wertmuller)	2009
Too Much Romance... It's Time for Stuffed Peppers	2004
Francesca and Nunziata (TV Movie)	2001
Ferdinando e Carolina	1999
The Blue Collar Worker and the Hairdresser in a Whirl of Sex and Politics	1996
The Nymph	1996
L'encyclopédie audio-visuelle (TV Series documentary) (1 episode) - Vivaldi (1993)	1993
Ciao, Professore!	1992
Saturday, Sunday and Monday	1990
12 registi per 12 città (Documentary) (segment "Bari")	1989
Up to Date	1989
Il decimo clandestino (TV Movie)	1989
Imago urbis (Documentary)	1987
Summer Night with Greek Profile, Almond Eyes and Scent of Basil	1986
Camorra (A Story of Streets, Women and Crime)	1985
Sotto... sotto	1984
A Joke of Destiny, Lying in Wait Around the Corner Like a Bandit	1983
E una domenica sera di novembre (TV Movie documentary)	1981
Blood Feud	1978
A Night Full of Rain	1978
Seven Beauties	1975
Swept Away	1974
All Screwed Up	1974
Love & Anarchy	1973
The Seduction of Mimi	1972
Il mio corpo per un poker (as Nathan Wich)	1968
Non stuzzicate la zanzara (as Lina Weltmuller)	1967
Rita la zanzara (as George H. Brown)	1966
Let's Talk About Men	1965
Il giornalino di Gian Burrasca (TV Series) (8 episodes) - Addio giornalino (1965) - Giannino in collegio (1965) - Giannino in casa Maralli (1965) - Giannino in casa Collalto (1965) - I razzi nel caminetto (1965) Show all 8 episodes	1964-1965
I basilischi	1963

Biography

Hal Erickson

Article sourced from AllMovie: <https://www.allmovie.com/artist/lina-wertm%C3%BCller-p116446>

The daughter of an aristocratic Swiss family, Lina Wertmuller harbored dreams of becoming a lawyer, but this notion fell by the wayside when she entered the Academy of Theatre in Rome in 1947. Thanks to a few valuable connections--one of her school chums was the wife of actor Marcello Mastroianni--Wertmuller found work as a performer/writer with Maria Signorelli's Puppet Troupe. She went on to function as actress, writer, set designer and publicist in a variety of theatrical and broadcast endeavors, entering films in 1962 as Federico Fellini's assistant on the set of *8 1/2*. She made her directorial debut the following year with *The Lizards*. With actor Giancarlo Giannini, a friend and co-worker from her theater days, Wertmuller formed Liberty Films, turning out a series of fascinating, iconoclastic feature films, with Giannini-invariably cast as a Chaplinesque loser--starring in all but one film (*All Screwed Up*). The first Wertmuller effort to receive an American release was *Love and Anarchy* (1973). Three years later, she scored her biggest international hit with *Seven Beauties* (1976), a trenchant, surreal, darkly comic tale of survival and compromise that earned her a Academy Award nomination for "Best Director" (the first such honor bestowed upon a woman). On the strength of *Seven Beauties*, Warners signed Wertmuller to a four-picture contract--an agreement that was abruptly cancelled after the poor box-office showing of her first Warners project, *The End of the World in Our Usual Bed in a Nightful of Rain* (1976). During her heyday, Wertmuller was effusively praised for her championing of the underdog, her staunch feminism and her anarchistic approach to her material. Once her vogue had passed in the U.S., however, she was taken to task for the "hollowness" of her vision and her lack of compassion for her characters. Undaunted, she continued making films for the European market, enjoying a brief resurgence of critical approval with one of her most atypical films, *Ciao Professore* (1994). Lina Wertmuller's most recent film, completed in 1996, bears the typically lengthy cognomen *Metalmeccanico e parrucchiera in un turbine di sesso di politica*.

Biography

Article sourced from Turner Classic Movies: <http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/person/204382%7C0/Lina-Wertmuller/>

This European director's grotesque/comic treatments of weighty political, social and sexual themes earned her a sizeable cult following in the mid-1970s.

Wertmuller was born to a family of Swiss aristocrats; her father, a lawyer, dominated his family and young Lina constantly fought with him. A product of a Roman Catholic education, Wertmuller brought her domestic battles into the classroom and, as she approached college age, could boast of having been thrown out of fifteen schools. Her father wanted her to attend law school but Wertmuller decided, at the instigation of a friend, to enroll in theater school. After her graduation in 1951 she became an itinerant theatrical jack-of-all-trades, traveling through Europe as a producer of avant-garde plays, puppeteer, stage manager, set designer,

publicist and radio/TV scriptwriter. Through an acquaintance with Marcello Mastroianni, Wertmuller was introduced to Federico Fellini, who offered her a production position on his film "8 1/2" (1962).

Through her work on this production Wertmuller developed a desire to direct her own film. Enlisting the services of several technicians from "8 1/2", Wertmuller (with the financial backing of Fellini) made her first film, "The Lizards," in 1963. A second film, "Let's Talk About Men" (1965), performed decently at the box office, but when she had difficulty obtaining funding for a third film, Wertmuller returned to her work in the theater and TV.

Wertmuller re-emerged as a major film director through her friendship with actor Giancarlo Giannini, who had already established a reputation as a popular stage star. Wertmuller directed him in a TV production, "Rita the Mosquito" (1966); Giannini then recommended a play she had written, "Two Plus Two Are No Longer Four," to Franco Zeffirelli, who agreed to produce it with Giannini starring. The critical and financial success of this production was the breakthrough Wertmuller needed.

Giannini and Wertmuller now agreed to collaborate on films. Their first production, "The Seduction of Mimi," a comic examination of sexual role-playing and political maneuvering, garnered Wertmuller the best director award at the 1972 Cannes Film Festival. Their next film, "Love and Anarchy" (1973), won Giannini the best actor award at Cannes and, booked for distribution in New York in 1974, gave American critics a first look at a new directorial sensibility. Its success prompted the release of "The Seduction of Mimi" in the USA.

The release of these films created an almost instantaneous cult around Wertmuller, which was fueled by the release of "All Screwed Up" (1974) and "Let's Talk About Men" and culminated with the release of "Swept Away" (1974) and "Seven Beauties" (1975). These films combined heavy-handed caricature with extended, often violent, political and sexual debate. Wertmuller's satirical thrust was so broad that both feminists and anti-feminists, liberals and conservatives flocked to her films. On the whole, however, Wertmuller's women characters were treated with contempt--from the shrill, ultra-chic Mariangela Melato in "Swept Away" and "Summer Night" (1986) to the Felliniesque, wide-angle exaggerations of "The Seduction of Mimi" and "Seven Beauties." Her male characters were not much more sympathetic, but their broad, macho posturing and chauvinism was tempered by the Chaplinesque pathos of Giannini's performances--particularly his pathologically comic Pasqualino in "Seven Beauties."

After "Seven Beauties," Wertmuller's reputation took a sharp downward turn. Her first American film, "The End of the World in Our Usual Bed in a Night Full of Rain" (1978), was both a critical and financial flop and her subsequent, sporadic productions have failed to recapture her audience.

LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



Woman Film Directors 2
Spring 2018

Mira Nair
b.1957

Salaam Bombay!
1988

Salaam Bombay!

Roger Ebert • October 28, 1988

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/salaam-bombay-1988>



The history of the making of "Salaam Bombay!" is almost as interesting as the film itself. The filmmakers gathered a group of the street children of Bombay and talked with them about their experiences, visiting the streets and train stations, bazaars and red-light districts where many of them lived. Out of these interviews emerged a screenplay that was a composite of several lives. Then many of the children were enlisted for weeks in a daily workshop, not to teach them "acting" (for that they already knew from hundreds of overacted Indian film melodramas), but to teach them how to behave naturally in front of the camera.

Out of those workshops a cast gradually emerged, and it was clear almost from the start that the star was an 11-year-old street child named Shafiq Syed, whose history was unknown, but who proved to be such a natural filmmaker that he sometimes reminded the directors of errors in continuity. Using Syed and shooting on actual locations in Bombay, director Mira Nair has been able to make a film that has the everyday, unforced reality of documentary, and yet the emotional power of great drama. "Salaam Bombay!" is one of the best films of the year.

Syed plays its hero, a boy named Chaipau who works for a traveling circus. One day he is sent on an errand - to get some cigarettes from a neighboring village - and when he returns, the circus has packed up and disappeared. He goes to a nearby village and takes a train to Bombay, following some half-formed plan to return to his native village and his mother, who perhaps sold him to the circus. But Chaipau cannot read or write, and he is not quite sure where his village is, or perhaps even what it is named, and he disappears naturally into the ranks of thousands of children who live, and die, on the streets of Bombay.

These streets are without doubt a cruel and dreadful place, but as Nair sees them, they are not entirely without hope. Her Bombay seems to have a kinship with one of the Victorian slums of Dickens, who portrayed a society in which even the lowest classes had identity and a role to play. In that respect "Salaam Bombay!" is

quite different from "Pixote," the 1981 film about Brazilian street children. Although the two films obviously have much in common, the children of "Pixote" exist in an anarchic and savage world, while those in "Salaam Bombay!" share a community, however humble.

Chaipau is an intelligent boy, stubborn and wily, and he finds a job as a runner for a man who runs a tea stall in the street. Chaipau's job is to race up flights of tenement stairs with trays of tea, and in the tenements he finds a world of poverty, sweatshops, prostitution and drug dealing. One of the friends he makes is a pathetic 16-year-old girl who was sold or kidnapped away from her native village, and is being held captive by a rapacious madam who plans to sell her virginity to the highest bidder. The other characters in the neighborhood include a hopeless drunk and addict, who befriends the children as best he can.


One of the subplots of the film involves the relationship between a drug dealer and the prostitute who is his common-law wife. She lives for her child, and exists in daily fear that the child will be taken from her because of the life she leads. Nair treats this woman with such sensitivity that we feel great sympathy for her when the child is threatened, and this illustrates one of the underlying beliefs of "Salaam Bombay!": That the street life, however hard, is preferable to what happens to people once they are identified by the law and become the victims of official institutions.

It is remarkable how well Nair creates this street world and tells us its rules without seeming to force her story. One of her secrets is location shooting; not a single scene in this movie was shot on a set or in a studio, and some of the scenes - including a funeral procession - were shot with hidden cameras, to capture the unrehearsed behavior of the spectators.

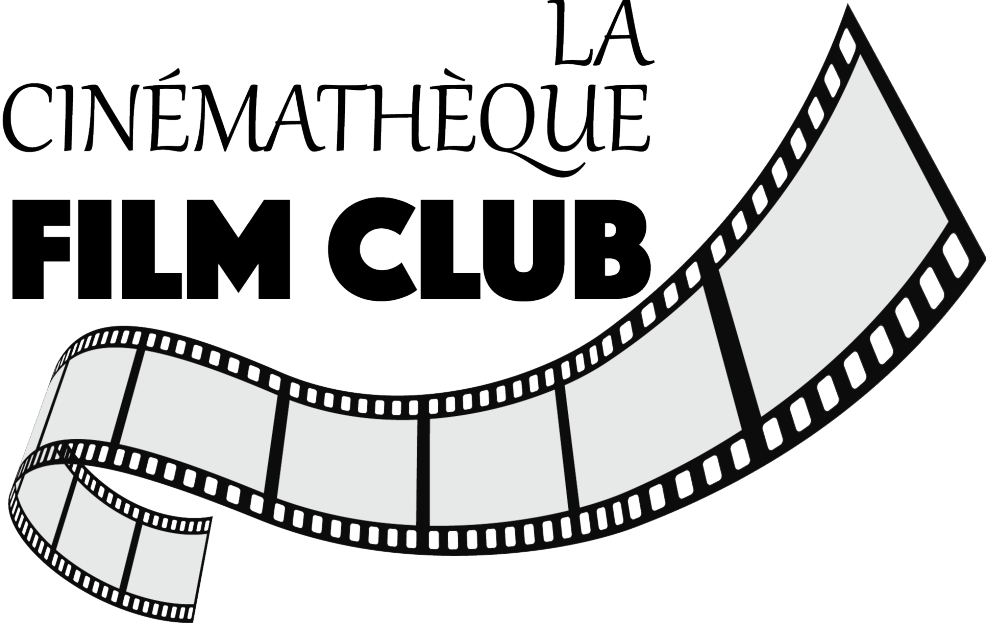
It is a well-known truism of filmmaking that color photography tends to make locations look better than they are; we lose the smells and the suffering and see the bright colors and the sunlight. That happens here, I think; the very act of photographing this society probably has tended to romanticize it somewhat. And yet there are moments that remain raw and painful, as Chaipau drops his street-smart facade for a second, and we see the lonely little boy behind it.

One of the questions asked, but not answered, by the film is, what should be done about these children? At one point Chaipau and some friends are rounded up by the police and herded into a large institution that combines the worst features of an orphanage and a prison, but that doesn't seem to be the answer, and we are left with the troubling impression that in Bombay, at any event, the children seem to fare better on the streets. There they have an identity, and a measure of hope. Of course, in the best of possible worlds something would be "done" about them, but "Salaam Bombay!" takes place far from such a world, and the movie is about children doing the best they can for themselves.

Filmography

Director (24 credits)	Hide 
Nafas (Short) (<i>post-production</i>)	
Queen of Katwe (directed by)	2016
Words with Gods (segment "God Room")	2014
The Reluctant Fundamentalist	2012
Amelia	2009
8 (segment "How can it be?")	2008
New York, I Love You (segment "Mira Nair")	2008
Migration (Short)	2008/I
The Namesake	2006
Vanity Fair	2004
September 11 (segment "India")	2002
Hysterical Blindness (TV Movie)	2002
The Laughing Club of India (TV Short documentary)	2001
Monsoon Wedding	2001
My Own Country (TV Movie)	1998
Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love	1996
The Perez Family	1995
The Day the Mercedes Became a Hat (Short)	1993
Mississippi Masala	1991
Salaam Bombay!	1988
Children of a Desired Sex (TV Movie documentary)	1987
India Cabaret (TV Movie documentary)	1985
So Far from India (Documentary)	1983
Jama Masjid Street Journal (Documentary)	1979

LA
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Women Film Directors
Spring 2018

Agnès Jaoui
b.1964

The Taste of Others
2000

The Taste of Others

Roger Ebert • March 9, 2001

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-taste-of-others-2001>

Finding out somebody has bad taste is like discovering they need dental work. Things were fine until they opened their mouth. Of course your good taste might be my bad taste, and vice versa. For example, I know



there are people who don't go to foreign films, and I am patient with them, as I would be with a child: With luck, they may evolve into more interesting beings. And then they could think about the lessons of "The Taste of Others." This is a film about a busy industrialist named Castella (Jean-Pierre Bacri) who is blindsided by love and idealism. As the movie opens, his life is affluent but uninspiring. He is surrounded by material comforts, all of them dictated by his wife, an

interior decorator. She is the kind of woman who, when she says something loving and affectionate, he has to look up to see if she's talking to him or the dog.

Castella signs up for English lessons, but is impatient at the work required; he gets stuck on the pronunciation of "the." He asks the teacher if she doesn't have a "fun" way to learn English. She doesn't, so he fires her. That night, his wife drags him kicking and screaming to a local dramatic production, and he falls in love with the leading actress. This is of course the very same woman who was the English teacher, but at first he doesn't realize that, because now she is surrounded by the aura of Art.

He pursues the actress, named Clara (Anne Alvaro). She is 40ish, attractive but not beautiful, a member of the artsy set in their provincial town. She is not attracted to Castella, who has crass tastes and materialist values and has led the life of money rather than the life of the mind. But he persists. He sends her flowers. He turns up everywhere. When she doesn't like his dorky mustache, he shaves it off. The movie doesn't present this simply as a romantic infatuation, but goes the additional step. It sees that Castella is in love not only with Clara, but with what she represents: the life of the arts, of ideas, of questioning things, of developing one's own taste. We are reminded of Jack Nicholson in "As Good as It Gets," when he tells Helen Hunt, "I love you because you make me want to be a better man." Meanwhile, things are shaky on the home front. Castella sees a painting he likes, brings it home and hangs it on the wall. Whether it's a good painting is beside the point: It is his painting. When his wife rejects it in horror, he says very quietly, "Angelique . . . I like this picture," and those are words she should listen to very carefully if she values their marriage.

There's a parallel relationship in the movie, between Castella's bodyguard Moreno (Gerard Lanvin) and the barmaid Manie (played by Agnes Jaoui, the film's director). Manie sells hashish as a sideline, and Moreno disapproves. This, too, is a matter of taste: Anyone who sells drugs is telling you something about themselves that you don't want to know more about. The difference is, you can stop selling drugs, but you may never be able to tell a good painting from a bad one, or know why the decor of a living room should not hurt the eyes.

Castella continues his lonely quest, uneasily joining Clara and her bohemian friends in the cafe they frequent after performances of the play, and eventually--well, people evolve, and taste involves not only judging superficial things, but being able to see beneath them.

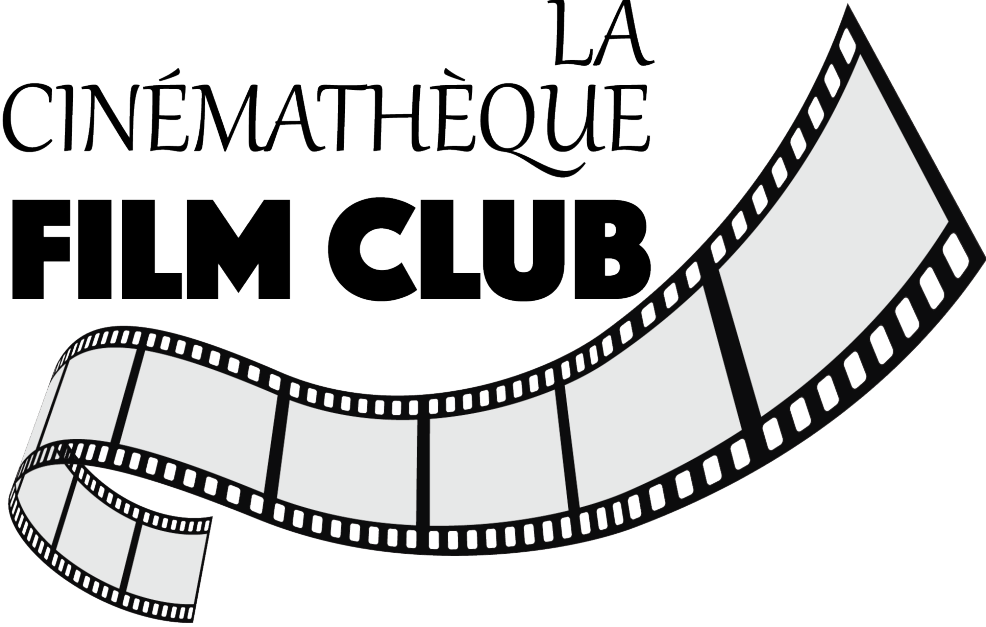
One of the delights of "The Taste of Others" is that it is so smart and wears its intelligence lightly. Films about taste are not often made by Hollywood, perhaps because it would so severely limit the box office to require the audience to have any. "The Taste of Others" will be all but impenetrable to anyone unable to appreciate what's going on under the dialogue, under the action, down there at the level where we instinctively make judgments based on taste, style and judgment. It's not, of course, that there's a right or wrong about taste. It's more that your taste defines the kinds of people who want to share it with you. Here's a test: If, as your taste evolves over a lifetime, you find that it attracts more interesting friends, you're on the right track.

Note: "The Taste of Others" is nominated for this year's foreign film Oscar.

Filmography (as director)

- **Place publique** (2018)
in post-production
- **Under the Rainbow** (2013)
- **Let's Talk About the Rain** (2008)
- **Look at Me** (2004)
- **The Taste of Others** (2000)

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Women Film Directors
Spring 2018

Jane Campion
b.1954

The Piano
1993

The Piano rewatched – re-examining the erotic via sexually charged music lessons

Luke Buckmaster • 20 Feb 2016

Article sourced from The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/feb/21/the-piano-rewatched-re-examining-the-erotic-via-sexually-charged-music-lessons>

Jane Campion became the first female director to win the Cannes' prestigious Palme d'Or with her extraordinary brooding drama of a mute piano player.

Films about mute piano players embroiled in erotic love triangles never did become a burgeoning genre. Perhaps that's because it's virtually impossible to imagine another equalling writer/director Jane Campion's 1993 magnum opus: an extraordinarily brooding drama that occupies an irrepressible space in audiences' minds and memories.

Like the early work of another New Zealand film-maker, Vincent Ward, who also directed a breathtaking Australia/NZ co-production, *The Navigator*, the film is its hermetically sealed own universe – an almost mystical type of time capsule. It plays with a gothic fog-through-the-trees moodiness that combines an incredible score with lush cinematography.

The Piano is kinky on its own terms and in its own unusual ways. Campion once told the critic Roger Ebert she “was trying to re-examine what erotic is”. The film contemplates a recurring theme in her work, exploring a woman on the fringes of social norms (arriving after 1989's *Sweetie* and *An Angel at My Table* and before *Holy Smoke* and *In the Cut*).

Set in the early years of the European colonisation of New Zealand, 30-ish Scottish woman Ada (Holly Hunter) hasn't spoken a word since she was six years old. “The voice you hear is not my speaking voice but my mind's voice,” she tells us via voiceover. “The strange thing is, I don't think myself silent. That is because of my piano.”

She is indeed rather fond of said piano, in a take-it-from-my-cold-dead-hands kind of way. Nevertheless Ada loses ownership of her prized possession after the husband she is shipped off to marry, Mr Stewart (Sam Neill), insists on leaving it on a beach – the first misstep in an increasingly rocky relationship.

The slightly more amiable George Baines (Harvey Keitel) obtains it and cuts Ada a deal. She can buy the piano back, key by key, in exchange for lessons.

These “lessons” become increasingly sexually charged. Baines transitions from gawking at her leg to running a hand across her shoulder. Before you know it, he's proposed the old “let's not do anything, just lie next to each other in bed” chestnut. Their relationship becomes more even-keeled as Ada's sexual urges are awakened.

Hunter is mesmerising as a mysterious and in certain senses impenetrable character, headstrong but vulnerable. Anna Paquin (in her first major role) is also unforgettable as Ada's young daughter, with whom she communicates via sign language.

Both actors received Academy awards for their performances. Paquin, who was 11 years old at the time, became the second youngest Oscar winner in history. Campion became the second woman to be nominated for

best director (and won for best original screenplay). The film's accolades go on and on, including winning Cannes' prestigious Palme d'Or (Campion was the first woman to do so) and 11 AFI awards.

In the context of Australian cinema, *The Piano* is a reminder that long-term investment in talent pays dividends in both creative and commercial ways.

Campion's first film, *Sweetie*, was not a hit at the box office; the kind of production the peanut gallery might suggest we produce less of on the grounds it may not be palatable for mass consumption. Two films down the track Campion made *The Piano*, which netted about \$150m worldwide and became one of the most acclaimed films of the 90s. It is clear demonstration that cultural value accrues in multiple senses and arrives in multiple forms.

It is also a significant film in that it was produced by Jan Chapman, one of Australian cinema's most distinguished behind-the-scenes talents (her incredible track record includes *The Babadook*, *The Daughter*, *Lantana*, *Love Serenade* and *Somersault*).

The Piano remains many things to many people: an enigmatic masterpiece from one of the finest living film-makers.

Filmography (as Director)

- **Top of the Lake** (2013-2017) TV series, eight episodes
- **Bright Star** (2009)
- **8** (2008) “The Water Diary”
- **To Each His Own Cinema** (2007) “The Lady Bug”
- **The Water Diary** (2006) short
- **In the Cut** (2003)
- **Holy Smoke** (1999)
- **The Portrait of a Lady** (1996)
- **The Piano** (1993)
- **An Angel at My Table** (1990)
- **Sweetie** (1989)
- **2 Friends** (1986)
- **A Girl’s Own Story** (1986) short
- **An Exercise in Discipline: Peel** (1986) short
- **Dancing Daze** (1986)
- **After Hours** (1984) short
- **Mishaps of Seduction and Conquest** (1984) short
- **Passionless Moments** (1983) short

'The Piano' Plays on the Inner Voice

Roger Ebert • November 4, 1993

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/the-piano-plays-on-the-inner-voice>

Jane Campion's wonderful film "The Piano" arrived at this year's Cannes Film Festival so already wreathed in glory that another director, Abel Ferrara, grouched: "They might as well have met her at the airport and given her the prize, and let it go at that."

In the end, "The Piano" shared the Palme d'Or with "Farewell My Concubine," and now seems well-positioned to pick up some Academy Award nominations, especially for actors Holly Hunter and Harvey Keitel.

Having seen it again just last week, at the Hawaii Film Festival, I am reminded what an odd, strange film it really is. It tells the story of a 19th century Scottish woman named Ada, who stops talking at the age of 6 ("Nobody, not even I myself, knows why"), and arrives with her young daughter on a godforsaken coast of New Zealand to be married to a man she has never met. She expresses herself through her piano, and through the daughter, a willful little girl with a careless notion of truth.

The new husband proves distant and impotent, but a scruffy neighbor, a British whaler who lives with a Maori tribe, is seduced by the music of her piano. He buys it from the husband, and then starts a campaign to win the bride's love - by trading her one piano key for each favor. Removing her blouse is worth two keys.

The height of eroticism

There is a moment in the movie that is among the most erotic I have ever seen. The whaler, played by Harvey Keitel, has paid her a key to lift her skirt up above her knees while she plays. Of course, as a proper Victorian lady, the skirt is only the first of her countless layers of clothing. But as she plays and he peers under the piano, he sees a tiny patch of her skin revealed through a tear in her stocking. And he touches that little pink oversight with trembling reverence.

"That was one of the challenges," Jane Campion told me one afternoon during the Cannes festival. "I was trying to re-examine what erotic is. To see if you can create it in a half-centimeter square flesh. Of course, what amazed me when we were researching the costumes was something I hadn't really clicked on: Victorian women wore crotchless underwear, so that under these very elaborate and formidable gowns, their bottoms were completely bare. And the men knew that!"

One of the most amusing moments in the film comes when a formidable old local woman has to relieve herself in the woods, while her companions hold blankets to shield the view. Taking off a dozen layers of underclothing under the circumstances would not have been practical.

"Otherwise, she'd be at a loss, wouldn't she?" Campion smiled. "I'm thinking that the men must all have known that. I'm sure everyone was permanently eroticized by the idea and no wonder: just a little ankle to suggest so much more. These days, with pantyhose and panties, it's certainly not the same idea."

A Victorian twist

If this spicy talk gives you the idea "The Piano" (opening Friday in Chicago at the Fine Arts) is a film about sex, you would be right, and wrong. The movie is powerfully erotic, but in a repressed, twisted, Victorian way. The heroine's muteness only adds to the mystery. She does not talk (except sometimes in a voiceover,

which she says is "not my own voice, but the voice of my mind"). But she has a ferocious will, and scribbles notes on a pad she carries always ("That is my piano! MINE!"). And she uses sign language with her daughter, who speaks for her, and is also capable of making up the most extraordinary stories on her own.

Jane Campion and I spoke in one of those vast, half-used salons that a Victorian-era grand hotel, like the Carlton in Cannes, has squirreled away in its farther reaches. The sun slanted in through potted palm trees, the furniture was so overstuffed you had to lean forward to be seen, and in a distant corner, Holly Hunter was playing the piano as if unaware that anyone might be listening (which she certainly was not).

Hunter is a very compact, definite, determined woman, able to evoke the very souls of those 19th century heroines who faced down whole continents with starchy little smiles. If there is one thing certain about the approaching Oscars, it is that Hunter will win one of the nominees for best actress.

How did you decide on her? I asked Campion. Hunter, after all, is better known for her Southern characters - for the intense TV producer in "Broadcast News," and the proud, bloodthirsty mother of "The Absolutely True Adventures of the Alleged Texas Cheerleader Murdering Mom."

"Well, at first, it wasn't an obvious choice," Campion said. "I met a lot of women I think could have done interesting things, but Holly has a kind of interior world. Actually, not a big interior world, not like you'd say was a universe, but a very definite one. In this role, she has to communicate with her eyes, her empathy and her vulnerability. And Ada, the character, can be very chilly."

Part of the mystery, I said, is wondering, "What is she thinking now?"

"And that was hard for both of us because we're both really big, expressive types. Holly being mysterious is almost unimaginable. But we sorted it out, and as we were watching rushes, we'd keep talking, and we just noticed that it didn't work for Ada to move her face around a lot, like some deaf people do when they sign.

"It worked for her to have a certain restraint all the time, and a pride, and even when she's savaged and her finger is cut off, even then the most important thing to do is to keep that sense of herself, that pride and that sort of pathos in her holding herself together."

Ada's husband, played by Sam Neill, is a distant, pathetic man who doesn't understand the first thing about women or about himself. When he discovers that Ada is having an affair with the neighbor, his first instinct is not to rush in upon them in rage.

Instead, he fits his eye first to one chink in the wall and then to another, finally ending up beneath the house, listening to them. First, he debases himself in this way, and only later does he fly out in rage.

A full-blown romance

The Keitel character seems at first sight untamed (he has decorated his face with Maori tattoos), but is revealed as sensitive, even romantic. It is one of the film's surprises that his bargain with Ada, at first so mercenary, a key for a peek, turns in the end to full-blown romance.

"He's sort of vaguely part of the colonials, but not really," Campion said. "A whaler who has settled ashore, and is comfortable with the settlers, but outside them. He's not a Maori, either. The face decoration is a half-hearted thing; he doesn't have the full tattoo that they have. Perhaps the pursuit of this woman is the only thing that he's ever really given his hundred percent to."

When Ada plays the piano for him, I said, the music releases his better nature. It expresses beauty and truth, and that's why he finally can't go through with his bargain, can't prostitute her for her piano.

"I think the bargain outweighs its usefulness for him," Campion said.

Extraordinary performance

And then there is that extraordinary little girl, Flora, played by Anna Paquin, who probably has more dialogue in the film than any of the adult characters, and who is instrumental in bringing about the resolution of the plot.

In some notes she wrote for the film, Campion recalled the day she saw Paquin's audition tape: "There was this tiny little girl, probably the smallest of all I'd seen - and extremely shy. I almost turned it off.

"I thought this girl was never going to be able to cope with this huge speech. I just about fell off my chair when she began. She just looked into the camera and never blinked. She told this long, extremely impassioned story of how Ada lost her voice and you totally believed her."

When you were writing the screenplay, how did you hit upon the notion that the central character would never speak? And why did her muteness seem to add to the story?

"You'd have to go back to the first intention I really had, which was to find a story that would work for me in talking about love. Since I've never really had an easy time with narrative, I was looking for a story which would give me some devices that I could use. I thought of the film working in a kind of gothic, romantic genre - which my spirit just loves.

"And when you're trying to tell a romantic gothic story, you try to put situations in their most extreme form. So I thought, what if she doesn't speak? She doesn't speak and so the piano is going to be so important to her. She must have it in order to live. That would mean she'd do a lot more - she'd do anything to get it back. Whereas if she could speak and say, 'That dirty old man over there,' the whole story would be over."

So much of what she feels is so much better for not having to be said.

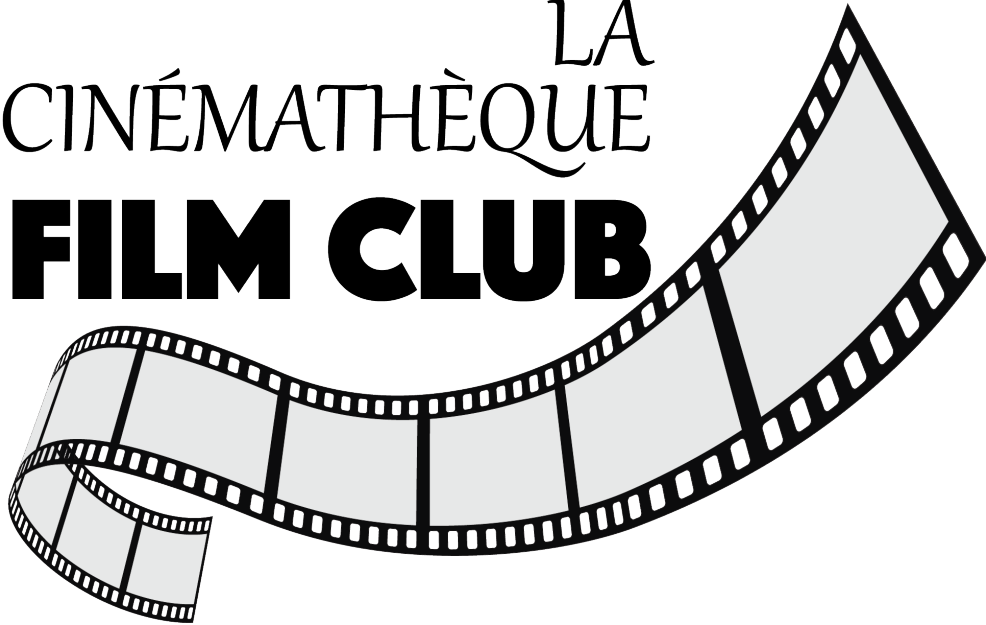
"That was the next challenge. Holly manages to capture Ada's aloofness with no sense of the handicapped person. It's the rest of the world that's handicapped by speaking."

"The Piano" is Jane Campion's third feature, after her debut at Cannes 10 years ago with a program of shorts that announced her as a major new voice. Then came "Sweetie," the story of a strong-willed, mentally disturbed young girl who disrupts her family.

And the extraordinary three-part "An Angel at My Table," based on the autobiography of New Zealand writer Janet Frame, who survived long years of wrongful hospitalization for schizophrenia and emerged as her homeland's most important modern writer. All three films are about women who have to find difficult ways of expressing themselves to people who don't want to listen to them.

"Yes," Campion said. "They have powerful spirits but no clear path of expression. The story tries to find them a way of discovering one."

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Women Film Directors 2
Spring 2018

Samira Makhmalbaf
b.1980

Blackboards
2000

Blackboards

Maria Garcia • Nov 1, 2004

Article sourced from Film Journal: <http://www.filmjournal.com/blackboards>

Reviews

The frontiers of embattled nations are marked not just by the omnipresent threat of violence, but by a surreal in-between-ness. Desolate, they nevertheless harbor memories of habitation. In Samira Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards*, the borderland is the one between Iraq and Iran, the former Kurdish homeland, where gunfire from roving helicopters demarcates the otherwise indistinguishable boundaries. Traversing this craggy purgatory are the young Iranian filmmaker's unforgettable cast of characters: a cortege of dying men in search of their birthplaces, young boys smuggling contraband, and teachers with blackboards. Their encounters are the ciphers to Makhmalbaf's Kafkaesque cosmology.

The teachers, Said (Said Mohamadi) and Reeboir (Bahman Ghobadi), come to the borderlands in search of pupils, but their students, hauling bales of illegal goods to support their families, trumpet the futility of formal education. Soon, Reeboir's blackboard is split into pieces to serve as a splint for one boy's injured leg. Said, joining the caravan of old men and their families back to the town of their birth, transforms his blackboard into a pallet when one of the men stumbles and falls. Blackboards become a clothesline for an overburdened mother and, covered with mud, shields for raining bullets. In the absurdity of the blackboards' presence on the frontier, and in their necessary transformation from instruments of institutionalized knowledge into needed objects, Makhmalbaf expresses the multiplicity of her characters' impoverishment. *Blackboards* is an exquisite allegorical film about the plight of stateless people.

This is Makhmalbaf's second feature. Her first, *The Apple*, made when she was 17, garnered critical acclaim, but most reviewers attributed her success to her father's tutelage. While Mohsen Makhmalbaf (Gabbah) is Samira's co-writer and her editor on *Blackboards*, he was not on the set during his daughter's challenging shoot in the borderlands. Samira Makhmalbaf's vision is distinctive, not overtly political, but certainly critical of Iran, and perhaps other countries like Syria and Turkey, which will not relinquish any land to establish a Kurdish homeland. Visually, it is austere, in the Iranian New Wave tradition, and gritty, like fellow Fourth Wave member Bahman Ghobadi's *A Time for Drunken Horses*, the first film about Kurds. Its humanism is uncommon and extraordinary.

Shooting in the hinterlands without a permit, directing a cast of non-professionals recruited on-location, Samira Makhmalbaf circumvented Iranian censorship. Her film was smuggled out of the country for Cannes, where it won the Grand Jury Prize in 2000. This promising young artist is one of the few women working in that country's film industry, along with Mohsen's wife, Marzieh Meshkini, the director of *The Day I Became a Woman* (2001). In *Blackboards*, she illustrates the same sensitivity to the plight of Muslim women as she did in *The Apple*. The final shot is of Halaleh (Behnaz Jafari), the woman who inherits Said's blackboard. As she disappears into the mountain rime, the words Said once wrote on the blackboard, "I love you," become visible, but Halaleh can't read. The message is now just another part of the larger burden she carries upon her back.

-Maria Garcia

INTERVIEW: Samira Makhmalbaf Paints It “Blackboards”

Anthony Kaufman • December 9, 2002

Article sourced from Indie Wire: <http://www.indiewire.com/2002/12/interview-samira-makhmalbaf-paints-it-blackboards-80092/>

At only 18, **Samira Makhmalbaf** (daughter of famed Iranian master **Mohsen**) directed one of the most auspicious film debuts of the '90s, “**The Apple**,” a trenchant account of two young girls sheltered by their parents to debilitating extremes. Acted by the family whose story the film is based on, the young Makhmalbaf created a resonant neorealist study of the dangers of fundamentalist beliefs, the oppression of women, the bonds of family, and the blurry lines between documentary and fiction.

In her second film, “**Blackboards**,” a Special Jury Prize winner at **Cannes** 2000 (which belatedly lands in New York today, with dates to follow in Boston, Berkeley, Seattle and L.A.), Makhmalbaf continues her poetic exploration of deprivation and neglect in the Middle Eastern world. In the film’s striking opening images, we see how “**Blackboards**” gets its title: a group of teachers carry large chalkboards strapped to their backs, as if burdened with the weight of education itself, searching fruitlessly for Kurdish students in the dusty nether regions between Iran and Iraq.

Since making “**Blackboards**,” Makhmalbaf directed one of the more subtle and celebrated segments from the French omnibus film “**11-09-02**,” about a teacher trying to explain September 11 to young Afghani refugees. She is currently in Afghanistan working on her next feature, and along with her father and “**Kandahar**” actress **Nelofar Pazira**, helping to launch Afghan Film, a film production and exhibition entity that will put on the first film festival in Afghanistan. During **Cannes** 2000, indieWIRE contributor Anthony Kaufman spoke with Makhmalbaf about working with nonprofessional actors, the devastating affects of war, and the borders between imagination and reality, and nation states.

indieWIRE: You used mostly nonprofessional actors. How did you recruit and work with your cast?

Samira Makhmalbaf: There is only one professional actress in the film. I had taken one of Iran’s most experienced professional actors, but after a little time, I found that he was quite different from the others, quite exaggerated. So he left. All of the others, except one or two, are local people, and they speak Kurdish, but they understand Persian, so I could express myself in Persian, and I could check it with my local assistant. After a little time, I got used to it, because it’s very similar to the Persian language. It was hard and easy at the same time. It was hard because they didn’t know what was cinema. They wanted to take a holiday during production for some religious practices and I said, no, it’s not possible. But it was easy also, because it wasn’t complicated. I chose all these characters because of the geography of their faces one by one; if you love your characters, they can feel it. And when you feel it, it’s easier to direct them. It was a challenge, but it was not impossible.

iW: How did you write the dialogue?

Makhmalbaf: I wrote it and then I went to the characters with it. But I didn’t dictate them to use all these words. Sometimes, it would be changed.

iW: Where did you find the little boys; were they actual mules smuggling goods between the countries?

Makhmalbaf: Yes, I chose them all from one village. It was their real lives. Smuggling was real to them, being a fugitive, poverty, ignorance, that's the reality of their lives. But the way I shot it, the way I expressed it, is between reality and imagination. It has a lot of metaphors, but at the same time, I'm talking about reality.

iW: Can you talk about the relationship between metaphor and reality in the film?

Makhmalbaf: The first image of the film starts with a very surreal image, but as you go into the film, you can feel the reality of being a fugitive. And I love this image very much and I think it can carry different meanings. It can express social, philosophic, and poetical meaning — so many metaphors, and yet also, you can go into their reality.

The idea for the film came out of my father's mind when I was looking for a subject to do for my next film. He gave me three or four pages and then it was time for me to imagine it. But I couldn't simply imagine it. How can I sit here in Cannes and think of people living in Kurdistan? So I had to go in it and be involved in it. So I cast the actors and found my locations, and at the same time, I let the reality of the situation come in. I don't want to kill the subject and put it in front of the camera and just shoot it as a dead subject. I let the reality come into imagination. I believe that metaphors are born from the imagination of the artist and the reality of life making love to each other.

An example: Imagine more than a hundred old men want to go back to their country. This is imagination and reality. It's reality because there are some older generations that want to go back to their country to die. This is real. But just being old men is imagination. Or just being one woman is imagination. Or carrying these white boards is a combination of reality and imagination. Because maybe it's possible, if you're a refugee, if you're a teacher, what can you do except carry your blackboard and look for students? They are like street vendors, shouting, "Come, try to learn something!" In such a dire situation, everyone is poor, so nobody can learn anything. It is imagination, but it could exist.

iW: The teachers, of course, can't find any children who are interested in learning. Why is this the case?

Makhmalbaf: When I make a movie, I don't try to make a statement; I think of a question and I go to find why it is so. In this situation, it is the bad consequences of war. This new generation is suffering from it, the old generation is still suffering from it, and the middle generation is trying to teach the past and future generations, but it's impossible, so they're also suffering the consequences of war. Why? Because there's no time to learn. The children have to smuggle every day from one country to another country to stay alive. They just want to be alive. To them, they feel education is useless. For the old people, the time for them to learn is over. They want to go back to their own country and die in their own country. So education also seems useless.

iW: The film deals a lot with borders. Most obviously, the border between Iran and Iraq, but also, the Kurds are a people without specific borders. What is your attitude towards borders?

Makhmalbaf: I think the best way to express myself about this is in the film. These people's situation is so hard. They're refugees, but they're also free. As the director of this film, I didn't make any limitations for the characters, any borders for them. For the young generation, there is no border, because they just want to live. It

seems to me that they are like a big school of fish; they live in a big ocean, they're free, but when it's time to die, they suddenly want to go back to the place where they were born. I don't believe in borders. They seem funny, so arbitrary. However it's painful, because you feel this nationalism.

iW: How long did you spend shooting the film?

Makhmalbaf: For three months. One month of research, two months of shooting and around one month of editing. For editing, my father first did it. But he had to go by my decoupage [editing]. But then there was the creative editing, so of course, he made some changes. Then we had different ideas. If we didn't agree, we went with my idea. For example, he didn't like some of the dialogue or the sequences, but I believed in them. They came from my heart. If I didn't put it in, it would lack something.

iW: What exactly is your working relationship with your father?

Makhmalbaf: As a producer, of course, he helps give me the money so I can make the film. Then, he gives me many ideas, and I choose from them. Then I make the movie on my own. As it is in the cinema, it's a combination. It's art with different energies coming into it.

Filmography

- **Two-Legged Horse** (2008)
- **At Five in the Afternoon** (2003)
- **September 11** (2002) Segment: "Iran"
- **Blackboards** (2000)
- **The Apple** (1998)

An analysis of the New Iranian Cinema through four of its key directors

Jean-Baptiste De Vault

Sourced from *Young and Innocent*: <http://www.youngandinnoent.eu/articles/2012/english/analysis-new-iranian-cinema-through-four-its-key-directors>

Introduction

In the late 1980s, the so-called 'second generation' of the 'Iranian New Wave' (also sometimes called 'New Iranian Cinema') gained international attention with films such as *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (Bahram Beyza'i, 1986) and *Where is the Friend's House?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987) putting Iranian cinema back on the map for the first time since the 'first generation' New Wave of the late 1960s. While it is advisable to resist the temptation of labelling film movements on the back of a handful of films, which can only represent a small fraction of a country's cinematic output, it also cannot be denied that Iranian cinema has gathered prolonged recognition and admiration well beyond this initial breakthrough. In the 1990s, Richard Peña, director of the New York film festival, called Iranian cinema "one of the most exciting in the world today" (1) and the Toronto film festival hailed it as "one of the pre-eminent national cinemas" (2).

This acclaim from international film festivals is symptomatic of New Iranian Cinema's global success, as may be observed from several factors. For example, the fact that an Iranian film has won top prize at each of the triumvirate of major festivals - Berlin, Cannes and Venice - in the last 20 years (*Taste of Cherry* (Kiarostami, 1997) won the Palme d'Or at Cannes (3); *The Circle* (Panahi, 2000) won the Golden Lion at Venice; and *A Separation* (Farhadi, 2011) won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale). The very presence of Iranian cinema in film festivals has itself undergone a meteoric rise, with the number of Iranian entries in worldwide festivals increasing from 43 in 1980 to 1769 in 2003, and the number of awards won from 2 in 1980 to over 100 each year of the 2000s (4). On top of this, the unique position of a figure such as Abbas Kiarostami in particular, voted most important director of the decade by U.S. critics in *Film Comment* and revered as an auteur of international repute, fully cements Iranian cinema's status renaissance in the late 1980s as more than a passing fad. Its status continued to grow and has now elevated to being seen one of the most distinctive national cinemas. Naturally, this is too broad a statement to make about the entirety of Iranian cinema, and hence it must be specified that this essay will focus almost exclusively on the New Iranian Cinema (hereafter referred to as NIC), that is the Iranian 'art cinema' of the last 25 years. The international spread of this type of Iranian cinema picked up momentum in the late 1980s, and carried it well into the 1990s and beyond. One of the primary impetuses was Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House?* taking five prizes at the 1989 Locarno Film Festival. Three years later, Kiarostami not only saw his film *And Life Goes On* (1992) judged Best Film in the *Un Certain Regard* strand at Cannes, but was also honoured with the Roberto Rossellini Prize for his career overall. From then on, Kiarostami would continue to be a regular at film festivals worldwide, soon to be joined by other standard-bearers of the NIC. Jafar Panahi, who worked as his assistant director on *Through The Olive Trees* (1994), has directed Kiarostami-penned scripts such as *The White Balloon* and *Crimson Gold*. He developed his own style, however, displaying a passionate concern for social injustice (a trait which sadly resulted in the current regime jailing him), and has won awards at Cannes, Venice and Berlin.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, whose career has been punctuated by abrupt changes in style and ideology, is another of the well-known auteurs to emerge out of the NIC. He too has won a host of awards, and was perhaps influenced in his change of direction towards more self-reflexive films by Kiarostami, for whom he played a small part in *Close-Up* (1990). In 1996, he set up the Makhmalbaf Film House, simultaneously a film school and collaborative production company, in his own home with family members and friends as students. Under his guidance, his daughter Samira Makhmalbaf displayed directorial talent precociously, making *The Apple* (1998) when only 18 years old, and touring with it on the film festival circuit. Her follow-up film, *Blackboards* (2000) would win the Jury Prize at Cannes. By this time, Iranian cinema had already become celebrated the world over, and the work of these four directors played a key role in paving the way for the attention it garnered, from festivals to art-house regulars and even mainstream audiences. A global market was suddenly surprised to find Iran, with its reductive reputation as a fundamentalist Islamic state, producing such poetic humanist films. Many questions can therefore be raised about the recent success of Iranian cinema, and the characteristics which have made it so distinctive. Are there aesthetic or thematic similarities in these films, and what are some of the influences and motivations behind them? Is there such a thing as a signature style, idiosyncratic to the NIC, discernibly running through these films, and in what ways might it be responsible for their positive reception from festivals, scholars and critics? In order for this study to engage with these questions, it will need to narrow its focus, notwithstanding the great diversity of Iranian cinema. By restricting itself to the films of Abbas Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira Makhmalbaf and Jafar Panahi, this project necessarily omits many Iranian directors equally worthy of study (the likes of Beyza'i, Bani-Etemad or Naderi for example), but these four filmmakers represent a sample of the most prominent and internationally recognised proponents of the

NIC. While their films have differences and contrasting elements, the essay will attempt to identify recurring themes and features and assess the factors which have shaped these.

Historical Background

For the benefit of the subsequent sections, it will be useful to place Iranian cinema in its historical and socio-political context. Up until the late 1950s and early 1960s, Iranian cinema consisted of formulaic melodramas and musicals. Under the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Tehran "boasted a major film festival and a commercial industry releasing up to seventy films a year" (5), but films making social critiques were heavily censored or banned altogether. The first 'New Wave', which occurred in the 1960s with films such as *The Cow* (Dariush Mehrjui, 1969) and *The House is Black* (Feroz Farrokhzad, 1963), brought a kind of realism to Iranian cinema which had hitherto been missing. Furthermore, these films took modernist literature, present in Iranian cultural consciousness since the 1940s, as one of its main influences; in fact, Farrokhzad was herself a key figure in the modernist poetry movement. Other directors came through, such as Sohrab Shahid Saless, whose *A Simple Event* (1974) is a known influence on Kiarostami (6). Indeed, the impact of these first New Wave films left an indelible mark on Iranian Cinema.

Kiarostami was already active in the 1970s, having made his first feature, *The Traveler* (1974), at the film division of the Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Adolescents (*Kanun-e Parvaresh-e Fekri Kudakan va Noja-vanan*, also known as *Kanun* for short). *Kanun* became the focal point of a new generation of young filmmakers, including Kiarostami, who would make shorts, features and documentaries there over the next two decades. The political landscape in Iran would vastly change during that time, with anti-Shah protests, primarily by supporters of the then-exiled Ayatollah Khomeini, becoming more fervent. Many traditionalists accused cinema of being "an agent of cultural colonization of Iran by the West" (7), and in August 1978, a cinema in Abadan was set on fire by anti-Shah militants, causing almost 400 deaths. In 1979 the revolution drove the Shah into exile and the Ayatollah Khomeini took power, with the goal of transforming Iran into a fundamentalist Islamic state. Cinema now became "associated with the previous regime's cultural dominance" (8) and was met with much suspicion by the new authorities. This negative attitude led to 195 of the 525 existing cinemas being burnt down or destroyed (9), and film production itself slowed down drastically. The first few years after the revolution were therefore a very uncertain time for Iranian cinema; yet, unexpectedly, out of these literal and metaphorical ashes would rise the beginnings of the NIC. Rose Issa describes the changes which gradually revitalised the film industry: "...following the enormous and rapid social upheaval brought by the devastating Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the conservative religious regime needed the film-makers to document current events. It is no accident that most of the currently known film directors started out making documentaries. Later, the need to entertain a public hungry for cinema, forced the only state production and distribution foundation, Farabi, to let go of its monopoly and to encourage directors to raise their own funds." (10)

The stagnation gradually was overcome and the number of films being made almost quadrupled between 1979 and 1987 (11). This was due to the factors Rose Issa mentions, as well as others. For instance, the majority of foreign films were banned, meaning less market competition for domestic productions; the Fajr film festival, promoting Iranian cinema, was inaugurated in 1983; and social security for filmmakers was introduced. Directors who had been working in the pre-revolution era found success again, such as Amir Naderi with *The Runner* (1985) or Dariush Mehrjui with *The Tenants* (1986), while a new post-revolution generation also came to the fore, including Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who made humanistic films using the war as a theme to criticise Iran's government and society. Such social critiques were predictably met with disapproval by the state, which was as keen as the Pahlavi regime before it to "suppress themes of political criticism and social dissent" (12). Censorship remained present in both pre- and post-revolution eras, yet it proved to be, somewhat paradoxically, one of the defining factors shaping the NIC in the late 1980s and 1990s. Khomeini's attitude towards cinema was ambivalent; opposed to its 'misuse' under the Shah's regime, he nonetheless was pragmatic about its potential as propaganda tool and thus did not seek to remove it, instead aiming to 'purify' it according to the ascetic codes of Shi'a Islam. In 1982 government officials introduced a set of censorship regulations: women had to remain veiled on-screen, even in situations where they realistically would not be, such as in their own homes; nor could they be shown in close-ups because the audience's gaze too came under religious scrutiny. Censorship went through alternating periods of tightening and relaxing; an example of the latter came under reformist Mohammed Khatami, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance (the ministry responsible for supervising the film industry) from 1982 to 1992 and later President from 1997 to 2005, a well-known supporter of filmmakers. But ultimately the restrictions induced the creation of a new cinematic grammar and urged filmmakers to invent innovative ways to bypass them. The extent to which industrial, historical and socio-political factors have formed NIC's idiosyncrasies shall be addressed further on, but first these idiosyncrasies themselves must be distinguished.

Recurring traits of New Iranian Cinema films

Certain aesthetic features, as well as thematic concerns, are common to a large number of the films made by the four NIC directors introduced in the previous sections, even though each has their own distinct auteurist style. Notably, these films developed a realism with tropes comparable to the documentary format (with many either being actual documentaries or pseudo-documentaries like *Close-Up* and *The Apple*) or to Italian neo-realism. Yet, differentiating them from these traditions, is a self-conscious, self-reflexive tone characteristic of modernist art. For the purposes of categorisation these features have been divided into two loose sub-sections, since it is in the blend of these traditional and modernist elements that NIC finds its signature style.

Realist/Neo-realist elements

Although their stylistic range is wide, NIC films are often made with non-professional actors, filmed on location rather than in studios, use direct sound, contain a number of long takes and frequently end with a final freeze-frame shot. They tend to have simple narratives, commonly open-ended, with seemingly little dramatisation or sensationalisation, often set in rural areas of Iran and focussing on lower class characters. This approach has drawn many comparisons between New Iranian Cinema and the Italian neo-realist films, or the 'poetic realist' films of Satyajit Ray. Indeed there is another trait which NIC films have in common with works such as *The Bicycle Thieves* (De Sica, 1948), *Germany Year Zero* (Rossellini, 1948) or *Pather Panchali* (Ray, 1955); namely the use of child protagonists in prominent roles. As Hamid Reza Sadr describes, in "the absence of a star system and famous actors in the years following the revolution, children became an important element" in Iranian cinema (13). It was predominantly boys who featured in the 1980s (*Where is the Friend's Home?* and *Homework* (Kiarostami, 1989)), while during the 1990s it was typically girls: Panahi's *The White Balloon* (1995) and *The Mirror* (1997), and Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998). For *Where is the Friend's Home?*, Kiarostami travelled to rural northern Iran to tell the story of Ahmed, a conscientious young boy on an after-school quest to return his classmate's schoolbook, which he took home by mistake. The themes of the film are deceptively simple; the moral dilemma posed to Ahmed becomes compelling because the friend will be expelled from school the next day, if his book is not presented to the teacher. Ahmed responds with an innate sense of duty, despite the indifference of the adults and figures of authority around him. The mazy village pathways and zigzag trails he follows (purposely created by Kiarostami for the film) lend the rural settings a de-familiarising aura. Something comparable can be seen across other NIC films, like Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996) in which the rug-weaving of a nomadic tribe is depicted as a colourful spectacle, or in Samira Makhmalbaf's *Blackboards* (2000). In the latter, the surreal image of itinerant teachers carrying their blackboards on their backs is juxtaposed with the rural landscape of Kurdistan which "dissolves into disconnected spaces of desolation" (14) through fragmentary editing, eschewing the spatial bearings of standard continuity editing. It is in traits like these that we already perceive NIC's blend of the everyday and the extraordinary, a conscious desire to play with representations of village life, and thereby force re-negotiations of national coordinates.

The use of child protagonists also resonates on a national scale; they are often allegorical stand-ins for something wider, a technique "disguising [from the censors] its wider socio-political implications through the figure of childhood" (15). Samira Makhmalbaf's debut film, *The Apple*, provides such an example. The pseudo-documentary narrative is based on a real-life event, concerning two 11-year-old twins who were locked up inside their home by an over-protective father. This news-item immediately attracted Samira's interest because, to her and her father Mohsen, it was the "story of our nation" (16). Samira, however, refuses to judge or condemn in the film, instead casting an anthropological eye on the girls slowly making their first steps towards the outside world, an optimistic metaphor for Iran's slow course towards a more open society. The film ends with the twins' blind mother, herself just as secluded as her daughters, wandering into the street and tentatively reaching out for a symbolic apple. Some have seen this as a "feminist allegory about women seizing opportunities" (17), and the film as "a devastating condemnation of the mind-numbing oppression of women" (18). In this regard, *The Apple* may be likened to other NIC films highlighting the situation of women in modern Iran, such as *The Circle* (2000) and *Ten* (2002). Besides documenting the nuances of gender divisions, NIC has also been thematically preoccupied with the ethnic and class differences present in Iranian society. Iran is a multi-ethnic country with significant Kurdish and Turk minorities, and a large community of Afghan refugees displaced during the Soviet-Afghan War. All four directors have addressed this issue of the major cultural 'others' in their own way. The Makhmalbafs have gradually moved away from making films in Iran, directing attention towards the plight of the Afghan people. *Kandahar* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2001) and *At Five in the Afternoon* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 2003) were both shot on location in Afghanistan, with non-professional actors, and the tragic experiences of ordinary Afghans told within the parameters of realistic narratives. Kiarostami, too, dealt with these social issues, albeit in a more oblique way, particularly in the parable-like *Taste of Cherry*, where the suicidal Mr Badii encounters three characters each representing one of the main ethnic minorities in Iran: a Kurdish soldier, an Afghan seminary student and a Turkish taxidermist, building a microcosm of Iranian society from the

abstract environment of Badiei's journey. Panahi also handled this theme obliquely, before his more overtly socially-minded films, in his first feature *The White Balloon*. The film revolves around a seven-year-old girl's quest to buy a goldfish and was a minor hit in the US and Europe, where it was received as a charming story of innocent children protagonists. But, as Shohini Chaudhuri notes, "the film's sombre ending belies this reading" (19), with the sudden shift in point-of-view from the girl, to a solitary Afghan balloon-seller holding the eponymous white balloon, serving as an effective reminder of the outsider status such refugees hold in Iran.

Whereas Samira Makhmalbaf's directorial style can be described as anthropological, and Kiarostami's as philosophical, Panahi's is more journalistic. His films exposed Iranian society's malaises, like *Crimson Gold* (2003), yet another film inspired by real events, in which a schizophrenic Iran-Iraq war veteran delivers pizzas to bourgeois homes or gets snubbed by a condescending uptown jeweller — episodes exemplifying his alienation. These more recent works by Panahi were not the first to directly deal with social and class divisions. Mohsen Makhmalbaf, himself regarded as somewhat of a 'working class hero' — hence the affinity the unemployed film-fanatic protagonist of *Close-Up* felt towards him — was already making films dealing with the socially excluded and disadvantaged in the 1980s, such as *The Cyclist* (1986) and *Marriage of the Blessed* (1987). This class-consciousness reflects an enduring thematic concern of the NIC, which has seldom focussed on the affluent middle classes of large cities like Tehran, either in setting or in character, except to present a contrast of social milieus. Such inclinations, as well as aesthetic features — free of eye-catching angles, ostentatious camera movement, or clever editing — differing from the standards of glamourised commercial cinema, have attracted comparisons with Italian neo-realism. As has NIC's penchant for minimalistic de-dramatised narratives, based on naturalistic events or even real-life stories (*The Apple*, *Close-Up*, *A Moment of Innocence...*) which puts into practice Cesare Zavattini's neo-realist motto: "[t]he time has come to tell the audience that they are the true protagonists of life" (20). Yet this is too simplistic a reading of NIC's characteristic style, as it has often attained a level of self-consciousness transcending pure realist traditions, and has unique preoccupations differentiating it from neo-realism.

Modernist elements

Kiarostami, speaking about *Close-Up*, claimed that "even I, the film-maker, get confused as to which parts were fiction and which documentary" (21). This could be applied to many NIC films generally, since blurring the lines between documentary and fiction, life and art, reality and film, is at the heart of much Iranian cinema. *Close-Up*'s starting point was a news-story about a man (Hossein Sabzian) arrested for pretending to be Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Kiarostami convincing the actual protagonists to re-enact the events on film (the similarities with how *The Apple* came to be made are evident). Hamid Dabashi summarised this dis-orientating amalgam of fact and fiction: "one knows one is watching a fiction (Kiarostami's *Close-Up*) that is based on fact (Sabzian's real story) that is based on fiction (Sabzian pretending to be Makhmalbaf) that is based on fact (Makhmalbaf as a leading Iranian filmmaker) that is based on fiction (Makhmalbaf making fictional stories in film) that is based on fact (the reality Makhmalbaf transforms into fiction)" (22). Kiarostami manipulates his material with skill, playing with the audience's expectations of documentary realism. For example, in the scene where Sabzian finally meets the real Makhmalbaf, the film crew is heard off-screen and the sound is cut under the false pretence of equipment failure — in fact this was a deliberate ploy to intensify the emotional power of the scene. Throughout this film and *The Apple*, its closest relation in the NIC canon, a constant tension between what is or isn't staged persists, and forces us to question the veracity of 'realism' and of film itself as a medium.

The NIC directors are fully aware that their films, despite much of mainstream realist cinema's ambition to depict some kind of fixed reality, can only be subjective, and this infuses them with a rare sense of self-consciousness. The audience is often reminded that what they are watching is merely a film, through distancing devices where the filmic apparatus literally intrudes into the diegetic space of the film, as in the coda to *Taste of Cherry*; the film-shoot in *Through the Olive Trees* (where the 'director' also introduces himself straight to camera as an actor at the start, putting the film's reality in doubt from the opening seconds); or in Panahi's *The Mirror*. In the latter, a young girl trying to get home unexpectedly breaks the cinematic illusion midway through the film by stating she no longer wants to act, and action cuts to Panahi and his crew debating what to do next. This abrupt denouement shifts the film from one which seemed destined to tread on similar ground to *The White Balloon*, into an examination of what is 'filmed', what is 'reality' and the interstices in-between the two. Panahi has recently returned to these themes, with *This Is Not a Film* (2011), made while he was under house arrest and smuggled out in a USB stick. Having been banned from directing by the Iranian authorities, in this conceptual and daring blend of film-essay-documentary, he ponders the definition of what filmmaking is. This recurring NIC motif of self-referentially making films about the filmmaking process itself also appears in much of the work of Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. The last two films comprising what is often labelled Kiarostami's 'Koker trilogy', *Life and Nothing More* and *Through the Olive Trees*, each refer back to the preceding film. In *Life and Nothing More*, a director, presumed to be a surrogate for Kiarostami, searches for the two boys

who acted in *Where is the Friend's Home?* in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake; while *Through the Olive Trees* is centred on the shooting of a scene from *Life and Nothing More*. Thus each film figures a film within a film, in an intricately nested structure. Characters from the previous films suddenly appear, including, in *Through the Olive Trees*, the sought-after boys who were never found in *Life and Nothing More*. Interestingly, Kiarostami refuses to group them as a trilogy, and also remarked "I didn't have the least intention as such of making a film about the shooting of a film" (23). Importantly, these self-reflexive tendencies resemble neither Brechtian devices nor post-modern playfulness, but instead offer a celebration of life — regarded as the one constant guiding both cinema and reality — and thus, in the hands of Kiarostami, take a more poetic and philosophical dimension.

Makhmalbaf's approach differs from Kiarostami's insofar as it is more personal; he frequently appears as himself in his films, but what the two share in common is an active interrogation of the authoritarian filmmaker and cinema's absolutist claim to truth. In the last 25 years, Makhmalbaf's personal transformation has been evident. Starting out as a fervent Islamist in his youth, he has gone on to alter his worldview and this evolution is visible over his film career. Already in *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989), we see his early experiments in self-referentiality, and in *A Time For Love* (1990) his ideas on the relativity of truth first emerge. But his most ambitious films were to come. In the pseudo-documentary *Salaam Cinema* (1995), Makhmalbaf, playing himself, presides over a series of auditions. The camera and what it makes the desperate people in front of it do, become an instrument to analyse both the significance of cinema in contemporary Iran and the dynamics of power relations. His next film, *A Moment of Innocence*, a personal attempt to exorcise the demons of his own past as a youthful revolutionary, again stars himself but this time he is joined by the actual policeman he'd stabbed twenty years before. Each of them mentors an actor set to play their respective youthful counterparts, in a re-enactment of their fateful encounter. Yet the cinematic re-creation of this real event ends with a symbolic final freeze-frame, where the representatives of the young policeman and the young Makhmalbaf exchange a flowerpot and a piece of bread, rather than a gun and a knife, which Hamid Dabashi described as "virtual realism" and an "erosion of the dead certainties that separate the real from the make-believe" (24). Instances like these, or the way Kiarostami builds a zigzag path on a hill in *Where is the Friend's Home?*, or how Samira Makhmalbaf introduces symbolic props (a mirror, a flower-pot, an apple) into the improvised scenes of *The Apple*, indicate a willingness to tamper with the on-screen representation of reality. The use of shots pregnant with symbolism adds poetic meaning to the 'reality' depicted, particularly with Kiarostami, who often speaks of his films being half-complete, with the viewer having to ascribe their own meaning to them. It is thus that NIC films transcend traditional realism, mixing the ordinary with the extraordinary, the real with the fantastical and the natural with the artificial, and as Rose Issa puts it, "explore and expose the complex paradoxes inherent in a society that, although based on traditional values and archaic religious laws, cannot escape modernism." (25)

Influences and Motivations behind New Iranian Cinema

Having identified some of the distinctive features of the NIC, these can now be traced back to their underlying influences and motivations, necessarily a complex blend of historical, geographic, aesthetic, economic, political and personal factors, all having played a role in shaping them. Dabashi, for example, offers theories which situate contemporary Iranian cinema within a wider cultural consciousness in Iran, but to take all of these factors into consideration is beyond the scope of the present essay. Only the most evident factors will be looked at here, again with a focus on the four selected directors, in order to see what lies behind the blend of traditional and modern in their films.

Censorship

It is clear that of all the social and political imperatives to influence post-revolution Iranian cinema, the censorship regulations, put in place in accordance with the doctrines of the Islamic regime, have had the most direct impact. Religious codes informed strict, ascetic modesty laws, dictating what was, or was not, morally acceptable for viewing. In order to enforce this, Iranian authorities maintained tight control over all aspects of the film industry, even having to approve screenplays at the pre-production stage and subjecting all films to a thorough vetting process before allowing exhibition permits. Thus the question often asked is whether NIC emerged in spite of this restriction on freedom of expression or, in some ways, because of it. Restrictive circumstances can have the ironic side-effect of motivating artists to invent indirect means of expressing their ideas. The idea that creativity can flourish when one has constraints rather than complete freedom, seems to hold true for Kiarostami (26) or for Panahi who makes the most of censorship rules by thinking of clever ways to sidestep them (27). Yet that is not to say such repressive measures are good for artists, since Panahi is now banned from making films and the Makhmalbafs could not cope with censorship, seeking a greater independence and eventually moving into exile.

The fact remains that Iranian filmmakers were forced to negotiate these restrictions, and the result was a different form of cinematic language. The post-revolution film industry saw its aim as producing "a national

cinema against the voyeuristic gaze of dominant cinema... and inscribing a new national subject-spectator severed from dominant cinema's formal systems" (28), and it is this resistance which enabled the development of NIC's unique cinematic grammar, distinct from standard cinema. In terms of film form, the specific limitations on intimate subject matter can be deemed largely responsible for the "preponderance of mid to long shots, the general absence of shot-reverse shot editing patterns, the difficulty of filming in interiors, specifically domestic spaces, the impossibility of showing actual physical contact between characters, or characters gazing into or close to the camera" (29) in NIC. This departure from standard tropes of conventional commercial cinema led to unexpected and sometimes paradoxical results. For example, Negar Mottahedeh argues that thanks to the unique cinematic grammar it had to develop to bypass modesty laws, the NIC developed a gaze removed from the scopophilic and voyeuristic impulses of dominant cinema and its masculine gaze. Mottahedeh thus asserts that NIC may be seen as "the apotheosis of 1970s feminist gaze theory" (30), as typified by Laura Mulvey's seminal paper "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*" (31). Censorship rules also can account for the choice of rural settings and use of child protagonists, both providing greater freedom; rural women can realistically be imagined outdoors in traditional garments unlike urban women. The modesty laws are also far looser towards children, who moreover can be used to get subtle, veiled allegories past censors, who are less suspicious of what appears to be an innocent child's tale. It is unsurprising therefore that Kiarostami has had relatively few issues with censors, as his is a more oblique approach — "I think they don't understand my films" he once said of the authorities (32) — whereas Panahi and Mohsen Makhmalbaf have been more openly interested in the social order of the here-and-now. But, as Shohat and Stam argued "the allegorical tendency available to all art becomes exaggerated in the case of repressive regimes" (33) and this would seem to apply to the way NIC filmmakers have got round censorship conflicts.

Artistic Legacy of Iran

One area in which the NIC's position on the cusp of tradition and modernism materialises itself most clearly, is in its relation with Iranian and Persian art, particularly poetry and literature. Criticism has often been levelled at Western critics and scholars for taking a 'Eurocentric' approach to analysing NIC, exoticising or culturally essentialising it, while only using European cinema as reference points. But works by the likes of Hamid Dabashi or Alberto Elena have stressed the importance of remembering the context of Iran's rich cultural legacy of poetry, philosophy and art, extending back several millennia, which pervades intrinsically through Iranian artistic heritage. As well as having a long tradition of oral story-telling (*naqqali*) and public theatre (*ro-hoz*), classical Persian culture boasts many celebrated poets, such as Omar Khayyam, Ferdowsi or Rumi (34), whose epic poems are an acknowledged influence on the philosophy of Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Indeed Makhmalbaf has often linked his own viewpoint concerning the relativity of truth and rejection of absolutes, noticeable in many of his films, to a passage from the poetry of Rumi: "Truth is a mirror that falls from the hand of God and shatters into pieces. Everyone picks up a piece and believes that this piece contains the whole truth, even though the truth is left sown about in each fragment" (35); while his 1997 film *The Silence* was explicitly influenced by Khayyam's poetry and philosophy. The enduring motif of journeys in NIC films, often with spiritual or metaphysical undertones, also has its counterparts in Persian poetry, most notably in Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, where a mystical quest serves to convey the moral that the destination is often less important than the journey itself.

20th century art has also been a fertile influence, with modernist movements in poetry and literature ushering in a new era for Iranian art. In the 1960s, Sohrab Sepehri and Forough Farrokhzad, among other contemporary poets, offered a ground-breaking new poetic outlook, and "became the principal locus of intellectual revolt against the dominant powers" (36). Kiarostami is particularly indebted to these modernist poets as an influence, and it is worth noting that *Where is the Friend's Home?* takes its name from a poem by Sepehri, whose work Dabashi describes as the poetic analogue of what Kiarostami has accomplished visually (37), while *The Wind Will Carry Us* (a title taken from a poem by Khayyam) quotes extensively from Farrokhzad's poetry. Numerous scholars have also identified the link between poetry and the symbolism used in NIC, especially in Kiarostami's films (38). There is also much to suggest the fascination with the interconnectedness of life and art stems from the themes of Iran's artistic tradition "which foregrounds deconstruction and multiple-narration" (39). To take just one, somewhat basic, example, even the famed Persian folk tales of the *Arabian Nights* were framed by the story within a story of Princess Scheherazade (40). But throughout classical Persian poetry and story-telling, the motif of framed narratives and stories-within-stories recurs, to the point where the different strands are inextricably entangled and life and art are firmly intertwined. As has already been stated, many NIC films express thematic concerns echoing these traditions, and the similarities, be they inspired directly or unconsciously, are noteworthy testament to NIC's specific position as descendent of many previous Iranian/Persian artistic movements.

Cinematic Influences

Cinematic movements may be included among this category, and as previously mentioned, the first New Wave in Iran, coming in the 1960s and 1970s, was an essential model for the next generation represented by the NIC filmmakers. The preservation of these films as an influence can be attributed to the insular climate in post-revolution Iran shutting itself off from globalisation, as well as the rise of video, and thus did "the modernist-cinematic 60s/70s survive to enjoy a vital afterlife" (41). In 1963 Forough Farrokhzad's *The House is Black* was made; hailed as the "greatest of all Iranian films" according to Rosenbaum (42), and as "the best Iranian film [to have] affected the contemporary Iranian cinema" (43) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf, this 22 minute long documentary about a leper community continues to show an affinity with NIC films made 30 years later. Its gaze at the suffering of the lepers is unsentimental and primarily humanistic, emphasising the small joys of life and poetically depicting a reality on film. These are features which can be seen again in the films of Makhmalbaf and Kiarostami, most obviously in the way the latter depicts earthquake survivors in the Koker trilogy or in his documentary about AIDS victims in Uganda, *ABC Africa* (2001).

In the 1970s, the films of Sohrab Shahid Saless "introduced a whole new way of looking at reality... an almost passive documentation of reality [which] became the hallmark of a new form of realism" (44) and "left an indelible mark on the narrative technique of Iranian cinema" (45). Saless has most directly influenced Kiarostami, but as the senior of the four directors, the influence of Kiarostami himself on this generation should not be underestimated. Links can be drawn between some of his films and *The Apple* or some of Mohsen Makhmalbaf's more self-reflexive work, whilst his collaborations with Panahi have undoubtedly helped to shape his former assistant-director. Another Iranian precedent to NIC themes was Kamran Shirdel's *The Night it Rained* (1967), a "Rashomon-like documentary manufacturing conflicting positions on a real-life event" (46) in which we can already recognise many elements later to become key modernist aspects of NIC. These strong domestic influences notwithstanding, attempts to position NIC within a wider context of world cinema cannot be avoided. Kiarostami has "recalled how his real interest [in cinema] began only... with the arrival of neo-realist Italian films in Iran" (47) in the 1950s and 1960s, as Iran opened itself up to these masterpieces of world cinema for the first time. The NIC has also been likened to the films of the French New Wave and other modernist currents of 1960s cinema, for the way it self-consciously interrogates the effects of the medium on the construction of everyday reality, but also more specifically for the recurring use of final freeze-frames, a motif made famous by Truffaut's *Les 400 Coups* (1959). Comparisons to other masters with a subtle humanistic vision, such as Kurosawa, Ozu or Ray, have also been common. It is hard to gauge exactly to what extent these filmmakers had an impact on the cinematic grammar of the NIC directors today, with Makhmalbaf for instance claiming he never watched a film until he was in his twenties due to a strict religious upbringing, but in any case they are now reflecting back these influences to the rest of the world with their own unmistakable Iranian accent. The international film community, with festivals and trans-national co-productions, also has had a huge role to play in the NIC, acting as a catalyst for its development and appraisal.

Some Responses to New Iranian Cinema and Concluding Remarks

To conclude this study of the NIC, it is worth looking briefly at some of the responses towards it from critics, scholars and audiences, both domestically and internationally. Iranian culture has historically attributed high value to the arts, and cinema, after the rise of the modernists in poetry and literature, has rivalled those two media in terms of social importance. This is evidenced especially in *Close-Up*, where Sabzian's desire to be someone else is linked with the social mobility cinema offers, and in *Salaam Cinema*, where crowds flock in the hope of obtaining parts in the film. Makhmalbaf's path from lower class revolutionary to leading filmmaker gives a further real-life example. Yet responses to NIC in Iran itself seem to be mixed, with Kiarostami in particular getting far more lukewarm reactions domestically than he does internationally. This tension has led some Iranian critics to accuse him of 'making films for foreigners', and other filmmakers of emulating 'Kiarostami-style films' in attempts to achieve similar international success (48). Dabashi offers one possible explanation for the mistrust towards Kiarostami, suggesting that his humanist philosophy is what clashes with the overbearing attitude of Shi'a Islam, which assigns more importance to the afterlife and regards life on Earth as an austere test. Kiarostami's life-affirming celebration of existence in the here-and-now is "what unites both his religious and his secular critics", against "what they consider to be Kiarostami's daring to replace the 'spiritual'... with the material" (49). Another possible explanation for this suspicion to his and other NIC films, is that fears exist over typical NIC films' bias towards rural settings and materially-poor characters, as being exactly the depiction of Iran that foreign audiences expected and were comfortable in seeing, maintaining a sense of Iranians as primitive 'others'. In any case, the fact that NIC has increasingly come to be defined by its international reception has perhaps understandably led to Iranians feeling a lesser sense of possession or relation to it. Furthermore, this global success, inadvertently legitimises the Islamic Republic's regime by providing a more positive publicity than that which it more usually gets. This problematic relationship between NIC and the Iranian establishment, not always

as oppositional as it may seem — exemplified by how *Taste of Cherry*, banned in Iran at the time, was only allowed to be entered for the Cannes film festival by the Iranian foreign minister after its potential benefits for the nation's image were appreciated — is yet another reason for domestic suspicion.

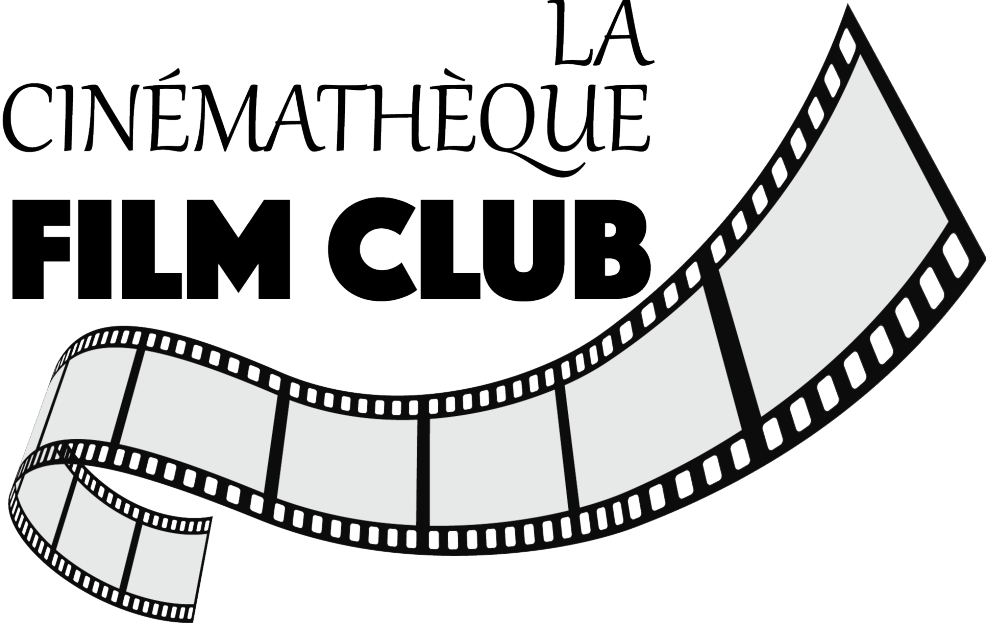
On top of this, and with NIC productions now relying more and more on foreign investors, critics both in Iran and abroad have attacked these films for being too 'apolitical' and not making explicit criticism of the Iranian regime and its human rights abuses. However, some of these critiques have often missed the allegorical nature of the NIC films. To take one example, Simon Louvish described *The White Balloon* as a "sentimental piece of slush [which] has had wide distribution in the West at the expense of far better Iranian films" (50). Such a condemning review is at once unfair — Western films are not judged on their political nature — and short-sighted, since the final scenes revolving around the Afghan balloon-seller and the closing freeze-frame, leave a telling, albeit oblique, portrait of the realities of the cultural minorities residing in Iran. And most importantly, the tight domestic censorship regulations Iranian directors work under cannot be ignored, while Panahi has in fact gone to such lengths to reflect Iranian society in his films that he is now under house arrest and serving a 20-year ban on filmmaking. This evolution and maturation in style from Panahi and other NIC directors, shows how wrong it is to view them as careerists changed by their international praise, since they never settled into any definable 'mainstream'. Mohsen Makhmalbaf has never stopped re-inventing himself; Samira Makhmalbaf is making challenging, symbolic films; and Kiarostami has continued to explore ever-more experimental forms of film, even doing away with narrative altogether in *Ten, Five* (2004) or *Shirin* (2008). That NIC directors managed to accomplish such celebrated art under political upheaval and strict regulations, is testimony to their artistic integrity as individual filmmakers, but also to the rich and enduring cultural potency alive in Iran and Iranians, and which has always transcended specific regimes to intertwine life and art in the most enlightening ways.

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24. Dabashi - *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, (New York: Mage, 2007), p. 364.
25. Rose Issa - *The Fabric of Life and Art*, http://archiv.hkw.de/en/dossiers/iran_dossierroseissa/kapitel1.html (Accessed September 2012).
26. Kiarostami has spoken of how the censorship regulations helped him find a way of expressing himself, for example in Bert Cardullo - *Out of Asia: The Films of Akira Kurosawa, Satyajit Ray, Abbas Kiarostami and Zhang Yimou* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), p. 95.
27. For example in the opening credits sequence of *The Circle* where we hear, but do not see, a woman in labour, in what we later find out is a prison hospital. The screams of the woman as the credits roll over a black screen serve as an atmospheric opening to the film, yet this scene could not have been depicted visually since a woman in the company of a female midwife would normally be unveiled in such a setting. Thus Panahi, in order not to either violate censorship rules or depict a situation which would be realistically absurd, found an efficient solution. Another example is how he avoids showing any physical contact between the actors playing the girl's parents in *The White Balloon*, only letting us hear the father shouting angrily off-screen; but this only adds to the subtle hints at unseen oppression in the film.
28. Negar Mottahedeh - *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 2.
29. Adrian Danks - *The House that Mohsen Built: The Films of Samira Makhmalbaf and Marziyeh Meshkini*, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/22/makhmalbaf> (Accessed September 2012).
30. Mottahedeh, op. cit. p.2.
31. First published in *Screen*, 16.3, Autumn 1975, p. 6-18.
32. Cardullo, op. cit., p. 94.
33. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam - *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p.272.
34. Their works are such staples of the Iranian cultural imagination that some of the earliest Iranian cinematic successes were adaptations of these, for example the films of Abdolhossein Sepanta in the 1930s.
35. Makhmalbaf is cited as quoting this passage in many sources, for example in Lloyd Ridgeon - *Makhmalbaf's broken mirror: the socio-political significance of modern Iranian cinema* (University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham, 2000), p. 14.
36. Dabashi - *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, p. 339.
37. Id., p.318.
38. For example Elena in *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* or Chaudhuri and Finn in *Poetic realism and New Iranian Cinema*.
39. Mir-Ahmad-e Mir-Ehsan, 'Dark light' - Rose Issa, Sheila Whitaker (eds.) - *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, p. 113.
40. Eva Sallis - *Scheherazade Through the Looking-Glass: The Metamorphosis of the Thousand and One Nights*(Routledge, 1999)
41. Godfrey Cheshire, 'Abbas Kiarostami: Seeking a Home', John Boorman and Walter Donohue (eds.) - *Projections 8* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 226.
42. Rosenbaum and Saeed-Vafa, op. cit., p. 2.
43. Mohsen Makhmalbaf quoted in id., p. 2.
44. Dabashi - *Close Up*, p. 29.
45. Id., p. 47.
46. Ohad Landesman, 'In The Mix: Reality meets fiction in contemporary Iranian cinema' - *Cineaste*, 31, no.3 (Summer 2006), p. 45.
47. Elena, op. cit., p. 15.
48. Farahmand, op. cit., p. 103.
49. Dabashi - *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, p. 295.
50. Simon Louvish, Review of *The White Balloon - Sight and Sound*, January 1993.

LA
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Women Film Directors 2
Spring 2018

Isabel Coixet
b.1960

My Life Without Me
2003

My Life Without Me

David Stratton • February 11, 2003

Article sourced from *Variety*: <http://variety.com/2003/film/reviews/my-life-without-me-1200543482/>

There'll be plenty of demand for tissues by audiences who see this unapologetic weepie about a lovely young wife and mother who discovers she has a short time to live. With a glowing performance by Sarah Polley as the doomed woman, this Spanish-Canadian co-prod, filmed in English, is surprisingly adept at avoiding the worst clichés and most manipulative elements inherent in such a story. Result could well be an arthouse sleeper in the coming months in many territories.

Writer-director (and veteran camera operator) Isabel Coixet, who previously impressed with “Things I Never Told You” (1995) establishes at the outset a premise many will resist. But the Spanish auteur avoids the most maudlin elements of the story, turning it into a genuinely moving and even inspirational yarn.

Polley plays the 24-year-old Ann, the mother of two delightful girls. She lives in a trailer located in the backyard of her mother’s suburban Vancouver house with her devoted young husband, Don (Scott Speedman), whom she met when she was barely 17. Don has recently landed a job building swimming pools; usually, though, it’s Ann who keeps the young family functioning thanks to the work she does as night-shift cleaner at a university.

Ann’s aging mother (Deborah Harry) is bitter and lonely. Her husband (an unbilled cameo by Alfred Molina) has been serving a prison sentence for 10 years for an unspecified crime, and the woman is mad at the world. She spends her spare time watching old Joan Crawford movies on television, and isn’t much comfort to Ann.

And, suddenly, Ann needs all the love and comfort she can get when she is told, by a shy and awkward doctor (Julian Richings) that she is so riddled with cancer she has only two or three months to live. Deciding to withhold the terrible news from everyone, she prepares a list of things to do before her death, among them: assure her children she loves them; go to see her father; find herself a lover (Don has apparently been the only man in her life); find Don a new prospective wife; and record birthday greetings for both her girls, one per year until they are 18 — among other vows.

Telling Don she’s suffering from anemia and popping pain-killers, she battles on at work to the concern of her diet-conscious friend (Amanda Plummer in a nothing supporting role). She makes the recordings for her girls (in a sequence which will bring out the handkerchiefs). She finds a compliant lover in the attractive, bruised, moody Lee (Mark Ruffalo), who duly falls in love with her. She goes to see her dad and achieves a kind of rapprochement. And when a charming young woman, also called Ann, played by Leonor Watling (from exec producer Pedro Almodovar’s “Talk to Me”) moves in next door, she sizes her up as a possible future partner for Don.

None of this should, in theory, work as well as it does. Coixet’s screenplay is packed with incidents and situations that, in lesser hands, could have been impossibly sentimental. But, thankfully, the delicate handling and the beautiful central performance ensure the film’s success beyond expectations. The exceptional Polley gets strong support from Speedman, as her loving husband, Ruffalo as her gloomy but increasingly ardent lover,

Watling as the neighbor with a tragedy in her own past, and, especially, Harry as Ann's worn-out and frustrated mother.

Vancouver backdrops downplay the beauty of the city, and Jean-Claude Larrieu's photography is functional, but pic's low-budget look and technical shortcomings don't detract from the honesty of the central performance and the genuinely moving arc of this vulnerable young woman's journey toward death.

My Life Without Me

Spain-Canada

PRODUCTION: A Sony Pictures Classics (in N. America) release of an El Deseo D.A., S.L.U. (Madrid)-Milestones Prods. Inc. (Vancouver) co-production. (International sales: Focus Features Intl., New York.) Produced by Esther Garcia, Gordon McLennan. Executive Producers, Pedro Almodovar, Agustin Almodovar, Ogden Gavanski. Directed, written by Isabel Coixet.

CREW: Camera (color), Jean-Claude Larrieu; editor, Lisa Robinson; music, Alfonso de Villalonga; production designer, Carol Lavalley; costume designer, Katia Sano; sound, (Dolby digital), Sebastian Salm; line producer, Jordi Torrent; assistant director, Sandra Mayo. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (competing), Feb. 10, 2003. Running time, 106 MIN. (English dialogue.)

WITH: Ann - Sarah Polley Don - Scott Speedman Ann's mother - Deborah Harry Lee - Mark Ruffalo Ann - Leonor Watling Laurie - Amanda Plummer Dr. Thompson - Julian Richings Hairdresser - Maria de Medeiros Penny - Jessica Amlee Patsy - Kanya Jo Kennedy Ann's father - Alfred Molina

My Life Without Me

Xan Brooks • October 24, 2003

Article sourced from *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/oct/24/londonfilmfestival2003.londonfilmfestival1>

Ann (Sarah Polley) is beautiful, intelligent and very nearly dead. Given three months left to live by a doleful doctor, she sits down and writes a list entitled "10 things to do before I die". Her list seems to involve standing in the rain in a clinging T-shirt, recording birthday messages for her infant daughters and romping off on a tender affair with a troubled soul she meets down the local laundrette (Mark Ruffalo).

I forget what else was on Ann's list and soon lost track of the items she'd ticked off, though I did find myself idly wishing that she'd chop-chop and get a move on. And yet this movie will simply not be rushed. Shrilly pleading its imminent demise, Isabel Coixet's drama proceeds to mangle for so long that you half suspect the whole thing is just a ruse to win our sympathy. Along the way it manages to squander the considerable talents of Polley and Ruffalo (not to mention Debbie Harry as Ann's caustic mom).

Coixet's florid second person narration ("so you're going to die ...") grates from the start. Later, however, the film's tyrannical self-regard grows increasingly creepy. Hunting a replacement wife for her husband, Ann discovers a woman living opposite who is also called Ann. This, one realises, is the perfect (indeed only) qualification for the role. For what better substitute for Ann than Ann, a handpicked Ann that will serve as a constant reminder of the earlier Ann? In this way Ann can live on for years and years, and not just in the form of her stack of pre-recorded birthday messages. The future's bright. The future's Ann.

Filmography:

- **Elisa y Marcela** (pre-production, 2018)
- **Light on a Broken Glass** (announced)
- **Amodio** (2017) short
- **The Bookshop** (2017)
- **Proyecto tiempo** (2017)
- **El Espiritu de la Pintura** (2017) documentary
- **No es tan fría Siberia** (2016) short
- **Spain in a Day** (2016) documentary
- **'Normal'** (2016) short
- **Un corazón roto no es como un jarrón roto o un florero** (2016) short
- **Parler de Rose, prisonnière de Hissène Habré** (2015) documentary short
- **Endless Night** (2015)
- **Learning to Drive** (2014)
- **Another Me** (2013)
- **Venice 70: Future Reloaded** (2013) documentary
- **Yesterday Never Ends** (2013)
- **Marea Blanca** (2012) short
- **Escuchando al juez Garzón** (2011) documentary
- **Aral. El mar perdido** (2010) short
- **50 años de** (2009) 1 episode
- **La mujer, cosa de hombres** (2009)
- **Map of the Sounds of Tokyo** (2009)
- **Elegy** (2008)
- **Invisibles** (2007) segment: "Cartas a Nora"
- **Paris, je t'aime** (2006) segment: "Bastille"
- **The Secret Life of Words** (2005)
- **Marlango** (2004)
- **¡Hay motive!** (2004) segment: "La insoponible levedad del carrito de la compra"
- **Viaje al corazón de la tortura** (2003) documentary
- **My Life Without Me** (2003)
- **A los que aman** (1998)
- **XII premios Goya** (1998)
- **Cosas que nunca te dije** (1996)
- **Demasiado viejo para morir joven** (1989)
- **Mira y versa** (1984) short

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Spring 2018

Claire Denis
b.1946

Beau Travail
1999

Beau Travail

Tamara Tracz • February 2007

Article sourced from *Senses of Cinema*: <http://sensesofcinema.com/2007/cteq/beau-travail/>

Beau travail plays out its story like the distant echo of a myth. The film is based on Herman Melville's *Billy Budd, Sailor*, but the story, the narrative events, are unclear. A fractured time scale makes it difficult to follow. Motivation, even for Galoup, the protagonist who narrates his story, remains unclear. Set in a closed society, the French Foreign Legion, the film is acted out like the reflection of an ancient tale. Half naked men with beautiful bodies train on the sand, bringing to mind the Greeks camped out before the walls of Troy. The painting of Legionnaires that is the opening image of the film references cave paintings. The images and rhythm of the film pull on a collective unconscious so that out of almost nothing, everything is present. Ancient enmities based on jealousy and love, the warriors stranded in a foreign land and the agony of lost utopias are felt, if not fully understood. Distorted and refracted until it is so fragmented as to be barely coherent, the film's narrative remains recognisable despite its almost cubist structure.

This is not a film about narrative, but about image, sound and rhythm, the way in which they create understanding beyond storytelling. Dread, desire, peace, pain, confusion and antipathy are all present in the film. Often it is hard to place exactly why such feelings engulf the viewer as a result of what they see and hear, but the feelings are disarming nevertheless. Fragments of a conversation about fishing, the scrabble of legionnaires on their elbows under low wires, the swell of music and even the absence of sound altogether seem to trigger a memory that isn't even ours. Experiencing the film is like remembering a dream on waking; a dream that made sense so recently but now is confusing and dispersed.

Much has justly been written about the training sequences filmed lyrically and seductively by Agnès Godard. Despite the combat fatigues and the guns, these exercises seem more like the spiritual practice of martial arts than preparation for war. Indeed, all the military hardware in this film seems defunct – the deserted tanks like petrified dinosaurs at the film's opening, the exploded helicopter just a ball of fire and a burning scrap of fuselage. It is the integrity of the military unit that matters here, not any outward reason for the unit's existence.

As in martial arts, strict hierarchy and respect, bordering on religious obedience, is the centre of Galoup's experience of the Foreign Legion. The Legion is a closed society, a monastery of fighting monks. The tenuousness of its military reason, the storming of hollow buildings, the building of roads to nowhere and the digging of empty holes, is held at bay by the rigour and beauty of its ritual. These rituals make the Legion an entire way of life, incandescent with strange beauty. Life in the legion in complete, time is filled, bodies are used to their limit. One can understand how seductive such a world could be, and how without it Galoup feels stranded in Marseilles – "unfit for life". In such a closed world the story, an archetypal triangle, is primed to take place. The tragedy is waiting to happen. Galoup, Sentain and Forrestier are just three out of many who, over time and through space, wear these particular masks and act out this ancient dance.

Sentain, the new recruit and catalyst of Galoup's disaster, has a face that is always mask-like. The Legion is Galoup's paradise but like all paradises, his world is fragile. At times it is impossible to understand what it is about Sentain that Galoup is so threatened by. Even he can't explain it. He describes seeing him at first, a thin young man, and thinking, "There's no place for people like him in the Legion" but he never manages to explain

why. Perhaps it isn't really anything to do with Sentain – if it weren't him it would have been another who set into action the course of events. In a mesmerising dawn sequence, the conclusion of a strange night in the city, we see the Legionnaires, who at night looked so out of place, little boys in their shorts and bare legs, processing down the street fluid and relaxed. On their shoulders they hold a black Legionnaire, his skin glowing dark and beautiful like a pagan god. But then they pause, and exchange him for Sentain, who is now carried, king like, on the shoulders of others. Galoup talks of seeing him: "They held above them one of their own". But actually, they held two. In such a fragile paradise, it could be anyone that tips the balance – it's the tipping of it that matters.

When he watches Galoup is dressed, as he is periodically throughout the film, in black. These clothes play no part in the story Galoup narrates; his fall from grace from the Legion. Neither does it seem part of his life in Marseille. Galoup's clothes, military and civilian are always immaculately presented, but none come close to the elegance of these black clothes. When he wears them he is full of mystery. As he wanders the streets at dawn, looking at the procession, he swings on a lamppost like a character in a musical beginning to break into dance. He seems strangely at ease, though his voice over narration suggests the opposite. Later, in the same clothes, he performs the extraordinary dance that closes the film. The final images of Galoup in Marseille – the gun in his hand, the pulse in his arm – suggest a suicide. But it would be wrong in a film such as *Beau travail* to take anything so literally, and to then extrapolate that the figure in black is Galoup's ghost. Nevertheless, implications of ghostliness are certainly present.

As a ghost Galoup reaches the conclusion of his life as an outsider. Despite the tenacity with which he clings to the Legion, he is never really a part of it. He belongs to no group, he does not socialise with the soldiers he trains or with Forestier, the man he worships. Galoup understands his isolation. There is pathos and longing in the phrase "They held above them one of their own", for he knows he can never be one of "their own" himself. He is a lost soul in Marseille, and a lost soul in black on the streets of Djibouti. The more he tries to belong within the Legion, the less he seems a part of it. When he drills the soldiers at press-ups he joins them, adding a little leap between each press-up to prove that he is fitter, stronger than they. But even though he is fitter and stronger he does not have their smooth skin, their glowing youth or their incandescent beauty. Galoup's tragedy is always within him. Sentain is just the tool by which it is transferred from the inside to the outside of the body.

Galoup is not the only outsider in this film that began as a meditation on the idea of foreignness. The Legion itself is a foreign imposition on the African country. Seemingly disparate scenes of African life – a crowded train, a woman selling mats, the dancing girls at the disco – remind us constantly of colonial imposition. Scenes at roadblocks where African police let through the French soldiers emphasise this. In a world exclusively made up of men, the position of woman is examined constantly. It is a group of women who watch the soldier storming the deserted building, and laugh. Images of the soldiers hanging washing are followed by one of Rahel, Galoup's girlfriend, hanging up washing while Galoup sweetly tries to help. Hanging the washing is women's work (in Dreyer's *Ordet*, 1955, the washing on the line is the symbol of a woman's presence in the house) and these juxtapositions emphasise the way the world of this film consists of a series of insiders and outsiders.

Indeed, it is, after the painting of the legionnaires, an African woman – a woman who plays no part in the plot – who opens the film, kissing at the camera in the disco. The disco also concludes the film; now empty of all but one, as Galoup performs the extraordinary dance that seals the film's ending. Beyond anything in the

film, this frantic explosion of movement makes no linear sense. But this doesn't matter. This film doesn't have to be understood. It doesn't have to be understood to be understood. The film must be read on the level at which it gives itself to the audience, a languorous mystery, suspenseful, unexplained – a film that is almost entirely sensual. Is the dance real? Is Galoup a ghost? These things are not important. What matters is the power of the dance, free, wild and mad, yet dignified, bursting out between moments of restrained cool as he smokes his cigarette. All the scenes in the disco are shot via mirrors and one can never be entirely certain what is reflection and what is not. At one point we see the dancers via a wall of diamond mirror tiles that looks at first as though they dance through a wire fence, penned in. Galoup's world is similarly hard to read; what happened, what he imagined, what he felt, what he saw. At times it is as fragile as a glass bauble. In Marseille he tries to reconstruct his shattered world. But his reconstruction remains fragmented and strange, like the mirrors in the disco – where one looks in or out of a kind of prison. Such double vision, such mixtures of memory, fantasy and observation, such a mirror-ball like creation of worlds of desire and mystery are at the centre of *Beau travail*. One leaves the film uncertain of much, but never of its unsettling and hypnotic power.

Beau travail (1999 France 90 mins)

Prod Co: Le Sept-Arte/SM Films/Tanaïs Productions **Prod:** Patrick Grandperret, Jérôme Minet **Dir:** Claire Denis **Scr:** Claire Denis, Jean-Pol Fargeau, based on Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd, Sailor* **Phot:** Agnès Godard **Ed:** Nelly Quettier **Prod Des:** Arnaud de Moleron **Mus:** Charles Henri de Pierrefeu, Eran Tzur **Cast:** Denis Lavant, Michel Subor, Grégoire Colin, Richard Courcet, Nicolas Duvauchelle, Adiatou Massudi

Filmography

Director (29 credits) Hide ▲	
Rotterdam, I Love You (<i>pre-production</i>)	2019
High Life (<i>post-production</i>)	2018
Let the Sunshine In	2017
The Breidjing Camp (TV Movie documentary)	2015
Voilà l'enchaînement (Short)	2014
Venice 70: Future Reloaded (Documentary)	2013
Bastards	2013
To the Devil (Short)	2011
White Material	2009
35 Shots of Rum	2008
Towards Mathilde (Documentary)	2005
The Intruder	2004
Ten Minutes Older: The Cello (segment "Vers Nancy")	2002
Friday Night	2002
Trouble Every Day	2001
Beau travail	1999
Nenette and Boni	1996
À propos de Nice, la suite (segment "Nice, Very Nice")	1995
Boom-Boom	1994
Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge... (TV Series) (1 episode) - US Go Home (1994)	1994
I Can't Sleep	1994
Cinéma, de notre temps (TV Series documentary) (1 episode) - Jacques Rivette - Le veilleur (1994)	1994
Monologues (TV Series) (1 episode) - La robe à cerceau (1993)	1993
Keep It for Yourself (Short)	1991
Lest We Forget (segment "Pour Ushari Ahmed Mahmoud, Soudan")	1991
No Fear, No Die	1990
Man No Run (Documentary)	1989
Chocolat	1988
New Reports from France (TV Series documentary) (2 episodes) - Chroniques de France N° 87 (1973) ... (segment "Bibliothèque modèle pour enfants, Clamart") - Chroniques de France N° 77 (1972) ... (segment "Magic Circus, burlesque")	1972-1973

Blood and sand: Beau Travail

Hannah McGill • 17 November 2016

Article sourced from BFI: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/features/greatest-films-all-time/blood-sand-beau-travail>

Directed by Claire Denis, and scripted by Denis and her regular writing partner Jean-Pol Fargeau around a loose riff on Herman Melville's novella *Billy Budd*, *Beau Travail* (1998) is set in a remote coastal outpost in the former French colony of Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa. Here a battalion of Foreign Legionnaires spend their days enacting gruelling training regimes on desert terrain, and their evenings circling girls at the local nightclub. Commander Bruno Forestier (Michel Subor) is admired by his men; less so is his prickly, solitary second-in-command Sergeant Galoup (Denis Lavant). Galoup is more interested in being "the perfect legionnaire" than in being popular – at least until the arrival of sweet-natured new recruit Gilles Sentain (Grégoire Colin).

Quite what winds Galoup up so much about Sentain isn't clear, but it seems to be the latter's apparent contentment and ease in living. These are, implicitly, untoward character traits in a legionnaire, who ought to have been driven into exile by some stigma, trauma or misdeed. "He had no reason to be with us in the Legion," Galoup notes in the account that we see him penning after the events, heard as voiceover. By joining the Legion, Galoup deliberately isolated himself in a context where dysfunctionality is the norm – where he would meet no resistance to his theory that "we all have a trashcan deep within." The arrival of a loveable kid capable of using conventional social graces poses a threat to Galoup's alternative social structure. Into this kingdom of the blind has walked a paragon possessed of perfect vision, and Galoup is none too keen on the prospect of being seen.

In which case we can't help but note that he is very much in the wrong film. Movement, gesture and glance tend to reveal at least as much as dialogue in the films of Claire Denis. Nowhere else in her work does she push this visual language as far as in *Beau Travail*, a near-ballet of a film that's at least as much a work of choreography as of verbal storytelling. But if Galoup's scribbled notes are clearly his subjective account, it's not clear whether his memory is our only guide. It's tempting to assume that the film's most abstract and movement-driven sequences represent material that Galoup has retrodden so many times in memory that it's fragmented and become surreal: a fight with Sentain transfigured into something akin to a tango; combat training moving into what amounts to a mass bout of ritualised hugging.

By provoking Sentain to intervene in the mistreatment of another soldier, Galoup turns Sentain's own good nature against him, in order to be justified in disciplining him. We gather that the punishment visited on Sentain – a lone trek into the desert with a sabotaged compass – is intended to kill him. But other elements of the story hinge on events to which Galoup cannot have borne witness. Does he know, or merely guess, which soldier betrays him to Sentain with the words, "He doesn't like you. Beware"? Do we see Sentain survive his final ordeal because Galoup did – or because some self-justifying part of Galoup wants to believe that he did, as evinced by the coyly self-justifying aside, "He could easily have crossed the mountains into Ethiopia"?

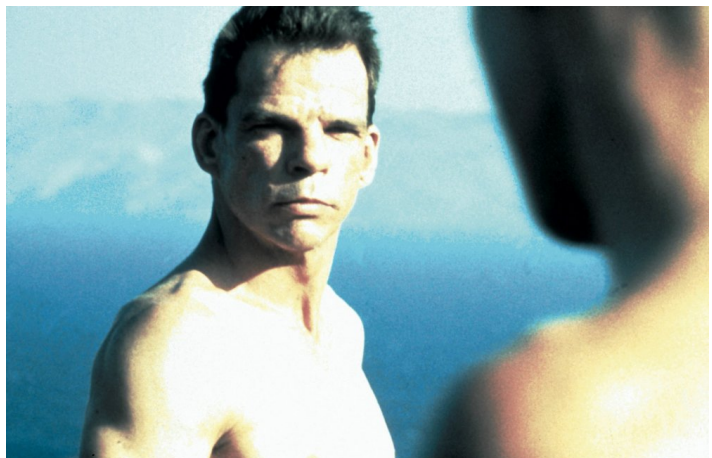
Throughout her body of work, Denis has toyed with subjective and objective realities – with whether her characters are living through externally manifested events, self-protective imaginings or symbol-heavy dreams. Like the legionnaire whose original identity is masked behind a false name, *Beau Travail* is cagey about the point of view it occupies. Recourse to *Billy Budd* offers some illumination, but Melville's text – a brief work

from the unproductive late period of his career, left incomplete at the time of his death in 1891 – has plentiful ambiguities of its own, compounded by posthumous publication and multiple revisions.

Set aboard a late-18th century British man-of-war, *Billy Budd* tells of a sailor whose beauty and popularity stir fascination in all who meet him, and destructive envy in the master-at-arms Claggart, who frames him for fomenting mutiny and ultimately ensures his execution. The prelapsarian innocence so fetishised in Billy (who “in the nude might have posed for a statue of a young Adam before the Fall”) represents a beautiful but weak position, one powerless against the machinations of the already fallen. Billy finally incriminates himself because he lacks the sophistication to defend himself: at the crucial moment a debilitating stutter prevents him from forming words.

Modern interpretation of *Billy Budd* has tended to focus on its homosexual undercurrents. These are indeed hard to avoid, even with consideration of altered mores and shifted terminology: young Billy’s physical beauty preoccupies Melville’s text to an almost comic extent, while his detractor is clearly motivated in part by frustrated desire. Our narrator (a bystander rather than one of the antagonists, as in *Beau Travail*) invents for Billy the quasi-iconic designation “The Handsome Sailor”: one bound by his “natural regality” to secure and accept “the spontaneous homage of his shipmates”. As readers, we can’t escape Billy’s girlishly smooth face, his golden locks or the sweetness of nature that draws men to him as “hornets to treacle”. Billy’s destroyer, Claggart, regards all this bounty with “a touch of soft yearning, as if [he] could even have loved Billy but for fate and ban”.

Whether or not Melville’s main impetus was the expression of thwarted gay passion, *Beau Travail* – emerging as it did at a time of assertive queer cinema and queer reading of apparently straight texts – inherited the interpretation, and indeed arguably compounded it through its knowing deployment of queer-identified imagery. Certainly the intensity of Galoup’s obsession with Sentain mimics the symptoms of love, particularly love as it tends to be experienced by those film noir protagonists who identify it as an emotion not dissimilar to murderous rage.



“Something vague and menacing” takes hold of Galoup, according to his voiceover; “a sort of rancour, a rage brimming”; “something overpowering”. He also jealously identifies Sentain as a potential new favourite of his beloved Forestier: “keep Sentain away from Forestier,” runs one of his neurotic inner notes, as he predicts – somehow, through all of this – “the end, the end of me, the end of Forestier”. Is this ‘end’, in his estimation, the disgrace of a gay affair – Forestier’s with Sentain? Does Galoup intervene not out of his own love for either man, but to prevent Forestier from slipping – from abandoning the self-denial that holds their way of life together? Sentain, unlike *Billy Budd*, isn’t markedly objectified by his superiors; desiring looks here pass from the camera to the performers, not between the characters themselves. If there’s an intense love in this story, it’s Galoup’s for Forestier, but the tenor of that connection seems more familial than sexual. Galoup responds to Sentain not like a jealous lover, but like an older sibling displaced by a new baby.

Beau Travail does frankly foreground male beauty, thereby highlighting the tension at the heart of a military society in which sentimental notions of comradeship, solidarity and love among men must strive to separate themselves from the taboo of homosexuality. The French Foreign Legion, set up post-French Revolution to allow the state to circumvent its own laws barring foreigners from military service, quickly developed a reputation as a refuge or site of self-imposed punishment for men with troubled pasts; that implied



criminality, but also sexual misdeeds of one stripe or another.

A certain camp romanticism attaches itself to the Legion's reputation, and so does specific gay mythology. Jean Genet joined at 18 (and was subsequently ejected for a homosexual act); Cole Porter claimed to have done a stint too; the popularity of Edith Piaf's 'Non, je ne regrette rien' as a Legion theme song creates a delicious rapport

between the personas of the tear-stained stage diva and the stoic, careworn legionnaire.

If camp as identified by Susan Sontag constitutes "the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve" all seen through "the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalisation of experience", the modern Foreign Legion as seen in Beau Travail – policing old combat zones, offering up its rigour and grace to indifferent wildernesses, practising permanent priapic readiness for a physical engagement that never comes – is the very quintessence of military camp. (In its sly acknowledgement of the queer interpretations that strain so unavoidably at the seams of military imagery, Beau Travail might be construed as a solemn foreign relative of the Monty Python sketch in which marching soldiers chant arch taunts: "Don't come the brigadier bit with us, dear / We all know where you've been, you military fairy...")

Male identity

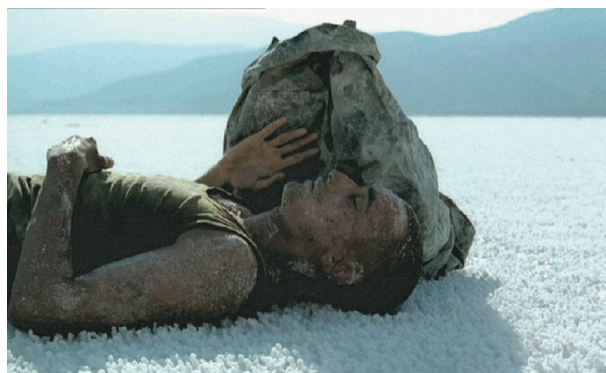
Desire, then, may form part of Sergeant Galoup's crisis, but the concerns of Denis's film reach beyond sexual acts or their refusal. At the time Beau Travail came out, angst around the matter of male identity – specifically, the post-feminist, post-industrial fear of redundancy and impotence, and the resulting querying of sexual and social identity – had considerable cinematic currency. The US cinema of 1999, for instance, repeatedly problematised the conventions of male heroism and male self-sacrifice. American Beauty and Eyes Wide Shut show groomed and affluent mid-life males thrust into confusion by consumerist decadence and aggressive female autonomy. Fight Club gives us men voluntarily cloistered away from women, the better to sublimate their emotions into physical exertion and violence (and has its own Billy Budd moment, when the narrator disfigures a gorgeous blond recruit on the basis that "I felt like destroying something beautiful"). Tom Ripley in The Talented Mr Ripley envies and desires Dickie Greenleaf, and becomes murderous as a result.

Denis's choice of the French Foreign Legion as a setting for Beau Travail originated in a commission from the television channel Arte to make a film on the theme of foreignness, but it can also be seen to reflect this prevailing millennial concern over male and female place and function. Submitting stoically to suffering, severing emotional connections, rejecting domesticity and blood family: the French Foreign Legion offers an

escape fantasy neatly tailored to the popular stereotype of the masculine temperament. Denis's film acknowledges, not least in its title, the sad glamour that has adhered to the French Foreign Legion since P.C. Wren's 1924 novel *Beau Geste* popularised the perception of the legionnaire as tragic hero rather than mere runaway criminal; but it also supports the notion that all-male environments harbour obscure and inevitable threats. Sexual desire is reconfigured as the threat of dominance, violation and feminisation; the hope of reproduction dies; love, rendered inexpressible by taboo, turns toxic. (Four years after *Beau Travail*, Gaspar Noé would begin his *Irreversible* in the supposed 'hell' of two all-male spaces – a prison and a gay nightclub – and end it in the hope-suffused 'heaven' of a pregnant woman alone in nature.)

Impotence in the face of social change is further emphasised in the imagery of near-defunct colonial outposts, whose continued existence both indicates the survival of a colonial legacy and emphasises its collapse. Military power, like the sexual energies of the recruits, is in abeyance, but continues to inform interaction with the African populace. Denis – herself a child of the French colonial experience, having moved around Africa as a child with her government-administrator father – shows the locals observing the legionnaires with amused curiosity rather than suspicion or awe. To the local girls they hit on at the disco, the legionnaires are suppliers of sex and gifts: part of a satisfying system of exchange, but hardly a source either of threat or salvation.

Of course, the fact that Denis is herself a woman – and was working in this case with a female cinematographer and editor, Agnès Godard and Nelly Quettier respectively – further complicates *Beau Travail*'s position on masculinity. Denis has been criticised for appropriating a perspective not her own – that of a



closeted gay man – and then associating that perspective with negative traits: envy, asociality, destructive and self-destructive drives. But the assumption that *Beau Travail*'s prominent enjoyment of the male physique constitutes an effort to replicate a gay male gaze risks negation of the existence of an active female gaze. Since there's nothing 'homo-' about a woman regarding the male body, it might be argued that the sexual perspective of *Beau Travail* is

straightforwardly erotic – and that some of the discomfort it has stirred is down to its unusual standing as a film about men primarily authored by women.

Frame of reference

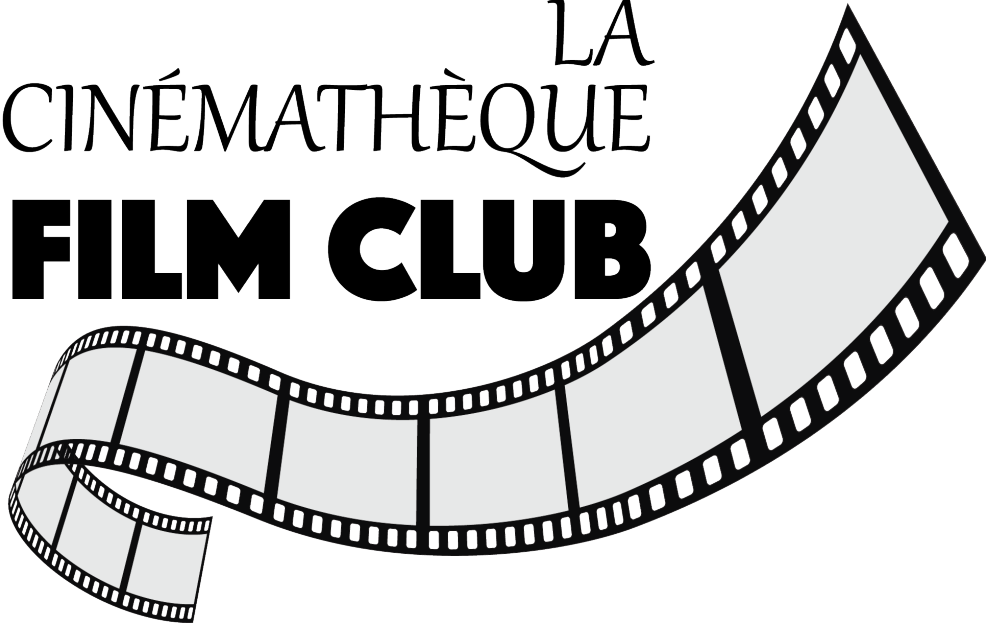
A further significant tendency of 1990s cinema that's identifiable in the make-up of *Beau Travail* is referentiality. Denis's film is haunted by pre-existing texts: *Billy Budd*; Benjamin Britten and E.M. Forster's 1951 opera of the same, which surfaces in the film in snatches of half-heard music; poems by Melville, which Denis reportedly gave to her cast in lieu of a script; *Othello*, with its recognition of the savage potential of envy; Fassbinder's *Querelle*, which knitted elements of *Billy Budd* into its frankly erotic take on Jean Genet's novel *Querelle de Brest*; *Beau Geste* (itself famously filmed in 1939, with Gary Cooper) and its sequels *Beau Sabreur* and *Beau Ideal*, if only in their association of the word *beau* ('good' but also 'beautiful') with the Foreign Legion's traditional conflation of nobility and physical elegance.

Another significant antecedent is Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1960), from which *Beau Travail* appropriates snippets of dialogue as well as the whole character of Bruno Forestier (who's played in both films by Michel Subor). Godard's film is set during the French-Algerian war; if Forestier is the same character in *Beau Travail*, his presence in the French Foreign Legion might be construed as either penance or escape. Forestier in *Le Petit Soldat* is also the mouthpiece for Godard's famous maxim defining cinema as "truth 24 times per second"; authenticity of representation preoccupies him, and surely also complicates his presence in Denis's film.

Whatever else is implied by *Beau Travail*'s exhilarating and befuddling final sequence, in which Galoup dances alone in a mirrored nightclub to Corona's 'Rhythm of the Night', it certainly points at a final bid for personal freedom – if one that's ironically characterised by a cheesy club anthem and a mannered, self-regarding routine. Perhaps Galoup is dead (we've seen him stretched on his bed, revolver nearby; going over his notes might have been a way of setting his house in order pre-suicide). Perhaps, in imagining himself back at the nightclub in Djibouti, he has found release in recognising his own physical grace, instead of obsessing over that of Sentain: freedom through narcissism. Or perhaps he's imagining an out gay life, in the only terms that his limited life experience provides (start by imagining dancing in public; move on to the matter of actual sex later!).

At its close, *Beau Travail* is still inviting us to guess – to feel rather than learn the rhythms of its storytelling. It's this audacious looseness, this elegant unfixability, that keeps Denis's 'beautiful work' so fresh – and asserts it as one of cinema's most compelling and original meditations on the need for, and simultaneous resistance to, intimacy.

LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



Women Film Directors 2
Spring 2018

Andrea Arnold
b.1961

Fish Tank
2009

Andrea Arnold

Sheila Johnston

Article sourced from BFI Screen: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/575233/index.html>



After years working in children's television, Andrea Arnold came relatively late to directing, but her films instantly made ripples internationally, attracting enormous acclaim. Hard to pin down but often centred on female, working-class characters and marked by simple, unsettling images and intricate editing, their surface harshness is shot through with complexity and compassion.

The eldest of four children, she was born on 5 April 1961 in Dartford, Kent, where she grew up on a council estate of the sort that would form the setting for her own work; her parents, in their teens when she was born, separated while she was still a child. Leaving school at 18, she moved to London, where her taste, she recalls, was shaped by such contemporary films as *Apocalypse Now* (US, d. Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Alien* (US/UK, d. Ridley Scott, 1979), *The Elephant Man* (US, d. David Lynch, 1980) and *Blood Simple* (US, d. Joel Coen, 1984), although their influence on her work isn't easy to detect.

She joined the dance troupe Zoo, appearing on television shows that included *Top of the Pops* (BBC, 1964-2006), but came to prominence as an actress and presenter alongside Sandi Toksvig, Nick Staverson and Neil Buchanan in *No. 73* (ITV, 1982-88), a children's show that blended chat, magazine items and comedy. She remained briefly on board when the programme was renamed *7T3* in 1988, then presented two other series: *Motormouth* (ITV, 1988-90) and *A Beetle Called Derek* (ITV, 1990-91), a show promoting environmental awareness in teenagers, some episodes of which Arnold also wrote.

In the 1990s, she spent a year studying at the American Film Institute in Los Angeles, then returned to England and had a daughter with her partner, a software engineer. Her first two shorts, *Milk* (1998) and *Dog* (2001), were both selected for Cannes and her third, *Wasp* (2003), about a single mother who leaves her four kids alone in a pub car-park to meet an old lover, won the Academy Award for Best Live Action Short.

She was then invited to join The Advance Party, a project instigated by the Danish director Lars von Trier to make three films by different first-time directors incorporating the same set of characters. Set in Glasgow, Arnold's contribution, *Red Road* (2006), followed Kate Dickie's solitary CCTV operator as she becomes obsessed with the man responsible for the death of her husband and child. Competing in Cannes, it won the Jury Prize. A second instalment in the trilogy, *Donkeys* (d. Morag McKinnon), followed in 2010.

Arnold returned south for *Fish Tank* (2009), about a combative 15-year-old (played by the electrifying newcomer Katie Jarvis) living on an Essex sink estate who dreams of escaping through her passion for dance, aided by her mother's likeable, highly ambiguous new boyfriend. It too won the Jury Prize in Cannes. She is currently planning an adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*; written by Olivia Hetreed, it will be the first time Arnold has not worked with her own screenplay.

'Chaos Brings Life': 10 Things We Learned from Andrea Arnold at Tribeca

Emily Buder • April 19, 2016

Article sourced from No Film School: <https://nofilmschool.com/2016/04/andrea-arnold-tribeca>

The director of Fish Tank and Red Road shares the secrets to low-budget authenticity.

Andrea Arnold's characters are—like Arnold herself—restless spirits. Trapped in lives that are too small for them, they push boundaries to break open their worlds. From the volatile Mia in *Fish Tank*, Arnold's most



celebrated film to date, to *Wasps*'s Zoe, a single mother of four who wants to live her own life, Arnold has compassion for women with a devil-may-care attitude and the desire to live an untethered life.

Arnold's new film *American Honey* will have its premiere at Cannes next month. "I never imagined my life like this," Arnold, who grew up with a single mother in a large working-class family, told Ira Sachs (*Keep the Lights On*), during a Tribeca Talk moderated by Sachs yesterday. "Every once in a while I just think, 'Wow, this is weird.'"

Here are some tips she shared during the talk about filmmaking and living an unexpected life.

"I love chaos because it brings life. I don't like being in control of the set; I like going to shoot not knowing what's going to happen."

1. The one film school takeaway? Trust yourself

Arnold, who attended the American Film Institute, said, "The one thing I learned from film school was to trust myself. People are always saying, 'Do this, do that.' Being at AFI allowed me to listen to everyone and then work out my own way."

Although it admittedly took her a while to hone her craft, the shorts she made at film school allowed her to exercise her creative muscles. "It took a little while to learn the ropes," she said. "I made my first short and didn't quite get the camera right; I was exploring. But I look at that now and I think there were lots of things I did that were really me, like the images and the way I filmed."

2. Life can be the greatest source of inspiration

When asked about her influences, Arnold said, "a lot of my filmmaking hasn't come from other films; it's come from life. The things that inspire me are things that I see every day. Sitting on the bus listening to a conversation, I start to invent stories about people's lives."



3. A movie begins with an image and a mind map

Each of Arnold's films was born from an image that lodged itself into her mind's eye. "What starts driving me is an image that won't go away," she said. "I keep these images close to my heart, like a medallion. They keep me going when it gets rough making the movie."

Fish Tank, for example, began with a very specific and unusual image. "I had an image of a girl pissing on the floor in someone else's house," said Arnold. "I thought, 'What is this girl doing?' I start thinking about what that means, who she is, and where she comes from."

In order to organize the myriad trains of thought that can evolve from a single image, Arnold creates a mind map. "You write down all the different possibilities under each decision or element," she explained. "It's like, 'Do I go to film school, or do I learn skateboarding, or do I go to Montana?' And then you just follow each thought like a spider's legs and write down everything you can possibly think of. The one that's the longest, with all the good and bad things, is the one you should choose."

"My scriptwriting always begins with the mind map," she continued. "I'll start with images and piece it together. Only when I've got a rough idea of the story do I start writing."



4. Use non-actors to help write the script

"I'm starting to wonder whether I should cast before I start writing," mused Arnold, who often casts real people in her films. "Sometimes trying to squeeze people into an idea in your head doesn't work," she said. "I do adapt to try to fit who these people are, but that's not always possible far down the road in the script. On my next film I might write the mind map, cast, and then write the script based on who these people are."

But sometimes she hits the nail on the head: *Fish Tank*'s Katie Jarvis was perfectly in sync with the character Arnold had envisioned. "We looked for a girl who came from that area and who felt quite authentic," she said. "I didn't change the script very much. I was going to cast a real person for the Michael Fassbender role; I actually had my eye on a bin collector from the park. But then I decided that the combination of actor and non-actor would be better."

"When we wrapped American Honey the very first thing I thought was, 'I'm so glad nobody died.'"

5. Chaos can yield great surprises

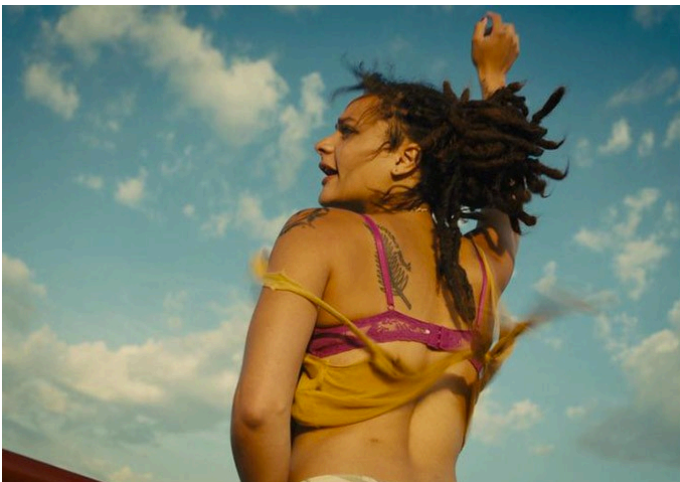
In keeping with her fiery energy and characters to match, Arnold's sets are frenetic places. "I love danger and risk," she said. "I love chaos because it brings life. I don't like being in control of the set; I like going to shoot not knowing what's going to happen. I like to be surprised. That's why I like dogs in films. You can't make them go anywhere; they go where they want."

Working with non-actors brings its own breed of unpredictability. "It's like a recipe—you don't know if it's going to come out well," Arnold said.

"Sometimes I fantasize about hiding my cinematographer in a cupboard and telling the actors and the cast to just do the scene, and then bringing him out of the cupboard and just shooting and seeing what happens," she said. "I want him to follow the characters as if it were a documentary."

"I don't really block the scenes. I want it to be organic and I like to do it when we're there."

Arnold doesn't shot list. Even the lens choice and scene blocking are very much left to chance. "We take more lenses than we need and we'll follow the characters and then adjust for what works," said Arnold. "I don't



really block the scenes. I want it to be organic and I like to do it when we're there. You don't know the day; you don't know what it looks like; you don't know whether the actor will have a stomach ache. I like to let those things play into it. I try not to control it too much. I try to keep it alive without squashing it."

Being surprised, of course, has its limits. "I don't like doing things to upset people in the film," Arnold continued. "I like them to be in

collaboration with me. I heard that in *Alien*, the stomach explosion was a surprise to the actors. They didn't know they were going to get guts on them. They did that for a more horrified reaction. I don't like that."

There is one element of chaos on which Arnold won't compromise. "I like to shoot in sequence," she said. "On *Red Road*, I shot the first scene on the last day, and it was such a painful thing to do. It never felt it had the gravity it needed and there was no chance to redo it."

6. Sometimes shoots are a near-death experience

In addition to featuring Shia LeBeouf and Riley Keough, Arnold's new film *American Honey* is mostly comprised of non-actors. "I cast all sorts of wild kids, and they didn't really do anything I asked," said Arnold. "We did a real road trip in the midwest. It was an adventure. At the very end, when we wrapped, the very first thing I thought was, 'I'm so glad nobody died.'"

"We didn't do the same take twice," she continued. "It was a bit of a nightmare to edit."

Before she made the film, Arnold embarked on nearly ten different road trips to experience the texture of its midwest setting. "Some of the poverty in some of the places really shocked me," she said. "It seemed more intense than Britain."

"I really do think I pushed it [with this film]," Arnold said. "We lost our lead girl two weeks before we started filming, so I had to find someone else. It was very tough; there were scenes when I had loads of non-actors and we were running out of time, and I thought, 'I really don't know how I'm going to get this done.'"

"Someone said the other day that if you shoot an empty room digitally, you think someone's just left the room; when you shoot an empty room on film, you think someone's about to come in. "

But at the end of the day, Arnold feels *American Honey* to be the best representation of her personal style. "This is the most me I've ever been," she said. "I was really trusting myself."

Though she had intended to shoot film, Arnold had to abandon the idea after the first few days of the road trip. "We traveled in the back of a van and it was too difficult," she said. "I like film a lot. Someone said the other day that if you shoot an empty room digitally, you think someone's just left the room; when you shoot an empty room on film, you think someone's about to come in. There's nothing quite like film."

7. It's okay to hate one of your movies

When Sachs asked Arnold about her experience shooting the adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, she blanched. "I don't like it," she said. "People keep saying one



day I'll come to like it. It was a difficult time making that film because I was in a bit of a dark place. When I think about it, I associate it with a lot of unpleasant personal stuff. Anytime anyone mentions it, I shudder."

8. Don't try to please anyone

Irreverence suits Arnold well: "When I'm writing, I'm aware of what you reveal and when you reveal it, and I'm trying to always make the audience work. But I'm not trying to please anyone. I'm trying to show things."

This sense of liberation guides her process. "If it feels right for the character and it feels right for the story, I don't worry about what anyone's going to think. People worry about people not being likable. I don't."

9. Have a badass cinematographer

Arnold's greatest collaborator is her long-time cinematographer, Robbie Ryan, with whom she's worked on every film since her first short, *Wasp*.

"He's fantastic," she said. "I love him. We're good friends. When we shot *Wasp*, the very first thing I asked him to do... There's a shot where a mother is walking down some stairs, and in my mind, we were always on her face. But it was the top flight of stairs. I wasn't thinking about what that practically meant. It meant he had to run backward down the stairs. And he goes, 'Yeah, alright,' and runs down the stairs backward with a big camera. We never looked back."

"He's like a goat," she added. "We shot *Fish Tank* on 35mm and I remember him just hopping on these rocks next to a cliff with the camera."



10. Write what you care about

"Every time I make a film, I feel like I'm beginning again," Arnold said. "It never feels like it gets easier. When I talk to young filmmakers, they face the same obstacles that I do now."

"What would I say to someone making their first film? Be yourself. There's only one of you. Don't try and copy anyone else. You can get inspiration from anywhere, but write what you care about. Trust that."

Fish Tank, Andrea Arnold, 124 mins, (15)

Jonathan Romney • 12 September, 2009

Article sourced from The Independent: <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/reviews/fish-tank-andrea-arnold-124-mins-15-1786335.html>

Andrea Arnold's portrait of 'broken Britain' captures the boredom and tawdriness of estate life through Mia, the scowling hoodie

It's only at the end of *Fish Tank* that we discover the name of the heroine's dog: Tennent's.

I'm glad writer-director Andrea Arnold kept this detail quiet; if she had revealed it early on, *Fish Tank* might have come across as a broad-stroke essay in chav



anthropology. As it is, there's little in the film that doesn't ring true: *Fish Tank* is as convincing a picture of life on the Essex estates as Arnold's debut *Red Road* was of a similar Scottish milieu.

If *Fish Tank* isn't quite as good as its predecessor, it's only because *Red Road*'s eerie existential-thriller aspect made it a distinct anomaly in British film. Altogether more familiar, *Fish Tank* could almost be considered an archetype of Brit realism, of scuffed school-of-Loach working-class drama. It's a vein of cinema in need of reinvention, and Arnold may not rethink it from the very roots in *Fish Tank*, but she carries the film off with fresh, abrasive clarity.

Fish Tank is set in a bleak stretch of Essex, near Tilbury, where even the roadside vegetation has a wizened, skanky look. The protagonist is 15-year-old Mia (Katie Jarvis), the kind of girl who's more usually a statistic than a person who art-film audiences get to know in any depth.

She's the scowling hoodie on the corner, an embodiment of the tabloids' "broken Britain". We think we have her measure at the start when Mia strides angrily towards a gang of her peers practising a sullen girl-group dance routine, and head-butts one of them. Then she slopes off back to the council flat where her mother Joanne (Kierston Wareing) – more like a foul-tempered, abusive big sister – spits invective at her. It's a horrible, sour, piss-off world that Arnold paints.

Officially a social problem, Mia is destined for a pupil referral unit where she will be off her mother's hands. A loner, Mia is only at ease in an abandoned flat practising solo dance moves. Framing the film in a cramped, nearly square ratio, Arnold and director of photography Robbie Ryan evoke the claustrophobia of Mia's world, show how her natural energies are boxed in, urging to burst as she dances with angry, muscular intensity.

One day, a stranger walks into Mia's kitchen: a bantering Irishman called Connor (Michael Fassbender), who is Joanne's new boyfriend. Despite Mia's initial defiant unease, something thaws around her. Connor mellows Joanne with attentive charm and vigorous sex, takes the family out to the country, and introduces Mia to his favourite music ("weird shit", Joanne calls it, though it's nothing more outré than "California Dreamin").

Despite this upturn in Mia's life, we're not fooled: from the first appearance of Fassbender's bare-chested, wolfishly charismatic Connor, we see where things are likely to go.

In its last stretch, the film takes a different direction, towards the kind of soul-wrenching crisis that tends to climax the Dardenne brothers' films. Arnold gives us a genuinely nerve-wracking sequence on the Essex marshes, but at the last moment, pulls back from the horror that seems inevitable. That's merciful, and in keeping with the film's overall tone, but I'm not sure *Fish Tank* needed to go out to that edge in the first place.

In fact, the film is at its best when simply evoking the day-to-day tawdriness and boredom of Mia's life. Arnold maps her heroine's world with an acute sociological eye, especially when showing how a knowing but still vulnerable teenager is callously excluded from the domain of adulthood. No longer a child, Mia is kept well away from her mother's parties, where adults gather in the kitchen to fumble sweatily in each other's knickers: her mother's sexual rivalry towards Mia is neatly pinpointed, and Kierston Wareing is superbly abrasive as the slutty, seen-it-all Joanne.

Sometimes Arnold tries a little too hard to muster a more portentous dramatic resonance: Mia is fascinated by, and tries to free, a scrawny horse chained in a yard, a creature that looks far too fragile to support the weight of symbolism piled on its ragged bones. The film ends touchingly on a near-wordless rapprochement, a bitterly unsentimental moment of casual intimacy, as Joanne and her two daughters dance to a rap telling us that life's a bitch and then you die. Alas, Arnold all but disperses the power of this scene by ending the film on a crunchingly obvious "poetic" skyline shot.

The film has a terrific lead in new name Katie Jarvis, famously discovered having an argument with her boyfriend. She's immensely affecting as Mia, never a cartoon of defiant feistiness, but a complex mix of determination, fragility and sandpaper cussedness. Also good is another newcomer Rebecca Griffiths, as Mia's kid sister, Tyler. Uneven as it is, *Fish Tank* is a powerful film from a director with a steely take on the world, who is able to make Essex look almost soulful.

Review: Fish Tank

Kristin M. Jones • January/February 2010

Article sourced from Film Comment: <https://www.filmcomment.com/article/review-fish-tank-andrea-arnold/>

At first glance, the modest council-estate apartment where much of Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* unfolds seems lovely—filled with sunshine, soft colors, and decorative flourishes like seashell wind chimes and a photomural of a tropical beach. Music is often playing, and an affectionate dog is clearly a cherished pet. But a water-stained ceiling and soiled walls around light switches suggest that it's a place where dreams are tinged with neglect. More tellingly, a sign on the mother's bedroom door reads "Parental advisory—keep out," as if she's forgotten she's no longer a teenager.



Arnold has a knack for subtle details but also for portraying female characters whose natural warmth and energy have been muted by trauma or social isolation—young women who might have blossomed under better circumstances—as in her vivid short *Wasp* (03), about a cheerfully desperate mother of four who stashes her hungry kids in a back alley while she hooks up with an ex-boyfriend. A feisty, doe-eyed 15-year-old, *Fish Tank*'s heroine Mia (talented nonprofessional Katie Jarvis) doesn't get much attention from her sexy mother, Joanne (Kierston Wareing), beyond an occasional pinch, threat, or insult. When Mia yells, "You're what's wrong with me!" in response to that old parental chestnut "I don't know what's wrong with you," she's stating the obvious. And yet, thanks to Jarvis and Wareing's remarkable performances—and the film's quiet conclusion—one senses affection buried beneath the antagonism.

The film begins with Mia trying to apologize for something she did to alienate her former best friend. Leaving an abandoned apartment where she's been practicing hip-hop moves, she finds the neighborhood girls in a parking lot. They're also dancing, albeit with more skin exposed and for a male audience. Mia, clad in baggy sweats, perches on a railing and curls her lip in amazement. When she head-butts a girl who taunts her, police and a social worker visit her home. Told she's being sent to a school for troubled youth, she fixates on attempting to rescue a frail horse she discovers chained near a mobile home.

And then, as alluring as a white horse, Joanne's new boyfriend, Connor (Michael Fassbender), appears. Louche yet sensitive, with a five-o'clock shadow, a crystal suspended from his rearview mirror, and a manner alternately paternal and seductive, he briefly seems to promise a happier home life for Mia and her gregariously foul-mouthed kid sister, Tyler (Rebecca Griffiths). When he's not partying with Joanne, he takes the family on an outing and encourages Mia to answer an ad for a dance audition. Unfortunately, his thinly veiled attraction to the teenager leads to a disastrous mistake, followed by a revelation about the life he left behind that is so shocking it inspires Mia to commit a terrible act.

Fish Tank's title may refer to the council estate, not far from the sea and bordering on factories and a wasteland, or perhaps to the aqua room in which Mia drinks alone, dances, and surveys the street below. But it also suggests a realm in which large creatures can't help but devour the smaller ones. Arnold makes a good case for not judging her characters, yet provides ample evidence for how easily minor transgressions—Joanne's cutting remarks, Connor's lies to Joanne and his selfish flirtation with Mia—can shade into more destructive ones. As well as how love doesn't always prevent parents from dragging their children down with them, a bitter truth underlined by a tabloid headline glimpsed near the end of the film: "Dad and Son Hanged from the Same Tree."

The story unfolds amid lush color and glowing summer light, so it's no surprise that Arnold reportedly admires Nan Goldin's downbeat yet radiant photographs. Her tale of surveillance and revenge *Red Road* (06) was also evocatively shot, but *Fish Tank*, which is pitilessly plausible, lingers longer in the memory. It's also the anti-*Thirteen*, painting a complex, and deeply sad, picture of the fraught intersection between teenage and adult desire and the ways in which mothers fail their daughters.



Filmography as Director

- **Big Little Lies** (2018-2019) TV show, 7 episodes
- **Transparent** (2015-2017) TV show, 4 episodes
- **I Love Dick** (2017) TV show, 4 episodes
- **American Honey** (2016)
- **Wuthering Heights** (2011) also known as The Bay of Angels
- **Fish Tank** (2009)
- **Red Road** (2006)
- **Coming Up** (2003) TV show, 1 episode
- **Wasp** (2003) short
- **Dog** (2001) short
- **Milk** (1998) short
- **Hotel Babylon** (1996) TV show, 1 episode

Fish Tank

Roger Ebert • February 3, 2010

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fish-tank-2010>



4 out of 4 Stars

Andrea Arnold's piercing "Fish Tank" is the portrait of an angry, isolated 15-year-old girl who is hurtling toward a lifetime of misery. She is so hurt and lonely, we pity her. Her mother barely even sees her. The film takes place in a bleak British public housing estate, and in the streets and fields around it. There is no suggestion of a place this girl can go to find help, care or encouragement.

The girl is Mia, played by Katie Jarvis in a harrowing display of hostility. She's been thrown out of school, is taunted as a weirdo by boys her age, has no friends, converses with her mother and sister in screams and retreats to an empty room to play her music and dance alone. She drinks what little booze she can get her hands on.

And where is her mother? Right there at home, all the time. Joanne (Kierston Wareing) looks so young, she might have had Mia at Mia's age. Joanne is shorter, busty, dyed blond, a chain-smoker, a party girl. The party is usually in her living room. One day, she brings home Connor (Michael Fassbender), a good-looking guy who seems nice enough. Mia screams at him, too, but it's a way of getting attention.

Joanne seems happiest when Mia isn't at home. The girl wanders the streets and gets in a fight when she tries to free a horse chained in a barren lot near some shabby mobile homes. She surfs in an Internet cafe, goes to an audition for sexy dancers and breaks into a house at random.

One day differs from the routine. Connor takes Mia, her mom and her little sister Tyler (Rebecca Griffiths) on a drive to the country. This isn't an idyllic picnic; they simply park in a field and hike to a river, Joanne staying with the car. Connor takes Mia wading ("I can't swim") in the river. Walking barefoot, she gets a ride on his back and rests her chin on his shoulder, and what was in the air from the first is now manifest.

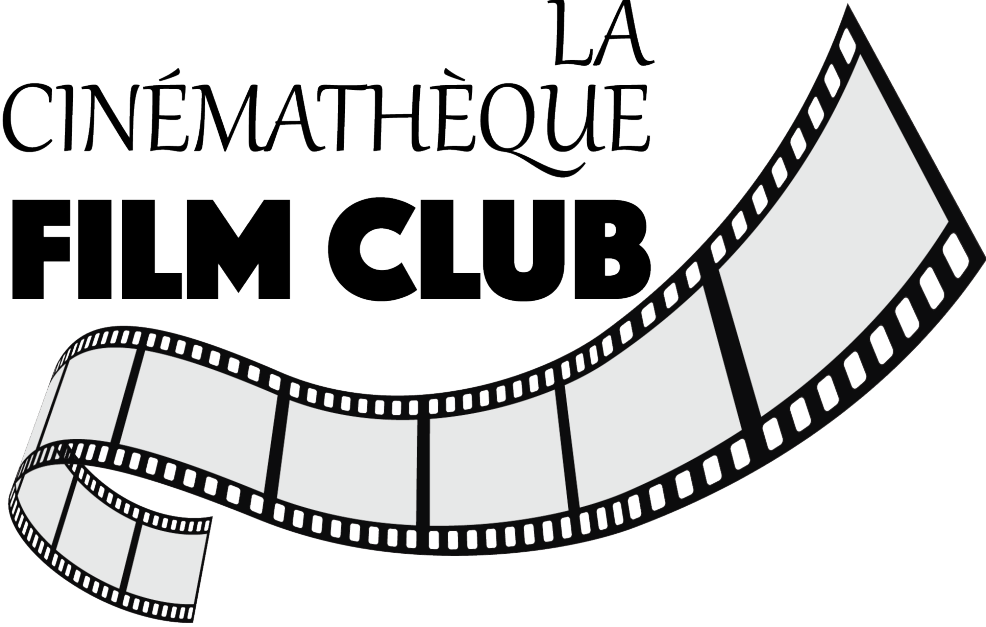
Some reviews call Connor a pedophile. I think he's more of an immoral opportunist. "Fish Tank," in any event, isn't so much about sex as about the helpless spiral Mia is going through. The film has two fraught but

ambiguous scenes -- one when she goes to Connor's home, another involving a young girl -- that we can make fairly obvious assumptions about. But the movie doesn't spell them out; Arnold sees everything through Mia's eyes and never steps outside to explain things from any other point of view. She knows who the young girl is, and we are left to assume. Whatever she thinks after the visit to Connor's house, we are not specifically told. The film so firmly identifies with Mia that there might even be a possibility Joanne is better than the slutty monster we see. A slim possibility, to be sure.

In a film so tightly focused, all depends on Katie Jarvis' performance. There is truth in it. She lives on an Essex housing estate like the one in the movie, and she was discovered by Arnold while in a shouting match with her boyfriend at the Tilbury train station, which is seen in the movie. Now 18, she gave birth to a daughter conceived when she was 16.

We can fear, but we can't say, that she was heading for a life similar to the one Mia seems doomed to experience. Her casting in this film, however, led to Cannes, the Jury Prize, and contracts with British and American agents. She is a powerful acting presence, flawlessly convincing here. And Arnold, who won an Oscar for her shattering short film "Wasp" (2003), also about a neglectful alcoholic mother, deserves comparison with a British master director like Ken Loach.

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Women Film Directors 2
Spring 2018

Niki Caro
b.1967

Whale Rider
2002

Niki Caro biography

Article Author [Garamond, 11pt. bold] • Date originally published [Garamond, 11pt., bold]

Article sourced from Tribute.ca: <https://www.tribute.ca/people/niki-caro/10927/>

Date of Birth: 1967

Born in Wellington, New Zealand, Niki Caro received a BFA at the Elam School of Fine Arts in Auckland and a Postgraduate Diploma in Film from Swinburne in Melbourne. She began her career doing TV commercials for companies such as New Zealand Land Transport Safety Authority, Nike and Tower Insurance. Her short film, **Sure to Rise** (1994), was nominated for a Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival.

She followed that up with the television drama *The Summer The Queen Came*, which received best writer and best director nominations at the 1994 New Zealand Film and Television Awards. Her 1996 short film **Footage** was an Official Selection at the Venice Film Festival.

Caro's first feature, **Memory and Desire** (1997), was in the lineup at the Cannes Film Festival and won a Special Jury Prize at the New Zealand Film Awards. She went on to write and direct the one hour TV drama *Plain Tastes* and a half-hour episode of the drama series *True Life Stories*.

But it was her second feature film, **Whale Rider** (2002), which won Caro worldwide acclaim. Caro adapted the screenplay from Maori author Witi Ihimaera's acclaimed novel of the same name. She also directed the film, which became New Zealand's most financially successful movie. Caro and *Whale Rider* have won and/or been nominated for over 50 international awards, including audience awards at prestigious international film festivals such as Toronto, Sundance, Rotterdam, San Francisco, Seattle, Maui and Lake Placid.

With **North Country** (2005), starring Charlize Theron, Caro directed her first movie for which she hadn't written the screenplay. Another first was that it was filmed in the United States, on location in northern Minnesota.

Following the success of **North Country**, Niki wrote and directed the drama **A Heavenly Vintage** (2009), which stars *Whale Rider* breakout Keisha Castle-Hughes.

In 2015, she directed Kevin Costner and Maria Bello in the sport drama **McFarland, USA**, which is about a real-life cross-country team.

Her latest credit is **The Zookeeper's Wife**, a drama starring Jessica Chastain and Daniel Brühl. It's adapted from a Diane Ackerman novel.

Caro is married to architect Andrew Lister, with whom she has a young daughter.

Filmography

- **Mulan** (2020) pre-production
- **Anne** (2017) TV show, 1 episode
- **The Zookeeper's Wife** (2017)
- **McFarland, USA** (2015)
- **42 One Dream Rush** (2010) short
- **A Heavenly Vintage** (2009)
- **North Country** (2005)
- **Whale Rider** (2002)
- **Mercy Peak** (2001) TV show
- **Dark Stories: Tales from Beyond the Grave** (2001) segment: "Sure to Rise"
- **Memory & Desire** (1998)
- **Sure to Rise** (1994) short
- **Another** (1992) TV show, 1 episode

FILM REVIEW; A Girl Born To Lead, Fighting The Odds

Elvis Mitchell • June 6, 2003

Article sourced from The New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/06/movies/film-review-a-girl-born-to-lead-fighting-the-odds.html>

The stoic mysticism of Niki Caro's cool-handed charmer "Whale Rider" -- in which the young Pai must overcome resistance as she tries to assume her destiny as the leader of a tribe on the New Zealand coast -- is wickedly absorbing. Much of the film's power comes from the delicate charisma of Keisha Castle-Hughes, making her acting debut as Pai.

Ms. Castle-Hughes lacks the traditional resources of an actress, and instead communicates her feelings through a wary hesitation. It doesn't matter that her voice makes her sound a little lost, still trying to find her way into a world that disdains her. Her intelligent, dark eyes are so expressive that she has the piquant confidence of a silent-film heroine.

Her instinctive underplaying gives "Whale Rider" an added gravity, with the lush remoteness of the landscape serving as an entrancing contrast to the sugar-rush, you-go-girl empowerment of programmed pandering like "The Lizzie McGuire Movie," whose tweener heroine flails her arms and bats her eyes as if she were sending distress signals. The director demonstrates a class and tact that brand "Whale Rider," which opens today in New York and Los Angeles, as more than a time-filler for young moviegoers or an ironman competition for adults accompanying them.

Pai's natural rectitude -- the way she plays both pride and hurt -- is even used by Ms. Caro as a hereditary trait. Pai's prickly grandfather Koro (Rawiri Paratene) displays a contempt for her that is like a deadpan force of nature itself. Koro, the tribal chief, wanted a grandson to take on his mantle. But Pai's twin brother died in a difficult birth, which also took her mother's life, and her father, Porourangi (Cliff Curtis), has deserted the family for a career as an artist. Koro treats his granddaughter as the living embodiment of a curse. When he bothers to pay attention to her at all, it's through a sharp cutting of his eyes in her direction.

Tradition dictates that the first-born grandson step into the role of chief, but Pai -- named Paikea by her father, after the tribe's ancient ancestor, who legend says arrived in the village on the back of a whale -- is all the family has.

Her patient grandmother Nanny Flowers (Vicky Haughton) encourages Pai to give things time; Nanny Flowers also refuses to crumple under the galling chauvinism of her husband. But Pai has endured the suffering for all of her 12 years. And though she has a plucky physical assurance -- the firm hand of her grandmother has helped keep her demeanor strong -- she still wants the nurturing she feels is her due.

Ms. Caro treats the material with the calm of a silent film and exploits the extravagant beauty of the location for its majesty. Each shot of the vistas in the breathtakingly lovely village is presented with an even clarity; Ms. Caro and her cinematographer, Leon Narbey, let the audience be seduced by the daunting power, rather than overwhelming viewers with it.

With a deft hand, the director bridges the disconnect between the modern touches in the village -- like the hilarious, cranky chatter over card games -- and the determination to cling to traditions. It is evident that tradition is the way the Whangara tribe maintains its spirituality, which defines it.

The critical moment comes in a set piece that has the potential to send the film off into florid, find-your-bliss sentimentality: a whale cruises too close to the shoreline and needs to be steered back into deeper, life-sustaining waters. Ms. Caro refuses to oversaturate the film with anxious hyperdramatics. It is a moment in which she must show that she trusts her young star, a faith that pays off with a disarmingly touching climax.

But you will have surrendered to "Whale Rider" long before then. The film shows strength by tightening the rhythms of the scenes; be warned that the longueurs that surface in the first 10 minutes or so may make demands on your patience. Ms. Caro and her editor, David Coulson, obviously wanted to dissipate any feeling of forced pathos that might accompany the intense tragedy experienced by Pai's family. It's a welcome exercise of taste on the director's part.

Mr. Curtis's total immersion in the role of Pai's father rescues him from the typecasting of his previous work -- playing dark-skinned bad guys of indeterminate ethnicity. His excitement alone adds a charge to the picture.

Ms. Caro's attempt to fight the mawkishness inherent in the film's opening by setting a tone of emotional tidiness makes the rest of "Whale Rider" distinctively efficient; this gamble makes the first section seem distended and a little drab. Still, there aren't many filmmakers who would have fought that initial heightening of heartbreak. Too flamboyant an opening would have left the movie with no place to go and embarrassed us with so early a claim on our sentiments. Bear with "Whale Rider": once the picture kicks into gear, it has the inspiring resonance of found art.

"Whale Rider" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned) for scenes of emotional cruelty that may be a little upsetting for younger viewers.

WHALE RIDER

Directed by Niki Caro; written by Ms. Caro, based on the novel by Witi Ihimaera; director of photography, Leon Narbey; edited by David Coulson; music by Lisa Gerrard; production designer, Grant Major; produced by Tim Sanders, John Barnett and Frank Hubner; released by Newmarket Films. Running time: 105 minutes. This film is rated PG-13.

WITH: Keisha Castle-Hughes (Pai), Rawiri Paratene (Koro), Vicky Haughton (Nanny Flowers) and Cliff Curtis (Porourangi).

Whale Rider

Roger Ebert • June 20, 2003

Article sourced from RogerEbert.com: <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/whale-rider-2003>



4 out of 4 stars

"Whale Rider" arrives in theaters already proven as one of the great audience-grabbers of recent years. It won the audience awards as the most popular film at both the Toronto and Sundance film festivals, played to standing ovations, left audiences in tears. I recite these facts right at the top of this review because I fear you might make a hasty judgment that you don't want to see a movie about a 12-year-old Maori girl who dreams of becoming the chief of her people. Sounds too ethnic, uplifting and feminist, right? The genius of the movie is the way it sidesteps all of the obvious clichés of the underlying story and makes itself fresh, observant, tough and genuinely moving. There is a vast difference between movies for 12-year-old girls, and movies about 12-year-old girls, and "Whale Rider" proves it.

The movie, which takes place in the present day in New Zealand, begins with the birth of twins. The boy and the mother die. The girl, Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) survives. Her father, Porourangi (Cliff Curtis), an artist, leaves New Zealand, and the little girl is raised and much loved by her grandparents Koro and Nanny Flowers.

Koro is the chief of these people. Porourangi would be next in line but has no interest in returning home. Pai believes that she could serve as the chief, but her grandfather, despite his love, fiercely opposes this idea. He causes Pai much hurt by doubting her, questioning her achievements, insisting in the face of everything she achieves that she is only a girl.

The movie, written and directed by Niki Caro, inspired by a novel by Witi Ihimaera, describes these events within the rhythms of daily life. This is not a simplistic fable but the story of real people living in modern times. There are moments when Pai is lost in discouragement and despair, and when her father comes for a visit she almost leaves with him. But, no, her people need her--whether or not her grandfather realizes it.

Pai is played by Keisha Castle-Hughes, a newcomer of whom it can only be said: This is a movie star. She glows. She stands up to her grandfather in painful scenes, she finds dignity, and yet the next second she's

running around the village like the kid she is. The other roles are also strongly cast, especially Rawiri Paratene and Vicky Haughton as the grandparents.

One day Koro summons all of the young teenage boys of the village to a series of compulsory lessons on how to be a Maori, and the leader of Maoris. There's an amusing sequence where they practice looking ferocious to scare their enemies. Pai, of course, is banned from these classes, but she eavesdrops and enlists a wayward uncle to reveal some of the secrets of the males.

And then--well, the movie does not end as we expect. It does not march obediently to standard plot requirements but develops an unexpected crisis and an unexpected solution. There is a scene set at a school ceremony, where Pai has composed a work in honor of her people and asked her grandfather to attend. Despite his anger, he will come, won't he? The movie seems headed for the ancient cliché of the auditorium door which opens at the last moment to reveal the person that the child onstage desperately hopes to see--but no, that's not what happens.

It isn't that Koro comes or that he doesn't come, but that something else altogether happens. Something in a larger and more significant scale, that brings together all of the themes of the film into a magnificent final sequence. It's not just an uplifting ending, but a transcendent one, inspired and inspiring, and we realize how special this movie really is. So many films by and about teenagers are mired in vulgarity and stupidity; this one, like its heroine, dares to dream.