

## **Adoration**

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**Dir:** Atom Egoyan      **Canada**      **2008**      **100 mins**      **Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring:** Scott Speedman, Rachel Blanchard, Kenneth Welsh, Devon Bostick, Aaron Poole  
**Language:** English  
**Available:** August 2010

An ancient news story takes on new viral life after a teenager transforms a simple translation exercise into a riveting narrative about his own dead parents, imagining his father as a terrorist who places a bomb in his pregnant girlfriend's handbag. When their teacher, Sabine (Arsinée Khanjian), has Simon (Devon Bostick) read the story in class, his classmates receive it as truth and turn it into an Internet sensation, the tale growing ever larger over a series of chats, eventually pulling in participants of the actual incident. But Sabine is not through, further roiling the waters by provocatively confronting Tom (Scott Speedman), Simon's unhappy uncle.

For his 12th feature, Atom Egoyan once more explores the way the past impacts the present and how grief manifests and sometimes curdles over the years. The drama marks a return to the elliptical style he pioneered with such films as *Speaking Parts* (1989) and *The Adjuster* (1991), the fractured narrative turning the story into a kind of mystery, inviting the viewer to tease out not just the truth of Simon's family but also the murky motives behind Sabine's actions. To the shifting points of view and fascination with technology that have long characterized his work, Egoyan adds the spectre of terrorism, using a 20-year-old news story as a prism for our 21st century, post-9/11 fears. The drama is cerebral, but hardly bloodless. Instead, as Simon, Tom and Sabine struggle with the past, what emerges is a poignant and haunting drama of family fissure and reconciliation. - *Pam Grady / San Francisco International Film Festival*

*Winner - Best Canadian Film, Toronto International Film Festival 2008*

## **Blind Loves**

**Slepé lásky**

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**Dir:** Juraj Lehotsky      **Slovak Republic**      **2008**      **77mins**      **Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring:** Miro Daniel, Peter Kolesaár, Iveta Koprdovaá, Zuzana Pohánková  
**Language:** Slovak  
**Available:** August 2010

Using an intriguing blend of documentary, fiction and fantasy, Slovakian filmmaker Lehotsky tells four romantic stories about blind or partially sighted people. It's not an easy movie, but adventurous audiences will love it.

First we meet Peter and Iveta, a blind couple going about their everyday life, watching the Olympics on TV and teaching piano. Next is Miro, a tough guy who falls for Monika. But he's a shunned gypsy, and her family doesn't want him around her. Third is Elena, a young woman who works as a housecleaner and is worried about having a baby with her equally blind husband Laco. And finally, 14-year-old Zuzana dreams of finding a boyfriend who likes her as she is. She meets a guy online, but is scared to meet him.

Shot over three years, the plotlines developed based on the lives of the characters. But director-cowriter Lehotsky takes a fluid cinematic approach with clever camerawork, witty visuals and an effective asynchronous audio mix that uses dialog as narration and

blends sounds with music. The film has a slow, delicate pace that adds an almost melancholy edge to the otherwise sweet and hopeful stories.

Along the way, there are telling touches that transcend the situations. Peter and Iveta live in a grim Soviet-style block covered in graffiti and decay, which they of course can't see. And in the film's most outrageous sequence, Peter imagines himself on an undersea adventure fighting a giant octopus, all while Iveta quietly knits a jumper. It's a sharp injection of Michel Gondry-style animation into a film that's otherwise extremely naturalistic, and it gives us a wonderful look into the minds of the characters.

There are many moments of sharp irony and dark humour. Zuzana has no idea that she's actually a hottie. Miro and Monika are terrified to confront the deep prejudice in their culture, wondering if they can make it on their own. Elena and Laco are frightened of the prospect of being blind parents, even though they both look forward to having a child. In other words, the issues these people face are deeply resonant; we feel their vulnerability and yearning. And in the epilogues, we share their emotions without it ever feeling sentimentalised. – *Rich Cline / Shadows on the Wall*

*Winner - C.I.C.A.E. Award, Cannes Film Festival 2008.*

### **Chiko**

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**Dir: Özgür Yildirim    Germany    2008    92mins    Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Denis Moschitto, Moritz Bleibtreu, Volkan Ozcan, Reyhan Sahin, Fahri Ogun Yardim, Lilay Huser.**  
**Language: German**  
**Available: September 2010**

One of Germany's most respected auteurs, Fatih Akin shot to international fame documenting the Turkish-German experience in such modern classics as *Head-On* and *The Edge of Heaven*. He now assumes the role of producer for writer-turned-director Özgür Yildirim's impressive *Chiko*, which *Variety's* reviewer described as "a forceful Turkish-German Scarface set in Hamburg's rough Dulsberg district."

Street-smart Chiko (Denis Moschitto) and his quick-tempered friend Tibet (Volkan Özcan) yearn for money, power and respect. Chiko dreams of making it all the way to the top in the drugs trade and tries to prove himself to violent drug lord Brownie (Moritz Bleibtreu, having fun playing a psycho) by agreeing to sell a large amount of weed in a short time. Chiko's new status threatens his friendship with Tibet, who sinks into a drug-fuelled anger and is bent on revenge.

Yildirim's fascination with the day-to-day workings of the drug business gives the film a fierce veracity and makes it work as both a genre piece and social critique.

- *Paulaner German Film Festival 2008*

## **Cold Souls**

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**Dir: Sophie Barthes                      USA                      2009                      101 mins                      Cert: 12A**  
**Starring: Paul Giamatti, David Strathairn, Nina Kozun, Katheryn Winnick, Lauren Ambrose, Emily Watson**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: August 2010**

*Cold Souls* is an ambitious comedy in which a frustrated actor - Paul Giamatti, using his own name - disposes of his annoying soul to ease his problems, and then decides he wants it back. There are elements of Woody Allen (who helped inspire this) and Charlie Kaufman, whose work it echoes.

The film's title plays on *Dead Souls*, the 1842 Russian novel by Nikolai Gogol in which a man buys the souls of dead Russian serfs to enhance his position in society. In Barthes' script, Paul Giamatti's soul is getting in the way of his acting in *Uncle Vanya* and is an annoyance to him. An article in *The New Yorker* leads him to a 'Soul Storage' run by Dr Flintstein (David Strathairn), where, in a Faustian twist, he unloads his burdensome soul as if it were a carbuncle. But without a soul, he can't act convincingly, so he acquires the soul of a Russian poet, which helps his acting but has the opposite effect on his marriage to Claire (Emily Watson). His malaise deepens.

Eventually Giamatti crosses paths with Nina (Dina Korzun), a radiantly melancholic 'soul mule' in a Russian mob-run transport racket. The film pivots into thriller-mode, and the two leave for St. Petersburg to find Giamatti's original soul as they form a tender bond.

Playing an actor who is anguished and befuddled by the emotional demands of *Uncle Vanya* and seeks a quick fix for a complex conundrum, Paul Giamatti fits neatly into the role that Barthes wrote for him David Strathairn, as the office-grey Dr Flintstein, is unnervingly calm and professional, given the nature of the product that his Soul Storage company handles. He's a 21st century version of Gogol's officious 19th century bureaucrats and Woody Allen's bland futurist technocrats.

As Nina the soul mule, Dina Korzun, shot in pastel tones, is as quiet and understated as Giamatti is expansive.

*Cold Souls* is admirably challenging, with light absurdist touches - a soul extraction machine that looks right out of Allen's mock-futurist *Sleeper* (1973), and a moment of sheer dread when Giamatti sees his extracted soul, which turns out to be a chick pea, and Dr Flintstein suggests shipping it to New Jersey.

Sophie Barthes handles the emotional depths of *Cold Souls* less convincingly than she wields its charming humour, but the film's literary wit still makes it a promising debut.  
- David D'Arcy / *Screen International*

**La Danse: The Paris Opera**

**Dir: Frederick Wiseman**

**France**

**La danse - Le ballet de l'Opéra de Paris**

**2009**

**158 mins**

**Cert: PG**

**Language: French**

**Available: November 2010**

Institutions are the venerable and prolific documentarian Frederick Wiseman's stock in trade. Since the long-banned *Titicut Follies* (1967), he's been turning his level, rigorously un sentimental eye on a huge variety of American institutions through 30-plus films, from high school, zoo, department store and the army to an intensive-care unit in the immersive six-hour *Near Death* (1989).

Since so much of Wiseman's work has quietly nailed organisations as either dysfunctional, morally careless or simply swamped by the social problems they face, *La Danse's* close, appreciative, often exhilarating picture of the Paris Opera Ballet working at the peak of its powers feels like a departure for him. He's ridden shotgun with a dance company before – tracking the American Ballet Theatre for *Ballet* (1995) – and he examined another iconic French troupe at length in *La Comédie-Française ou L'Amour joué* (1996). *La Danse* reflects themes from both films. This superb, utterly engrossing piece manages to dissect both an institution and an artform with extraordinary skill and beauty.

Wiseman confesses himself fascinated by the evanescence of dance, and the film focuses closely on the total consecration of both dancers and company to creating the transient beauty of performance and honing it to excellence. How do they do it? Work, is the short answer. The meat of *La Danse* consists of layer after layer of closely observed rehearsals for the seven pieces of the 2008 season, which range from the modern athleticism of Wayne McGregor's *Genus*, through the demandingly expressive *Le Songe de Médée*, to the traditional classicism of *The Nutcracker* and *Paquita*, with their rigorously drilled set pieces. Wiseman, his camera mysteriously invisible in the studio mirrors that refract the dancers, concentrates closely on the repetitive working-out of steps and sequences, as choreographers and dancers bind together in a chivvying, relentless search for perfection.

Wiseman's trademark *cinéma vérité* style – which has no truck with voiceovers, captions or score, no timescale or protagonist, no narrative laid out – keeps our attention usefully, hypnotically locked on the dancers' bodies. Watching star Laetitia Pujol fail repeatedly to perform a step ("She imagines an arabesque where there is none," snickers her partner) or seeing Marie-Agnès Gillot and Benjamin Pech trying endless variations on the fiendish contortions of *Genus* with its maker, the film becomes a paeon not just to the discipline of the dancers but to the process of development. One that involves the entire building, whose costume-makers and lighting crew appear as single-minded as the agile, steely artistic director Brigitte Lefèvre, who insists that "everyone must unite around the work." Granted, those Wisemaniacs who prize the *comédie humaine* aspects of his work, the absurdities, grimness or memorable grotesqueries (*Primate's* monkey masturbator, say) may be perturbed by the absorbed approval of its subject that the film emanates. But it's no documercial, since Wiseman is alert to the fiercely hierarchical nature of the organisation (where the only black people glimpsed are cleaners or painters, their rhythmic movements echoing those of the dancers), to the pressures on an ageing dancer pleading for fewer roles or a young one crippling herself with self-doubt. This is a portrait of a human hive, and there's even, fittingly, a beehive on the

roof, which the film visits with the same intense stare it gives to pools of light on the long dark corridors of the Palais Garnier.

Wiseman's concentration (and ours) pays off thrillingly once we finally see the dancers perform, shot seamlessly from the wings and stalls, the rote and wrangling of rehearsal adding layers of meaning. On stage, he shows how performance makes the dancer's body uniquely eloquent, with the sinuous Genus pas de deux closing a circle that began with Wayne McGregor's deliciously inarticulate 'da-da-da-oumfh' instructions to a bemused ballerina. The tour de force however is Médée, which choreographer Angelin Preljocaj has painstakingly encouraged his dancers to put their own imprint on. Wiseman captures Delphine Moussin's dazed murderess, awash with buckets of blood, creating something gloriously visceral and unexpected, prowling on all fours to her children's corpses. *La Danse*, which has patiently unwrapped and illuminated the months of unremitting toil behind every piece, captures the moment when the work becomes transfigured, as dazzlingly as any prima ballerina. – *Kate Stables, Sight & Sound*

### **Departures**

*Okuribito*

**Dir: Yôjirô Takita    Japan    2008    130mins    Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Masahiro Motoki, Ryoko Hirose, Tsutomu Yamazaki, Kimiko Yo, Kazuko Yoshiyuki, Takashi Sasano.**  
**Language: Japanese**  
**Available: September 2010**

The surprise winner of 2009's Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, *Departures* tells the story of a concert cellist named Daigo who undergoes a transformation following the death of his father and the dissolution of his Tokyo orchestra. Because he spent a fortune on a new cello for his now-defunct ensemble, Daigo retreats, guilt-ridden, to his picturesque hometown in northern Japan to look for work, with his obedient wife Mika in tow. He responds to an ad for a company called "Departures," thinking it's a travel agency, but discovers that the company caters to morticians who perform "encoffinments"—highly stylized and meticulous ceremonies to prepare bodies for burial or cremation.

Daigo has mixed feelings about working in an industry that carries such taboo in Japan, but he can't refuse the salary. Soon, he finds pride in helping grieving family members cope with the loss of their loved ones, but he still can't find the courage to admit to Mika what he does for a living.

Inspired by Japanese author Shinmon Aoki's mortician memoir, "Coffinman," *Departures* is a tonally eccentric, lushly scored, moving, and funny drama that uses the rituals of death to foster a greater appreciation of life. – *Seattle International Film Festival 2009*

*Winner - Best Foreign Language Film, Academy Awards 2009*

## **Dogtooth**

*Kynodontas*

**Dir: Yorgos Lanthimos    Greece    2009    97 mins    Cert: 18**  
**Starring: Christos Stergioglou, Michele Valley, Aggeliki Papoulia, Mary Tsoni**  
**Language: Greek**  
**Available: November 2010**

Cultural codes are challenged in this controversial portrayal of a dysfunctional family. A strict father has found authority within his domestic kennel: a safe haven, where his wife and children can be shielded from the evils of the outside world. The children's behavioral patterns are critically affected by the strange circumstances in which they are brought up-home videos are their only visual entertainment, they are taught that cats are viscous monsters, and they rapturously listen to Frank Sinatra in the belief that he is their grandfather. But this perversely idyllic bubble is about to come under attack as a female outsider suddenly enters the family's world.

Through inspired direction, Lanthimos orchestrates this strangely plausible dollhouse, letting intellectual acid drips onto initially comical territory as the story dwells into existential doubts, finding itself somewhere in the confused landscape of humanity. An exploration of the fine line between man and animal, *Dogtooth* leaves us wondering if society as we know it is in fact nothing but a zoo. – *Stockholm Film Festival 2009*

“Masterfully art directed and intensely focused, *Dogtooth* feels so otherworldly it could easily pass as science fiction. Yet Lanthimos consciously strives for his own brand of hyper-stylized realism – even if it exists solely within the confines of a well-executed script. Mercilessly satirizing middle-class ethics, his new film exposes the muffled sexual undercurrents that exist behind family life, proclaiming Lanthimos master of a brave, new world: a deliciously dry Greek cinema, shaken, not stirred.”

- *Dimitri Eipides / Toronto International Film Festival*

## **Double Take**

**Dir: Johan Grimonprez    Belgium, Germany    2009    80 mins    Cert: CLUB**  
**Featuring: Ron Burrage, Mark Perry**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: October 2010**

Hitchcock, doppelgangers, the Cold War and American TV: a complex, conceptual and very enjoyable brew from artist/film-maker Johan Grimonprez.

An ingenious hybrid, *Double Take* is part mock-documentary, part conceptual provocation, and altogether a thought-provoking, hugely entertaining piece that does for Alfred Hitchcock what Orson Welles did for himself in his myth-making *F for Fake*. Using a zippy assemblage of TV and newsreel material, artist/filmmaker Johan Grimonprez muses on Hitchcock's persona and humour, reading his films of the late 50s and early 60s against the climate of Bomb-era political anxiety. The film especially mulls on Hitchcock's preoccupation with doubles, a theme that recurs not just in his films but in the portly auteur's jokey intros to the vintage TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*; the theme is further expanded on in an apocryphal story about the maestro meeting his own future self. Interwoven with all this is a mass of newsreel material, dealing largely with US-USSR Cold War relations, and focusing on America's relationship with that other famous Hitchcock look-alike Nikita Krushchev. Grimonprez leaves viewers to draw their

own conclusions about identity, filmmaking, power and paranoia, but the film's love of Hitchcock - artist, public face, TV clown - is unmistakable and very infectious.  
- Jonathan Romney / BFI London Film Festival 2009

### **Eamon**

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**Dir:** Margaret Corkery      **Ireland**      **2009**      **86 mins**      **Cert: 15A**  
**Starring:** Robert Donnelly, Darren Healy, Amy Kirwan  
**Language:** English  
**Available:** August 2010

Made for less than five hundred thousand dollars, *Eamon* plays like the most expensive low-budget film you've ever seen.; the result is a fabulously fresh and highly entertaining first feature.

Selfish, bratty little Eamon (Robert Donnelly) shoos his father aside for a privileged place in his mother's heart. King of her bed and dictator of all things, he leaves no space in her affections for anyone but himself, having banished his father to what feels like a distant planet a planet where touching your spouse is punishable and sleeping on the couch mandatory. Lonely and sexually frustrated, brooding Daniel (Darren Healy) covers himself head to toe while bikini-clad Grace (Amy Kirwan) actively pretends he doesn't exist.

Though he might not look it, their son is well aware of the parental climate and does his best to keep amorous heat waves at bay. Sitting between them every chance he gets, he insulates one from the other to make it easier to get what he wants which is just about everything. Monopolizing attention and eliminating sexual desire is what *Eamon* does best.

A bright, satirical drama with dark overtones, *Eamon* follows this idiosyncratic trio on a family holiday of sorts, intended to give them a break from their dire financial straits. Unfortunately, salvation does not sprout on the Irish coast, and sooner or later they come face to face with their problems. Too bad one of the three has no interest in seeing them resolved.

Director Margaret Corkery strips her first feature down to its bare essentials: three leads, an uncluttered narrative and the merest sprinkling of ancillary characters. The film's strength lies in the details. One of the most important elements in *Eamon* is the weather: it might be sunny outside, but it's certainly raining in the master bedroom.  
- Dimitri Eipides / Toronto International Film Festival

*Best Film - Forum of Independents, Karlovy Vary International Film Festival 2009*

### **Exit Through The Gift Shop**

**Dir: Banksy      UK      2009      86 mins      Cert: 12A**  
**Featuring: Banksy, Shepard Fairey, Rhys Ifans, Space Invader, Thierry Guetta**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: August 2010**

You could be forgiven for approaching the first film by Banksy with a can of petrol and a blowtorch. The cinema was, until now, one of the few places a chap could expect to avoid any annoying encounters with the ubiquitous (though still reasonably anonymous) English street artist.

A glance at the premise for *Exit Through the Gift Shop* does nothing to allay fears that the project will be annoying post-modern claptrap.

Beginning with the great man muttering behind his hood, the film, narrated lugubriously by Rhys Ifans, follows the story of an LA-based eccentric named Thierry Guetta. An obsessive video-camera user, the Frenchman took to recording the activities the first generation of street artists as they plastered Los Angeles with confrontational graffiti.

Secretive guerrillas such as Shepard Fairey, Neckface and Swoon and eventually Banksy himself allowed Guetta access on the basis that he was making an epic documentary. Sadly, it transpired he had no talent whatsoever for shooting or editing. The tables were turned and Banksy began making a film on Guetta.

Against the odds, the piece turns out to be an absolute hoot. Those ignorant of Guetta's eventual fate will appreciate a drama (shot in grainy video, but cannily edited) that reveals endless unhappy truths about the vacuity of the contemporary art world.

If nothing else, it is worth watching to hear Banksy (of all people), his face in shade, his voice distorted, come over aghast at the unstoppable advance of baseless hype. Yes, you read that right. – *Donald Clarke, The Irish Times*

### **Father of my Children, The**

### **Le père de mes enfants**

**Dir: Mia Hansen-Løve      France      2009      111 mins      Cert: 12A**  
**Starring: Louis-Do de Lencquesaing, Chiara Caselli, Alice de Lencquesaing, Eric Elmosnino**  
**Language: French**  
**Available: October 2010**

A warning about spoilers is necessary before rehearsing the question at the heart of this deeply intelligent film: why do people commit suicide? Is our catch-all diagnosis of "depression" a glib, quasi-clinical alibi which masks our incomprehension? Is suicide a spasm of despair, or rather something calmly envisioned years or even decades before the act itself, like emigration or retirement, and in fact the neurotically comforting option which has been the sole foundation for carrying on with the business of life? Mia Hansen-Løve has made an outstanding, undemonstrative family drama based on troubled film producer Humbert Balsan, who took his own life in 2005.

In the busy heart of cosmopolitan Paris – established with a superbly invigorating, unclipped montage over the opening credits – Grégoire Canvel (Louis-Do de

Lencquesaing) is a film producer: a handsome man in early middle age forever on the move, talking incessantly on his mobile, juggling projects, delegating, problem-solving. Yet he never appears grumpy or stressed or even in much of a hurry. On the contrary, his relaxed charm is remarkable. He has a lovely family to whom he is devoted: Italian wife Sylvia (Chiara Caselli) and three sweet daughters. Yet Grégoire is in deep trouble. His company is desperately in debt. Canvel is admired for promoting important but uncommercial film-makers, but each *succès d'estime* has pushed him further into the red, and his problems are reaching critical mass. When the terrible crisis comes, it is unexpected and shocking. Sylvia has already comforted him that financial success is neither here nor there: his contribution to the art of cinema is permanent and his family is what's important. Surely a sensible and admirable guy like Grégoire can see that? Apparently not: and we can never underestimate how profoundly men put their careers at the centre of their identity.

His terrible fate is the cause of a profound disagreement between his wife and daughter: Sylvia wishes to carry on the company in his honour; his daughter angrily wishes to wind it up and reject the grotesque showbiz compulsion which destroyed their family. Hanson-Løve presents us with the possibility that Canvel with all his charm was, after all, selfish and contemptible – and yet her film does not offer easy answers. What precisely was in Grégoire's heart and mind are unknowable. All that is left is the dignity and courage of his family which has quietly decided to continue loving their lost father in the same way that they will continue to love each other. – *Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian*

*Winner – Special Jury Prize Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival 2009*

**Girl With The Dragon Tattoo, The**

*Män som hatar kvinnor*

**Dir: Niels Arden Oplev    Denmark/Sweden    2009    152 mins    Cert: 18**

**Starring: Michael Nyqvist, Noomi Rapace, Lena Endre, Sven-Bertil Taube, Peter Haber, Peter Andersson**

**Language: Swedish**

**Available: August 2010**

One of the best, least celebrated of Scandinavian movies of the past few years, *We Shall Overcome* (2006) was set in 1969 in a conventional Danish town where a spirited 13-year-old schoolboy, a radical follower of Martin Luther King, takes on the uphill task of confronting a reactionary headmaster, a sadistic bully whose role as pillar of the community no one dare challenge. Its director, Niels Arden Oplev, must have seemed, ideologically at least, the right person to bring the late Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy of crime novels to the screen, and in the event the producers' bold decision has been amply vindicated.

Faithfully adapted from the first novel (published in Sweden as *Män som hatar kvinnor*/*Men Who Hate Women*), the first-rate *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* unites Mikael Blomkvist (the ruffled, charismatic Michael Nyqvist), investigative journalist and editor of the left-wing Stockholm-based journal *Millennium*, and the abused, bisexual working-class punk Lisbeth Salander (Noomie Rapace), an ace researcher and computer hacker. They're involved in tracking down a rich, elderly business tycoon's niece, who disappeared as a teenager 40 years previously. Their quarry is the white ewe of one of those corrupt, arrogantly rich Scandinavian mercantile dynasties familiar to us from the plays of Ibsen and recent movies such as *Festen*. The pair don't meet until

nearly an hour into the film, by which time their characters are very well established, and together they follow a succession of fascinating biblical and forensic clues that point to the activities of a serial killer, or killers, and put their lives in danger.

The film is packed with the authentic, quirky detail that informs Henning Mankell's Wallander books and the Swedish TV series based on them, though the ultimate pay-off is relatively commonplace. The two leads are immensely attractive and one looks forward to seeing them again in *The Girl Who Played With Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (both of which are in the can). Eric Kress's photography is in a fine Scandinavian tradition and the supporting cast includes some highly familiar Swedish and Danish faces. – *Philip French, The Observer*

**Happiest Girl in The World, The**                      **Cea mai fericita fata din lume**  
**Dir: Radu Jude**                      **Romania**                      **2009**                      **100mins**                      **Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Andreea Bosneag, Vasile Muraru, Violeta Haret Popa, Serban Pavlu**  
**Language: Romanian**  
**Available: October 2010**

The latest find from Romania: an acerbic comedy about a young girl who wins a soft-drinks competition and finds that success comes with a catch.

You could call Radu Jude's *The Happiest Girl in the World* the latest Romanian film-about-nothing (or about one small thing extended to breaking point). The title may suggest one-joke irony, but Jude – who worked as assistant director on Cristi Puiu's *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* – scores by following the premise of this bitter comedy to genuinely excruciating lengths.

Delia (Andreea Bosneag) is a small-town girl who has won a car in a soft-drinks competition; as part of her reward, she is doomed to spend a day in Bucharest shooting a commercial through clenched teeth, while her parents (Violeta Haret Popa, Vasile Muraru) lay on the moral blackmail. Delia gamely speaks her lines, over and over again, but what looks like becoming a protracted gag about the capitalist dream gradually evolves into a resonant tragicomedy, its insight all the more trenchant for being executed with such casual economy. Long takes and a no-nonsense realist aesthetic perfectly capture the oppressive feeling of a day badly spent in a crowded city. A modest, no-frills work, but one of the wittier and more honest films of the year.

- *Jonathan Romney / BFI London International Film Festival 2009*

*Winner - C.I.C.A.E. Award, Berlin International Film Festival 2009.*

*Winner - FIPRESCI Prize, Sofia International Film Festival 2009*

**Headless Woman, The**

*La mujer sin cabeza*

**Dir:** Lucrecia Martel      **Argentina**      **2008**      **89 mins**      **Cert: CLUB**

**Starring:** María Onetto, Inés Efron, César Bordón, Claudia Cantero, Daniel Genoud, Guillermo Arengo, María Vaner

**Language:** Spanish

**Available:** November 2010

In the past decade, there have been three great films about guilt, denial and the return of the repressed: Mike Leigh's *Vera Drake* in 2004, Michael Haneke's *Hidden* in 2005 – and this is the third, *La Mujer Sin Cabeza*, or *The Headless Woman*, directed by Lucrecia Martel and co-produced by Pedro and Agustín Almodóvar. It is a masterly, disturbing and deeply mysterious film about someone who strenuously conceals from herself the knowledge of her own guilt.

Each time I have seen it, this film has swirled residually in my subconscious for days, and each time I have witnessed exactly the same spectacle outside the cinema afterwards: knots of people -excitably, grumpily arguing about it. Some denounce it for being boring, wilfully obscure arthouse stuff – and, yes, be warned, it is a difficult, challenging film – while others, like onlookers trying to piece together events leading up to a robbery, frantically ask each other what happened and where and how and why. Then there's a smaller group, including me, dazed and wondering if what we have seen is not a portrait of a guilty person, but rather the autobiographical and minutely realistic dream this person is having.

*The Headless Woman* is set among an extended wealthy family in Argentina. Maria Onetto plays Verónica, an elegant, middle-aged woman who works as a dentist. Driving back from a family get-together, Verónica hits something in her car – bang! – her forehead lunges forward and appears to smash either into the steering wheel or the windshield, and whiplashes back. Verónica brakes and for a long, long moment, Martel's camera holds the shot of her profile: as she sits immobile and silent in the car. Is she in shock? Is she gazing at what she has hit in the rear-view mirror? For the first time, we see a child's handprint on the driver's-side window, a handprint which, in some kind of nightmarish continuity error appears to change position in the next shot.

But couldn't that just be from the kids who were larking around her car at the party earlier? We turn with Verónica, and all we can see at this stage is a dead dog in the distance, which in an earlier scene had been with some boys playing by the roadside.

Verónica returns home: clearly traumatised. She cannot answer simple questions; she is confused. But it is not merely the physical impact. Verónica is dealing with the awful suspicion that she killed not merely the dog, but its owner. She has killed a child. Verónica confesses as much, in a quiet, wondering voice, to her husband, perhaps conveying an unspoken instruction that he and the menfolk of the family – doctors and medical types well connected with the cops – should handle this situation.

Martel's movie intuits and imitates her concussed state, a state which embraces evasive semi-consciousness. Shots are asymmetrically composed in such a way that we can't be sure what we are supposed to be looking at: Verónica, with her faint, not-all-there smile, will be in one part of the screen, while someone else, in another part, will be quietly getting something sorted. Like Verónica, the film glimpses the truth out of the corner of its eye. The sound design is such that voices that we think are emanating from just

behind the camera, near Verónica, are coming from people talking in the middle distance: belatedly, we match the sound to their moving lips.

Often, people talking to Verónica will be seen only from the neck down – they are headless, like the famous photo of the "headless man" in the 1963 Duchess of Argyll divorce case. Her disorientation becomes most disturbing when she goes with a family party to visit an ancient aunt, who is suffering from dementia, and who complains that her apartment with its ancient furniture is filled with squeaks, like the sounds of the dead. In the same state of suppressed panic that she perceives everything else, Verónica sees that this old woman is a kindred spirit; she too must now live with ghosts.

But even here the complications and agonies are not complete. This is not the first time Verónica has had to swallow a secret and live a lie. There is another elephant in the living room she has to feed. A long, mysterious trip to a hotel just after the accident, and sexualised encounters with two different family members, indicate that avoidance, secrecy and denial are lifelong habits.

This is not an easy film to watch, or to understand, but the potency with which it resonates in the imagination is remarkable. Lucrecia Martel's other films, *The Swamp* (2001) and *The Holy Girl* (2004) have both had something of this spacey, floating style, but never before has it been applied to something so painful, so relevant, and never before has she delivered such a psychologically real portrait: demonstrating in both style and content what happens when we go into denial. I'm as certain as I can be of the towering talent of Lucrecia Martel, but I can't quite be certain of exactly what *The Headless Woman* is about. For example: the child's handprint changing position ... did I just imagine that? You tell me. – *Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian*

*Wiener - FIPRESCI Prize, Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival 2008*

### **His & Hers**

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**Dir: Ken Wardrop      Ireland      2009      80 mins      Cert: G**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: August 2010**

Rarely have the odd and the ordinary combined to such beguiling effect. Winner of a small hatful of prizes over the last year, Ken Wardrop's debut feature proudly defies categorisation.

Comprising a large number of conversations with ordinary (but remarkable) Irish women, *His & Hers* certainly satisfies most lucid definitions of a documentary. Listen closely and you will, however, detect a meta-narrative emerging from the cluster of monologues.

Each woman describes her own circumstances, but she also unconsciously contributes to the portrait of a composite personality. Wardrop admits that he intended the film as a tribute to his mother, but an engaging class of covert fiction is also under way.

At any rate, the film, made for peanuts under the Irish Film Board's Catalyst Scheme, could comfortably be filed in the drawer marked "avant garde". A compilation of chatting ladies is, after all, not the sort of thing you expect to encounter in your average Enoromoplex.

Well, maybe not. But *Wardrop* – already acclaimed for a series of touching shorts – has composed such an easily digestible entertainment that it positively demands space in the mainstream. No other film this season has told such a strong story (such strong stories?) with such touching conviction.

*His & Hers* must have been as hard to make as it is easy to summarise: about 70 women, all from the Irish midlands, arranged in ascending order of age, tell stories about the men in their lives.

Shot in slightly grainy, attractively washed-out colours by Kate McCullough and Michael Lavelle (winners of an award at the Sundance Film Festival), the participants begin by discussing dads, go on to ponder boyfriends, and then move on to sons and husbands. We begin with a baby; we end with an elderly lady philosophically contemplating decline.

As the film progresses, the various unseen men appear to coalesce into a portrait of one decent, slightly useless but hopelessly lovable individual. He makes a nice curry, but he doesn't do such a good job with the washing-up. When he was a child he had ambitions to move into law enforcement, but his mother never quite bought it. "A guard? A bank robber, more like," she laughs.

For all the joshing, however, the shared affection between man and woman is never in doubt. Among the most moving of many touching moments comes when a young contributor discusses her boyfriend (and all boyfriends). "It's like they have your heart in their hands and they can do what they like with it," she says.

By this stage, *Wardrop* has established such a warm ambience that the viewer feels confident the clutched heart will be treasured rather than crushed.

Indeed, the few criticisms that have come the way of *His & Hers* have focused on its apparent cosy view of the chosen milieu. Occasional terrible things happen to the women – the sections on illness and widowhood truly wrench the heartstrings – but this remains a safe environment, largely untouched by violence, stress or marital disharmony.

More curiously, the women rarely convey any sense of their lives outside the home. Where are the female doctors, accountants, firefighters and tree surgeons of the midlands?

Well, *His & Hers* does not claim to offer any sort of overview of women's lives in contemporary Ireland. *Wardrop's* most impressive achievement is, in fact, to take so many disparate stories (the firefighters may be here, but they don't talk about fighting fires) and use them to investigate one particular life: a wife and mother in the mould of Mrs *Wardrop*. *His & Hers* is, aside from being a very touching film, an enormously impressive formal achievement.

Women's homes may (for all I know) look quite similar in the midlands, but it takes skill to make every kitchen seem like it abuts the same well-tended, tidily painted corridor.

The result is a near-perfect act of cinematic sleight of hand: a beautiful tale told apparently by accident. No wonder *His & Hers* is the most lauded Irish film since *Hunger*. – Donald Clarke, *The Irish Times*

Winner – Best Irish Feature, Galway Film Fleadh 2009

Winner – World Cinema Cinematography Award, Sundance Film Festival 2010

Winner – Audience Award, Jameson Dublin International Film Festival 2010

Winner – Critics Choice Award, Jameson Dublin International Film Festival 2010

Winner – Feature Documentary, Irish Film and Television Awards 2010

## **I Am Love**

*Io sono l'amore*

**Dir: Luca Guadagnino**

**Italy**

**2009**

**119 mins**

**Cert:16**

**Starring: Tilda Swinton, Edoardo Gabbriellini, Pippo Delbono, Alba Rohrwacher, Marisa Berenson**

**Language: Italian**

**Available: November 2010**

The surprise of Luca Guadagnino's *I Am Love* (*Io Sono L'Amore*) will wear out in time and press coverage/word-of-mouth, but this considerable achievement will always impress. An intriguing delight and so beautifully performed - particularly by lead Tilda Swinton - *I Am Love* is a film of great formal elegance with much simmering underneath its patrician surface. The finale is magnificent, satisfyingly-operatic, melodrama, with Paiato and Swinton working together particularly well.

Set in Milan's upper classes, in the Art Deco villa of a family of great wealth (the Agnellis come to mind), this is a film about repression and breaking free. From its 50s-style opening titles set over a snow-covered Milan and to John Adams scores, *I Am Love* can't help but recall the Douglas Sirk themes of an earlier film age, not to mention Visconti, so it's a surprise to realise that it is all set more or less in the present day. Guadagnino, who developed this with his *The Protagonists* star Tilda Swinton, evidently relishes playing with audience expectations and it's enjoyable to be in this experience with them.

The Recchi family, we're told earlier on, are winners to a man – although the women look a good deal less confident. At a formal lunch party which plays out like a modern-day Italian take on *Gosford Park*, ailing scion Edoardo Sr (Gabriele Ferzetti) celebrates his birthday by passing the business on to his son, Tancredi (Pippo Delbono), and, unexpectedly, his grandson Edoardo (Flavio Parenti), the beloved heart of the family.

Although coolly beautiful and seemingly in control of her surroundings, Tancredi's wife, Emma (Swinton) is evidently not entirely at ease: they have another son, Gianluca (Mattia Zaccaro) and a daughter Elizabeth (Alba Rohrwacher) who is an artist, and, it is later revealed, a lesbian.

And, fatefully, during that same evening, Eduardo Jr introduces his mother to his friend Antonio (Edoardo Gabbriellini), a chef, with whom he plans to set up a business.

Later, Emma, a Russian émigré and facing into an empty nest, takes a trip to Sanremo and encounters Antonio there, as Edoardo Jr struggles against his role in the business during a trip to London.

There is much at play and so much not to give away in *I Am Love*, propelled by some terrific writing and performances – Swinton works her magic, but Marisa Berenson as Edoardo Snr's wife Allegra, Maria Paiato as housekeeper Ida and Alba Rohrwacher as the newly-liberated daughter, whose actions are evidently a turning point for her mother, also impress.

Guadagnino, working with DoP Yorick Le Saux, matches the performances with elegantly-shot interiors and formally composed scenes – but not so much as to over-burden the piece – mixed in with a Hitchcock homage in Sanremo and rush of nature in the countryside outside. Individual sequences, such as that in Antonio's restaurant with three women, are perfectly-formed joys all of their own. One discordant note is Swinton's snap transformation from Hermes-clad elegance to shorn-haired headscarfed soup-maker – it's amazing what just a taste of scruffy sex can do for a woman – but such goodwill has been earned by this point, it's easy to go with her flow. The finale is magnificent, satisfyingly-operatic, melodrama, with Paiato and Swinton working together particularly well. – *Fionnuala Halligan, Screen Daily*

*Winner – Best Female Performance, Dublin Film Critics Awards, Jameson Dublin International Film Festival 2010*

### **Life During Wartime**

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**Dir: Todd Solondz                      USA                      2009                      97 mins                      Cert: 16**  
**Starring: Shirley Henderson, Ciarán Hinds, Allison Janney, Charlotte Rampling, Michael Kenneth Williams, Michael Lerner**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: November 2010**

It's hard to believe that it's been over a decade since Todd Solondz won the International Critics' prize at the Cannes Film Festival for his wry, provocative *Happiness*. Even then, that uneasy examination of sexual desire in American suburbia showed a great progression from his promising *Welcome to the Dollhouse* days. And though Solondz returned to the festival circuit with *Storytelling* and *Palindromes*, comparisons between *Happiness* and his most recent effort are inevitable. But *Life During Wartime* revisits Solondz's unsettling terrain with new maturity.

Separated from her incarcerated husband Bill (Ciarán Hinds), Trish (Allison Janney) is about to be married again. Bill is a pedophile, so Trish couldn't be more excited to have Harvey (Michael Lerner), a "normal" father figure for her two sons. But when Bill is released from prison and the boys finally meet their future stepdad, the family is forced to decide whether to forgive or to forget.

Trish's sister, the virginal, angelic Joy (Shirley Henderson), is also haunted by ghosts of lovers past. On leave from her degenerate husband, Allen (Michael Kenneth Williams), and her job at a New Jersey correctional facility, Joy unwittingly leaves behind a trail of shame and exposed secrets wherever she goes. In one of the film's most stylized sequences, the image of Joy walking the dark streets of Miami in her nightgown maintains her innocence against a backdrop of self-affliction and desire.

Whether it's viewed as a late-coming sequel to *Happiness* or a resurrection of its

characters with different actors, *Life During Wartime* is classic Solondz storytelling. The cast play their roles with subtlety and measure from a screenplay wrought with both sadness and humour. For the uninitiated, *Life During Wartime* is funny and morbid in its realism. For long-time fans of the cult filmmaker, it speaks to the sense of play and the strength of one of the most original voices in American filmmaking.

- Cameron Bailey / Toronto International Film Festival 2009

Winner - Best Screenplay, Venice Film Festival 2009

### **Lion's Den**

*Leonera*

**Dir: Pablo Trapero**                      **Argentina**      **2008**                      **113 mins**                      **Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Martina Gusman, Elli Medeiros, Rodrigo Santoro, Laura Garcia, Leonardo Sauma, Tomas Plotinsky.**  
**Language: Spanish**  
**Available: November 2010**

Receiving its Cannes premiere a full 12 months before *A Prophet*, this skull-judderingly well acted, incongruously good-looking Argentinean film now plays like a distaff response to Jacques Audiard's adored prison drama.

Pablo Trapero's film also deals with the horrors associated with induction into the penal system. It has similarly equivocal points to make about the effects of incarceration. Unlike the French film, it doesn't quite turn into a thriller, but the action is never less than gripping.

*Lion's Den* begins with Julia (Martina Gusman) waking up groggily to discover herself covered in blood. It transpires that her boyfriend is lying dead in a nearby room beside another seriously injured man. Julia is arrested for the murder and, during questioning, we learn that she is several months pregnant.

The film then resolves itself into three strands: Julia's efforts to get by in the prison; her attempts to prove her innocence; and her struggle to retain custody of the child.

Though occasionally a little too fresh looking, Gusman gives an astonishing performance. As the story progresses, she gradually, subtly allows her features to form into ever more painful contortions of desperation. Prime among the pressures is her own apparent confusion about what happened on the night of the killing. She knows the other man – her boyfriend's lover – has lied to the police, but she's not entirely certain of her own innocence.

Trapero strikes just the right balance of flair and restraint in his approach to representing the prison. Shooting in a smoky brown, making use of just one bravura marathon take, he gets across both the awfulness and the unexpected joys of a jail in which children ride tricycles around squabbling drug addicts.

Like *A Prophet*, *Lion's Den* ultimately comes to some troubling conclusions. In a similar way to the hero of the Audiard piece, Julia is debased and humiliated by her experiences, but eventually is transformed into a stronger, more accomplished human being. There's no moral in this story. – Donald Clarke, *The Irish Times*

Winner - FIPRESCI Prize for Best Actress, Palm Springs International Film Festival 2009

### **Limits of Control, The**

**Dir: Jim Jarmusch                      USA                      2009                      116 mins                      Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Isaach De Bankole, Alex Descas, Jean-Francois Stevenin, Luis Tosar, Paz De La Huerta, Tilda Swinton, Youki Kudoh, John Hurt, Gael Garcia Bernal, Hiam Abbass, Bill Murray**

**Language: English**

**Available: September 2010**

Jim Jarmusch has been writing and directing intriguing, highly accomplished independent movies for a quarter of a century now and occasionally acting in those of fellow independents. His budgets remain relatively modest by Hollywood standards, but he has attracted leading performers like Johnny Depp and Robert Mitchum to work with him, as well as musicians such as Tom Waits and Joe Strummer.

His films are mysterious without being obscure and are sometimes carefully patterned and sometimes linear stories of journeys of discovery. *Mystery Train*, for instance, retraces the same few hours as it interweaves several stories of Presley fans in Memphis, while in *Broken Flowers* Bill Murray crisscrosses America visiting old girlfriends (all played by well-known actresses) to discover which one bore him a son. Despite the fact that few of the characters actually meet each other, there's always a sense of ensemble acting in Jarmusch's work and this is true of his hypnotic new picture *The Limits of Control*.

Isaach De Bankolé, the black French actor from the Ivory Coast making his fourth film with Jarmusch, travels around Spain encountering a dozen people played by familiar actors from a dozen countries ranging from Japan to Palestine, none of whom appears to know of the others' existence. The movie is something of a homage to John Boorman's dreamlike thriller *Point Blank* (it's actually announced as "A Point Blank production") and is much influenced in its themes and settings by Melville's *Le samourai*, Antonioni's *The Passenger* and the conspiracy pictures of Jacques Rivette.

No one has a name. Bankolé, identified in the credits as "Lone Man", belongs in that tradition of professional hitmen who have fascinated writers and film-makers from Shakespeare (the Murderers in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*) through Graham Greene (*A Gun for Sale*) and Jean Paul-Sartre (*Les mains sales*) to Michael Mann (*Collateral*). Forest Whitaker played such a figure in Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai*, and while Bankolé also seems attracted to eastern ways (he begins the day with tai chi), he's an existential figure about whom we know nothing beyond his few laconic statements and his behaviour.

He's dispatched on a mission by two Frenchmen, one black, one white, in an airport lounge, who begin their briefing with the question: "You don't speak Spanish, right?", which becomes both recognition code and mantra. As with his later contacts, they exchange matchboxes, alternately red and green, from a brand called Le Boxeur, the one he receives always containing a small, encrypted message which he chews and swallows. He first flies to Madrid, where he stays in a famous high-rise apartment block that looks like a Bauhaus reworking of Gaudi. Wherever he goes, he orders two separate espressos, an indication of his rigid sense of control, and makes contact

according to oblique instructions.

From Madrid, he takes the train to Seville, where his backstreet apartment in the old town is in a different, more traditional style. Another train takes him to rural Almería, where he stays in a ghost town near his target, a closely guarded fortress belonging to some powerful international organisation, possibly connected to the helicopters that hover everywhere.

Along the way, the Lone Man meets a variety of colourful characters, all of a philosophical bent, who have to be reminded of their essential roles in some conspiratorial enterprise, at which we can only guess. My hunch is that we're watching the revenge of the downtrodden upon globalism and capitalist society. The film's one demon is called simply "the American". Death and disorientation are much in the air.

The only time Bankolé faintly smiles is when he watches a flamenco singer and dancer in Seville and several times he is directed to a grand art gallery in Madrid to interrogate a cubist painting by Juan Gris of a violin, an erotic 1920s nude by Roberto Balbuena and, at the end, an all-white painting by Antonie Tàpies of a sheet nailed to a canvas. There are numerous clues in this delightfully ludic, enigmatic film to suggest we're experiencing a dream or watching a film about film. For example, the hero flies by Air Lumière and an exotic cinephile dressed all in white (Tilda Swinton) tells him she loves old films because they capture a vanished past, that in her memory she can't distinguish dreams from films and that she loves watching movies where people just sit around and nothing happens.

*The Limits of Control* is a picture people will love or loathe, though no one could fail to be impressed by the haunted, surreal atmosphere that is rendered by the brilliant Hong Kong-based Australian cinematographer Christopher Doyle. I was riveted from the moment I read the epigraph from Arthur Rimbaud's "Le bateau ivre": "As I descended into impassable rivers/ I no longer felt guided by the ferryman."

- Philip French / *The Observer*

## **Lourdes**

**Dir: Jessica Hausner      Austria,France      2009      96 mins      Cert: G**

**Starring: Sylvie Testud, Lea Seydoux, Bruno Todeschini, Elina Lowensohn, Gerhard Liebmann, Linde Prelog**

**Language: French**

**Available: October 2010**

A cool and firmly ambitious film from Austria's Jessica Hausner, *Lourdes* is an accomplished work which radiates intelligence. Setting her story on a religious pilgrimage to the French Catholic shrine sets many expectations, but Hausner neither belittles nor reveres her subjects, and as a result *Lourdes* could be looking at a wider commercial reach. After *Hotel* and *Lovely Rita*, Hausner certainly confirms herself here as an original voice.

The performances here are uniformly good, led by Testud but extending to smaller cameos

While its tone, slowish pacing and general approach is art-house, there is much in here to attract a wider, even religious crowd, and *Lourdes* will have screenings at Lourdes

itself, where it was shot, and a place Hausner approaches, crab-like, from the safety of the formica-table-topped, marble-floored hotel where her pilgrims are staying.

Opening slowly and formally as waitresses set the canteen tables to the strains of a distant *Ave Maria*, *Lourdes* shows the pilgrims slowly entering the room to eat, some on wheelchairs, accompanied by officers and volunteers of the Order of Malta. (Around 1.5 million people visit the Marian shrine every year, many disabled, nearly all looking for a miracle).

But wheelchair-bound Christine (Testud), a rigid MS sufferer, is here “because it’s the only way I get out,” she confesses to young volunteer Maria (Lea Seydoux). They both notice Order of Malta officer Kuno (Bruno Todeschini), and are in turn all noticed by strict, otherworldly head nun Cecile (Elina Lowensohn).

Christine shares a room with the solitary, devoted Catholic Madame Hartl (Linde Prelog), who comes to view the young girl as her own mission, as, to a certain extent, does Sister Cecile.

As they approach Lourdes, which Hausner films in a straightforward, restrained, manner, the film begins to circle more and more directly the subject of miracles and faith. Hausner tackles a heavy subject in a delicate manner, and there’s a comic vein running through *Lourdes* which is rewarding, adding greatly to the overall experience. Ultimately, the obvious questions – what is a miracle? Why him and not me? – are tackled unexpectedly with all Hausner’s characters performing an intricate dance.

The performances here are uniformly good, led by Testud but extending to smaller cameos from two gossipy women, the priest, the volunteers and the little cabal of team leaders who meet every evening to play cards and drink wine and joke about Jesus.

Hausner with DoP Martin Gschlacht (also producing) displays a sure visual sensibility, with sparse framing and a pared-back, restrained approach. Nothing in *Lourdes*, from the souvenir shop to the stations of the cross and the candlelit Masses, is presented as you might expect. There is no real soundtrack, apart from the odd devotional him, a small jolt of Bach and the final, unforgettable, pilgrims farewell dance.

- *Fionnuala Halligan / Screen International*

## **Machan**

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**Dir: Uberto Pasolini      Sri Lanka      2008      109 mins      Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Dharmapriya Dias, Gihan de Chickera, Dharshan Dharmaraj, Mahendra Perera**

**Language: Sinhala**

**Available: November 2010**

According to the International Handball Federation, there are 35 recognised member nations of the Asian handball division. Sri Lanka is not one of them. It seems, in fact, that Sri Lankans have very little concept of the sport at all, let alone enough to establish a national team. Yet in 2004, a 23-strong group of representatives of the Sri Lanka National Handball Team infiltrated an international tournament taking place in the suburb of Wittislingen, Bavaria. Unbeknownst to the German organisers, the squad had blagged their way into the contest, not with any view to compete, but with the audacious and

outlandish plan to leave their harsh home lives behind in search of a better life.

From the outset then, *Machan* has that madcap air of the underdog about it that cinemagoers seem to find so irresistibly alluring. But Italian-born producer-turned-director Uberto Pasolini's film is a lot more sobering than you might expect from such an overtly eccentric premise. In taking these men's plucky tale to a wider audience, Pasolini laces together an intricate narrative, bringing difficult social concerns to the fore with great care and optimism. The film has been widely hailed in its homeland, and it's not hard to see why. Much like *The Full Monty*, the film that offered Pasolini his producing break back in 1997, *Machan* foregrounds a group who occupy the margins of a society burdened by the constant strain of economic instability.

Disenchanted by the impossible problems afflicting their daily lives, Manoj (Gihan De Chickera) and Stanley (Dharmapriya Dias) chance upon a way out; an invitation to a handball tournament in Germany. Without much afterthought the pair submit an application, assemble a ragtag squad, and set their sights on the somewhat brighter lights of Bavaria. The assortment of friends, acquaintances and tagalongs (the cast themselves are a mixed bag of newcomers, non-professionals and established actors) intoxicated by the promise of greener pastures.

While *Machan* handles some delicate social issues, it does so with a sense of humour and frivolity. Rather than exaggerate the poverty that plagues our protagonists, Pasolini astutely conveys a more pragmatic realism. The consequences, of course, are much more serious for this zealous troupe, but what is so refreshing and uplifting about Pasolini's vision is that he rarely dwells upon such shortcomings. Instead, the first time director eschews the maudlin mentality that is so easily resorted to when raising awareness of immigration. As such, while the group's hardships are a continual reminder of the film's moral motivations, *Machan* is never overly sentimental and never melodramatic, but brims with charm, compassion and ultimately hope.

- Adam Woodward / *Little White Lies Magazine*

Winner - Europa Cinemas Label, Venice International Film Festival 2008

### **Merry Gentlemen, The**

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**Dir: Michael Keaton                      USA                      2008                      99 mins                      Cert: 15A**

**Starring: Michael Keaton, Kelly Macdonald, Tom Bastounes, Mike Bradecich, Debbi Burns**

**Language: English**

**Available: September 2010**

At 56, you could say that actor Michael Keaton's directorial debut has been a long time coming. In fact, it wouldn't have come at all if a ruptured appendix hadn't stopped writer Ron Lazaretti from also stepping into the director's chair. But despite the rather odd circumstances that brought about his first foray behind the camera, Keaton acquits himself with aplomb. There is both a warmth and a reserve to this film which, while covering serious ground, has a gentle humour running throughout.

Keaton stars as Frank Logan, a loner with a hacking cough whom, we learn in a beautifully played set-up sequence, is a hitman with suicidal tendencies.

This desire to kill himself causes his path to cross with that of Kate. She has her own problems, having moved to a new town for a fresh start after being used as a punchbag by her cop husband one too many times. One night, as she leaves the office in the run-up to Christmas, she spots a man on the roof opposite, about to jump. It's in her nature to do something, and so she inadvertently saves Frank's life.

Although too far away to see who the jumper is, she calls the police to report it, and moves on. Frank, however, has got a good look at her, and it isn't long before he engineers a meeting over a Christmas tree and they form an unlikely friendship. He's hiding his line of work from her, she's keeping a lid on her past. Throw in the romantic aspirations of the cop (Tom Bastounes) she dealt with over the attempted suicide and the stage is set for redemption. And trouble.

The idea of three loners - solo for very different reasons - whose paths cross, may sound like a recipe for silence more than sizzle. But though the dialogue is sparse, the leads make the silence speak volumes. Where the plot machinations require a leap of faith, the actors help bridge the gap. The emotions expressed here go beyond the common drama fare of love and hate, to touch on more uncertain emotions, such as anguish, low self-esteem, hope and aspiration. And the idea of what makes someone 'evil' is held up to a the light - killing for a living is a bad thing, but what about manipulating relationships, doesn't that also come with casualties?

Macdonald has returned triumphantly to the public eye in the past year - and not before time. After early success in films such as *Trainspotting* and *Stella Does Tricks* she slipped rather unfairly into bit-part obscurity. Now she is back with a bang, following the success of *No Country For Old Men*, with both this and a role in Chuck Palahniuk adaptation *Choke*. This is arguably the best of the three performances as, unencumbered by an American accent, the full force of her 100-watt glow as an actress comes across - she lifts the scenes she's in to a higher level.

Keaton is also excellent as Frank, and he shows a keen eye for laidback direction, letting the action unfold at a leisurely, but charming, pace. Meanwhile, Bobby Cannavale, as Kate's abusive spouse, proves again that he is too often overlooked as an actor in an almost unbearably tense scene that may see you leave nail marks in the cinema seat armrest.

Despite the easy nature of the drama and a gradual unfolding which may try the patience of some, *The Merry Gentleman* manages to retain an offbeat edge that stops it being predictable. It may not have huge appeal to younger members of the audience, but anyone in their 30s or above is likely to won over by its grace and subtlety.

- Amber Wilkenson / Eye For Film

## **Micmacs**

*Micmacs à tire-lariqot*

**Dir: Jean-Pierre Jeunet                      France                      2009                      105 mins                      Cert: 15A**

**Starring: Dany Boon, Andre Dussolier, Nicolas Marie, Yolande Moreau, Jean-Pierre Marielle, Julie Ferrier**

**Language: French**

**Available: September 2010**

Fans of Jean-Pierre Jeunet's utterly beguiling *Amelie* will recognise the moment in *Micmacs* when, at his father's funeral, young Basil is given a box of personal effects that include bits of the landmine that killed his dad. Years later, in the street one day, the grown-up Basil recognises the logo of the company that made the landmine.

Coincidentally, it's the same company that manufactured the stray bullet that accidentally shot him in the head as he was standing in the door of his video-rentals shop one day, reciting the dialogue of *The Big Sleep*. The bullet has remained inoperably embedded in his skull and could still kill him at any moment. There in the Paris street, he resolves to take his revenge on the arms dealers whose products totalled his old man and speared his cerebellum.

Amelie, the titular heroine of *Amelie*, also came upon a box of personal curiosities one day, the childish belongings of a complete stranger, in a hole behind one of the tiles in her bathroom. Finding it inspired her to set out on a quest to find the owner and return his missing childhood, as part of her project to do good works for everyone she meets.

Two quests, from two cabinets of curiosities. It's tempting to characterise Jeunet's films as being themselves boxes of tricks, in which random props, heterogenous ideas, mix-and-match genres, bits of film history, allusions and snatches of music are thrown together, to be rummaged through and picked out again by their capricious owner. If that makes him sound like a clever schoolboy, there's some truth in it. In an interview, he admitted that *Toy Story* and *Mission Impossible* are potent influences on his new film, which pitches an awkward gang of freakish pals against a massive corporate machine. It's conducted along slightly childish lines: the Secret Seven takes on the Military-Industrial Complex.

Basil, unemployed and on the street, is taken up by a bearded ex-convict who introduces him to a family of secondhand dealers who live in a kind of metallic Ali Baba cave on a rubbish dump and exist by salvaging. There's Mama Chow (Yolande Moreau) who lost both her daughters in the hall of mirrors at a fair one day, and now mothers everyone; Elastic Girl, a blonde contortionist who sleeps in the fridge; Remington, a Congolese ethnographer who types all day and speaks entirely in French proverbs; Calcuette, an idiot-savant girl with a tiny head, huge eyes and the ability to compute sizes, distances and sounds; Buster (Dominique Pinon, a Jeunet regular) who holds the world record for being a human cannonball...

You get the idea. Somewhere between Tod Browning's vengeful freaks in *Freaks* and the cast of TV's *Hustle*, this band of brothers mimics the conventions of filmic superheroes to outwit the arms dealers. They each have useful powers, but their ensemble scenes are played for laughs rather than logic. At an airport, they employ African robes, salami, a razor and a suitcase with a secret trapdoor to have an African dictator's henchman framed for drugs. At the arms dealers' headquarters, they use microphones, a vacuum cleaner and the contortionist in a box to steal the chairman's

collection of celebrity body parts, including Churchill's nail clippings, while the man in charge of security CCTV is distracted by the sight of the sexual contortions at a neighbouring window.

This may strike you as too wacky and zany to be funny, and there are indeed moments when the French sense of humour is lost on les Anglais. But Jeunet's imagination skips about with such alacrity, it's hard to resist. His pacing is fantastic. Little jokes whizz past you all the time, in the style of Wallace and Gromit. As his characters motor down a road beside the Seine, they pass an advertisement for the film they're in, a still of the moment you're watching. When Bazil tries to stop himself falling asleep by thinking of money, a section of his brain chatters with a cascade of cash. The digital special effects jostle with real-life special effects – such as the scrap-metal cave in which the secondhand dealers live, or the outburst of complex finger-clickings in which Bazil indulges, like a hip-hop prestidigitator or a fond uncle, to amuse the local kids.

Dany Boon, who plays Bazil, is an extraordinary actor. He started life as a mime and currently stars in the biggest thing on French TV, *Bienvenue Chez Les Ch'tis*. He goes in for weird, untranslatable vocalisations and a repertoire of shrugs and facial contortions that I took to be entirely Gallic until – a eureka moment – I realised he was doing Charlie Chaplin. Picture the scene in *The Gold Rush* when Chaplin makes two potatoes dance with the aid of forks and you have le style Dany Boon: whimsical, cute and just slightly slappable. His burgeoning romance with the elastic contortionist – who complains that, for him, she exists somewhere between a freak and a tomboy – has a lot of Chaplin about it too.

Jeunet is a master of comic-strip filming, the kind we associate with the Coen brothers of *Raising Arizona* or *The Big Lebowski*, and with the Terry Gilliam of *Brazil* or *Baron Munchausen*. Nobody beats him for sheer comic inventiveness and the speed with which he whips ideas into crazy reality. The only problem with his approach is that black humour clearly isn't enough for him.

For all its comic genius, *Micmacs* also tries to achieve a comic pathos that sometimes seems a substitute for genuine feeling. All the ingenious metal inventions, the freakish physical bending and stretching, the juvenile trickery, achieve diminishing returns. When, at the end, an old inventor shows us a little frock being made to dance by twirling a hanger, we may be forgiven for thinking, "Yes yes, very sweet, very cute, but what's happened to the story?" Otherwise, it's a crazy Gallic ride.

– John Walsh, *The Independent*

### **Mugabe and The White African**

**Dir: Lucy Bailey & Andrew Thompson    UK    2009    91 mins    Cert: PG**

**Language: English**

**Available: August 2010**

'The white man is not indigenous to Africa. Africa is for Africans. Zimbabwe is for Zimbabweans.' – Robert Mugabe.

Since 2000, in parallel with the country's deep economic crisis, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe has pursued a campaign of aggressive land reform, claiming land owned by white farmers. Government supporters have occupied many white-owned

farms, with violence flaring frequently, and a number of white farmers and their black workers have been killed. Though Mugabe proposed that the land would be distributed among the poorer black population, evidence suggests most has been put in the hands of government officials and cronies.

White farmer Michael Campbell faced intimidation and aggression, but chose to put up a fight for his land, taking the unprecedented step of challenging Mugabe before the South African Development Community's international court, charging him and his government with racial discrimination and of violations of Human Rights.

Filmed covertly in a country where a press ban exists, *Mugabe and the White African* provides a valuable, unsettling insight into the reality of life under Mugabe's dictatorship, following Campbell and his family on their brave campaign, as they fight for the right just to live peacefully. - *Michael Hayden, The 2009 Times BFI 53<sup>rd</sup> Film Festival*

### **My Name is Khan**

**Dir: Karan Johar                      India              2010              165 mins              Cert: 12A**

**Starring: Shahrukh Khan, Christopher B. Duncan, Kajol.**

**Language: Hindi / Urdu / English**

**Available: September 2010**

Indian superstar Shahrukh Khan (often lovingly intialised to SRK) has found this film to be a lot more controversial than expected, even allowing for its plotlines involving US homeland security and terrorism. SRK plays an Indian man with Asperger's syndrome who, for reasons revealed as the film unfolds, is on a quest to personally deliver a message to the US president.

Though the film's message of understanding, community and tolerance, is one that deserves to be heard, it seems unlikely that it will have far-reaching crossover appeal – to say nothing of its problems in Mumbai, where the large and very vocal Shiv Sena movement have been attacking Khan via the film that bears his name.

Western screenwriting guru Syd Field gets a credit for story consultancy, but the film is still very much structured according to Indian traditions. For instance, the interval is still used as the point where the film changes gear. As usual, the first half is more soap opera, spending plenty of getting-to-know-you time with the appealing characters before putting them through the wringer in the more politicised second section.

Khan's quest lands him in government detention and sees him helping out a hurricane-ravaged Georgia town, while the post 9-11 climate sees anyone even vaguely resembling a Muslim under verbal and often physical attack. It's stunningly shot, on mostly US locations, and tackles plenty of hard topics – its deceptively light touch gets heavier as things progress. It's a shame that much of the intended audience will not see this well-intentioned, slickly constructed and just plain likable film, for reasons that are very little to do with the film itself. - *Phelim O' Neill / The Guardian*

### **No Greater Love**

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**Dir: Michael Whyte**                      **UK**                      **2009**                      **100 mins**                      **Cert: CLUB**  
**Language: English**  
**Available: October 2010**

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" – so states John 15:13. The lifestyle depicted here, however, has rather more to do with laying down one's friends for one's life: sacrificing ordinary comforts and social stimulations in the name of an austere, restricted and fully contemplative existence.

Michael Whyte's unique and quietly inspiring documentary is the product of a labour of love: he campaigned for ten years for permission to film in the Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity in Notting Hill. This monastery is home to a cloistered order of Carmelite nuns, into whose distinct and distant world Whyte's film respectfully dips. What is revealed is not so much a group of people hiding from the world, but rather a lifestyle that engages with the problems of existence in a radically different way. In place of intimate relationships, there is an intense and often turbulent connection with God – characterised not necessarily by serene constancy, as one nun explains, but by inner tussles and painful periods of doubt. In place of the manic hustle and bustle of outside life, there is the challenge of facing oneself, all the time, soberly and in silence. The nuns are silent for most of each day, speaking among themselves for only one hour in the morning and one in the evening; these brief social occasions, as we glimpse, are fairly noisy affairs.

Yet Whyte's style is not necessarily to bask in the strange glamour of silence, or the nuns' exotic removal from the world, in the manner of Philip Groening's mesmerising study of French Carthusian monks, *Into Great Silence*. Nor is he hellbent on uncovering uncomfortable secrets or hypocrisies behind the habit. Rather, Whyte approaches the monastery as a busy, industrious place, and the nuns' work on the spirit as almost a practical matter; as one sister points out, it is the nuns' function to use their time in praying for those whose lives are too busy to allow it. Consequently his camera is often quick and reactive, emphasising the constant activity inside the monastery as well as his own somewhat furtive presence within its walls. The result is an unexpectedly lively and intellectually challenging approach to an alternative way of life, the details of which are customarily shrouded by either awed mystique or easy assumptions.

- *Edinburgh International Film Festival 2009*

### **No One Knows About Persian Cats**                      *Kasi az qorbehaye irani khabar nadareh*

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**Dir: Bahman Ghobadi**                      **Iran**                      **2009**                      **106 mins**                      **Cert: 12A**  
**Starring: Negar Shaghghi, Askan Koshanejad, Hamed Behdad**  
**Language: Farsi**  
**Available: November 2010**

Anyone who considers the Iranian Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi solely a practitioner of long-take chronicles about rural Kurdish life needs to reconsider. Here he ventures brilliantly into new territory, the urban jungle, highlighting Tehran's underground community of rock and heavy metal musicians who borrow melodies from the West but sing their own politicised lyrics. In the film, a love/hate letter to Tehran itself, he blends the genres of concert film, social drama, comedy, and thriller into a cohesive faux-documentary, adjusting his style to insure a snug fit.

Calm, painfully beautiful pastoral scenes appear between rapid, sometimes manic sequences—montages as gorgeous as they are critical of the status quo. *No One Knows About Persian Cats* affords Ghobadi the opportunity to wade into more commercial waters. Although it's hardly a mainstream effort, this film's fast pacing and hip soundtrack are potential draws for the youthful audiences distributors crave. The opening film at Cannes' Un Certain Regard, *Cats* is a rendering of the true, tragic tale of two young musicians, Negar (Shaghghi) and Ashkan (Koshanejad), who attempt to put together a rock/heavy metal band after being released from prison. They had committed the crime of playing western music in an inflexible, dogmatic Islamic society. (The situation is worse for Negar, because women are not allowed to perform any kind of music.)

They also seek passports and visas for themselves and the band mates they hope to find in order to emigrate to a country with freer artistic expression. The documents are expensive, with Ghobadi making the point that there's a crass material culture existing beside the country's religious one.

The pair hooks up with Nader (Behdad), a lovable, fast-talking operator and music promoter of sorts who promises to get them the papers, a dangerous undertaking. He occupies the comic centre of the film—the scene where he convinces a policeman to reduce his punishment for possession of American DVDs and alcohol is hilarious.

Ghobadi himself begins the film singing in a recording studio where others talk about how he was unable to receive permission from the government to shoot a film. He then shifts from this self-reflexive mode, taking us into the fiction. He structures *Cats* as a search, indeed a suspenseful investigation, following Negar, Ashkan, and Nader through the city on a motorbike while they struggle to complete their mission before a deadline only a few days away.

The motif of movement runs throughout: Characters constantly run up and down stairs (most illicit groups practice surreptitiously in basements), for example. The strongest shots of all, however, are the aerial views of Tehran, which not only entice but also prefigure the film's tragic finale.

Ghobadi shot *Cats* underground in a mere 17 days with an S12K camera. In Iran, 35mm equipment is owned by the state. The title refers to a law that bans dogs and cats from being outdoors. – *Howard Feinstein, Screen Daily*

*Winner - Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival 2009*

## **A Prophet**

*Un prophète*

**Dir: Jacques Audiard      France      2009      155 mins      Cert: 16**

**Starring: Tahar Rahim, Niels Arestrup, Adel Bencherif, Reda Kateb, Hichem Yacoubi**

**Language: French**

**Available: September 2010**

*Du Rififi Chez les Hommes* was the full title of Jules Dassin's classic tough-guy thriller from 1955 – aggro among men. Here, it is more a case of Rififi Among Men and God

alike, in a blisteringly powerful prison-gangster picture from the French director Jacques Audiard. It comports itself like a modern classic from the very first frames, instantly hitting its massively confident stride. This is the work of the rarest kind of film-maker, the kind who knows precisely what he is doing and where he is going. The film's every effect is entirely intentional.

Newcomer Tahar Rahim plays Malik El Djebena, a young Arab guy about to start a six-year stretch in prison for what appears to be violence against police officers. He is a 19-year-old petty criminal, and this is his debut in adult detention. Malik is very frightened, cringing almost visibly into his clothes on walking the grim corridors of jail, and into his nakedness when he is inspected by medical officers.

On what is apparently his very first day in the exercise yard, Malik's vulnerability and his very blankness attract the hooded eye of César, the Corsican mobster with the guards in his pocket – incomparably played by Niels Arestrup. César needs someone to whack a fellow prisoner, who is about to incriminate his -associates on the outside by turning state's witness. Surrounded by his thuggish courtiers, César curtly summons bewildered small-timer Malik and informs him that he must kill this switch, or be killed himself by César's lieutenants. He will be given instruction on how to do the job, and protection from César's crew for the rest of his term. No arguments: Malik is "in", a murderer. There is no way out.

Trembling Malik now finds himself in a terrifying, almost Greeneian dilemma. Should he refuse? Should he simply submit to death rather than become a murderer? The plan is that Malik must kill his victim, Reyeb (Hichem Yacoubi) with a razor-blade concealed in the roof of his mouth. Pretending to offer him a blowjob in his cell, he must work it out with his tongue and push it forward between his teeth while his face is invisibly at crotch-level, and then stand up and cut the man's throat. The scenes in which Malik must practise doing this in front of the mirror, retching and spitting blood into the sink, are the stuff of pure, scalp-prickling fear: I just can't remember being so tense in the cinema.

This nauseous forced deal between Malik and César appears to become the basis of a strange, unknowable spiritual bargain between Malik and God – or does it? Audiard makes the haunted Malik the centre of an internal crisis, part psychological, part supernatural. The terrible unsought burden of assassinhood transforms him into a grotesque, parodic "prophet" and the agent of César's downfall. Intent on self-betterment, Malik takes classes, learns Corsican-dialect Italian and, to the contemptuous disgust of the Muslim prisoners, becomes the Corsicans' Uncle Tom-ish servant boy.

But poker-faced Malik has big plans; he is rising through the ranks – and laws from the new Sarkozy government about repatriating Corsican prisoners away from mainland French jails now leave César exposed, with no bodyguards. Malik, whom César fears and suspects more than anyone, is his Quisling nemesis, his only companion, and the son he never had or wanted to have.

Audiard has created a long, involved, relentlessly brutal but gripping and thrilling picture; it has the rangy, anecdotal feel of something drawn from real life, but its realism somehow accommodates an eerie supernatural shimmer. Malik has visions which are partly, but apparently only partly, explicable as trauma. The sweat and the machismo are very familiar from the French crime genre, which was revived only recently in the 70s-era Mesrine films. The passing of contraband, the defiant songs and shouts and burning

garbage being flung from the high courtyard walls surely also summon up memories of Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*. But the movie has its own muscular originality.

Niels Arestrup is all too plausible as the jail gang-boss, coolly proprietorial with prisoners and guards alike, sporting a mask of impassive disdain through which world-weariness and fear gradually surface. But Arestrup and Audiard have found something new in this classic persona. What we see etched on César's face is pathetic loneliness and the horror of dying alone in prison. His weakness and Malik's future strength – this is the emotional fulcrum on which this tremendous film is structured.

Arestrup was outstanding in Audiard's previous film, *The Beat That My Heart Skipped* – also, intriguingly, in a tense, mutually resentful relationship with a younger man – but here he brings out new strains of desolation. Rahim, too, is a tremendous casting find for Audiard. The film returns us to what should be the biggest cliché in the book: the prison film, with its cells, its shouts, its corrupt guards, its boxes full of prisoners' heartrendingly meagre personal effects. But Audiard also revives the hidden source of our fascination with prisons. They are places of violence and fear, but also of paradoxical freedom – freedom from the ties of outside lives. They are places you can remake yourself, for good or ill, hellish furnaces in which you can smelt a new identity. – *Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian*

*Winner - Grand Jury Prize, Cannes Film Festival 2009*

*Winner - Best Film, London Film Festival 2009*

### **Samson and Delilah**

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**Dir: Warwick Thornton      Australia      2009      100 mins      Cert: 15A**  
**Starring: Rowan McNamara, Marissa Gibson, Mitjili Gibson, Scott Thornton**  
**Language: Aboriginal, English**  
**Available: November 2010**

The debut feature from director Warwick Thornton, *Samson & Delilah* was rapturously received when it premiered at Cannes, and won the Caméra d'Or there, while Australian critics have been falling over themselves to find superlatives to describe it, calling it 'captured lightning in a bottle' and 'one of the most wonderful films this country has ever produced'.

None of this is hyperbole; sensitively performed and beautifully filmed, *Samson & Delilah* is thoroughly deserving of high praise and prizes, and marks the arrival of a significant, singular voice in world cinema. It is a love story that begins at a remote outpost – home to a small Aboriginal community – in the Central Australian desert. Samson (Rowan McNamara) is woken each morning by the sound of his brother's band jamming repetitively outside of his window, and automatically starts sniffing petrol fumes from a battered old tin. Delilah (Marissa Gibson) lives close by and tends to her aging Nana. The couple communicate non-verbally, but deeply expressively, and it's clear they rely on, and need, each other to get by in their mundane circumstances.

Tragedy strikes, leaving the pair to feel ostracised, and they run away to Alice Springs, the nearest city, where their love for each other becomes an even greater necessity, the reason for their very survival.

- *Michael Hayden, The 2009 Times BFI 53<sup>rd</sup> Film Festival*

Winner - Camera d'Or, Cannes Film Festival 2009

Winner – Best Film, Dublin Film Critics Awards, Jameson Dublin International Film Festival 2010

## **Séraphine**

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**Dir: Martin Provost    France    2008    125 minutes    Cert: PG**  
**Starring: Yolande Moreau, Ulrich Tukur, Anne Bennent, Genevieve Mnich, Nico Rogner**  
**Language: French, German**  
**Available: August 2010**

Making a film about the life of an artist is a risky proposition. The paint box arrives full of clichés and unexamined assumptions about the creative temperament, and these grow more assertive if mental illness is part of the biographical material. You are likely to end up with a lot of huffing and puffing and mystification, rather than any real insight into the mysteries of the work.

There are exceptions. Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* (1991), one of a slew of movies about that unhappy genius, is one, and *Seraphine* Martin Provost's new film, winner of seven Césars, including best film, is another. Maybe French movies about painters with a special gift for rendering flowers are exempt from the usual banal biopic logic. Not that *Séraphine* escapes entirely from the genre's default settings. Still, its energies are devoted, for the most part, not to dissecting childhood traumas or recirculating stale cultural gossip, but rather to examining the alchemy by which perception is transformed into vision.

And Mr. Provost makes the case that Séraphine de Senlis, who was born Séraphine Louis and took the name of her hometown, not far from Chantilly in central France, was a visionary. That is not what the other residents of Senlis would have said. Making a meager living as a housekeeper and laundress, Séraphine (Yolande Moreau) is, when we first encounter her, an eccentric and slightly pathetic local character, a figure of pity and sometimes mockery, her dignity protected by a temperament that is at once sharp and childlike, and by a talent that she views as guided by angels.

She has the good luck to work for Wilhelm Uhde (Ulrich Tukur), a German collector and art critic who is rusticated in Senlis and struggling with some demons of his own. Uhde, an early patron of Picasso and Braque, was also famous for having discovered and popularized the work of Rousseau, a Belgian customs officer whose vibrant and exotic paintings seemed to come from nowhere and find their way to the very center of modern consciousness. Séraphine strikes Uhde as a similar kind of artist: self-taught, working in isolation and producing work that seems uncannily out of this world and ahead of its time.

He rejects the habit of calling this kind of art "naïve," preferring the term "primitive modernism." Nowadays Séraphine would most likely be called an outsider artist, and her difficult and incomplete assimilation into the marketplace is central to the film's drama.

The relationship between her and Uhde is a chaste, complicated love story. A gay man in a small town, a German living in France on the eve of World War I, he is in some ways

more of an outsider than Séraphine, who is both rooted in and confined by her life in Senlis.

Their partnership, and Séraphine's career, are interrupted by the outbreak of war, and brought to a crisis later by the Great Depression, but these historical catastrophes, while they shape Mr. Provost's narrative, do not dominate the film.

Instead, the director is properly immersed in the sensual and spiritual dimensions of Séraphine's art, which grows out of an ecstatic — both in the erotic and religious sense — engagement with the natural world. She paints fruits and flowers in arrangements that at first look merely decorative, like the patterns on wallpaper or pottery, but that on closer examination are charged with a marvelous and unsettling power.

The same might be said about Ms. Moreau's performance, which is passionate, humorous and heartbreaking. A large, slow-moving woman with a wide, fleshy face and small, intense eyes, she is graceful and elusive, giving clues to Séraphine's rich and vivid inner life without spelling out or overdramatizing her peculiar and perhaps unknowable state of mind.

The mystery of Séraphine de Senlis — who died in a mental hospital in 1942 and whose work survives in some of the world's leading museums — is left intact at the end of *Séraphine*. Rather than trying to explain Séraphine, the film accepts her.

- A. Scott, *The New York Times*

### **This Other Eden**

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**Dir: Muriel Box**                      **UK**                      **1959**    **80 mins**                      **Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Muriel Box, Alec Snowden, Emmet Dalton**  
**Available: August 2010**

The IFI Irish Film Archive are pleased to continue their collaboration with access> CINEMA and to make films from the national heritage collection available to interest groups around the country.

The IFI Irish Film Archive collection comprises amateur and professional material, fiction and non-fiction, newsreels, feature films, animations, travelogues and educational films. The material dating from 1897 to the present day is preserved in custom design vaults in the IFI premises in Temple Bar.

The first Irish feature film to be directed by a woman, *This Other Eden* is a caustic comedy set in 1945 where the erection of a statue of a patriot martyr Jack Carberry creates problems in a small town.

The film explores the traumatic legacy of the Civil war and in particular the impact of the death of Michael Collins on successive generations. Given that the producer, Emmet Dalton was with Michael Collins the day he was shot, some critics have speculated that the film was an attempt to redress, even rewrite the history of that time. However, with a fine supporting cast of Abbey Players and star turns from Leslie Philips as a hapless romantic Englishman, Audrey Dalton as a wonderfully independent-minded young woman, Milo O'Shea and Hilton Edwards, *This Other Eden* is not just a critique of the past but a witty and complex comment on an emergent modern Ireland.

The film, shot in Chapelizod (near Dublin's Phoenix Park), Wicklow town and Ardmore Studios, has now been digital re-mastered from original elements.

### **Treeless Mountain**

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**Dir: So Yong Kim    South Korea    2008    90 mins    Cert: G**  
**Starring: Hee Yeon Kim, Song Hee Kim, Soo Ah Lee**  
**Language: Korean**  
**Available: August 2010**

Inspired by the early childhood memories of director So Yong Kim, *Treeless Mountain* is a beautiful, meditative and deeply humanistic coming-of-age tale dealing with abandonment, resilience and perseverance in the face of apparent futility.

When their much put-upon mother is forced to leave their cramped Seoul apartment and go in search of their estranged father, seven-year-old Jin (Hee-yeon Kim) and her younger sister, Bin (Song-hee Kim), are left to live with their alcoholic Big Aunt (Mi-hyang Kim) for the summer. With only a small piggy bank and their mother's promise to return when it is full, the two young girls are forced to acclimate to changes in their family life.

Counting the days, and the coins, the two bright-eyed young girls anticipate their mother's homecoming. But when the bank fills up and their mother fails to appear, Big Aunt callously decides that she can no longer tend to the children. Taken to live on their grandparents' farm (an experience that directly mirrors the director's own following the separation of her parents), it is here that Jin comes to learn the importance of family bonds.

Yong Kim's follow-up to the highly regarded *In Between Days*, *Treeless Mountain* is presented through the initially innocent eyes of its juvenile protagonists. A film comparable to early Kiarostami in its non-manipulative evocation of childhood threatened by harsher and wider realities, this is an entirely unsentimental work that examines what happens in an uncaring world when children are simply not wanted anymore.

In a recurring attempt to find their way in an environment ill suited to the needs of children, Jin and Bin catch, grill and sell grasshoppers to the rural schoolchildren near their new home. These moments, born of a need to survive, nonetheless provide interludes of happiness, strengthening the bond between the two sisters as their innocence slowly ebbs away. Beautifully shot to emphasise the contrast between the rampantly industrialised countryside and its rapidly disappearing pampas grass meadows where the children find brief moments of respite, Yong Kim also draws performances of tremendous naturalism from her remarkable young leads. – *Jason Woods / Little White Lies*

*Winner - Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, Berlin Film Festival 2008*

## **Tulpan**

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**Dir: Sergei Dvortsevov Germany, Kazakhstan 2008 100 minutes Cert: CLUB**  
**Starring: Askhat Kuchencherekov, Tolepbergen Baisakalov, Ondas Besikbasov, Samal Eslijamova**  
**Language: Kazakh, Russian**  
**Available: August 2010**

The traditional lifestyle of nomadic sheep herders on the harsh Kazakh steppe provides quietly sensational drama in *Tulpan*, the feature debut of Kazakh-born documaker extraordinaire Sergey Dvortsevov. This engrossing tale of a 20-ish youth who can't achieve a long-cherished dream of tending his own flock without first acquiring a wife offers fascinating ethnographic detail, gentle humor and spectacular cinematography.

Throughout Central Asia, more and more young people are rejecting the hard life of their parents and migrating to cities in search of work. Writer-director Dvortsevov contrasts the lure of modern, metropolitan living with the herders' fast-vanishing way of life.

Just as he cleverly refrains from really showing the title character, whose imagined charms become all the more potent from never being seen, so, too, does he let the mere concept of the city represent a myriad of meanings for his characters.

The arid area of southern Kazakhstan called Betpak Dala is a place that barely sustains the few remaining humans or their herds of sheep. There, a herdsman can't hope to survive without a wife to cook, clean and do the washing.

Recently discharged from the Russian navy, endearing protagonist Asa (Askhat Kuchinchirekov), shares a yurt (a tent house made of skins) with his beautiful older sister Samal (Samal Yeslyamova), laconic brother-in-law Ondas (Ondasyn Besikbasov) and their four rambunctious children.

Asa, boisterous best buddy Boni (Tulepbergen Baisakalov) and Ondas call on the only family in miles with an eligible daughter, the eponymous Tulpan (whose name means "tulip"). Hoping to leave the steppe and go to college, she tells her parents to refuse him, claiming it's because his ears are too big. A wistfully charming later scene where Boni tries to put Asa's ears in perspective generates laughs.

The crestfallen Asa finds his dream further deflated when he proves to lack a natural instinct for herding, yet he persists at both courtship and animal husbandry. The film charts Asa's learning curve with a pair of extraordinary real-time lamb birthing scenes.

Preserving an organic mix of naturalism and poetry, the director manages to make the sounds, smells and simple pleasures of the steppe palpable. Prioritizing authenticity, he reportedly waited a year for the right weather conditions to reshoot scenes of the family striking the yurt.

The entire cast plays convincingly, with adult performances seemingly living their parts. The family dynamics feel remarkably genuine, probably helped by characters sharing first names with the actors and the casting of a real-life brother and sister as the oldest offspring of Ondas and Samal.

Matching the sterling performers for screen time - and presence - is a veritable

menagerie of animals, including camels, horses, donkeys, goats, dogs and kittens. A shot of a bandaged baby camel folded into a motorcycle sidecar while its anxious mother trots and brays nervously in the background is priceless. - *Alissa Simon / Variety*

*Winner - Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival 2008*

*Winner – East of West Prize, Karlovy Vary Film Festival 2008*

### **Still Walking**

*Aruitemo aruitemo*

**Dir: Hirokazu Koreeda      Japan      2008      114 mins      Cert: CLUB**

**Starring: Hiroshi Abe, Yui Natsukawa, You, Kazuya Takahashi, Shohei Tanaka, Kirin Kiki, Yoshio Harada.**

**Language: Japanese**

**Available: August 2010**

*Still Walking* is a family drama that gets the family dynamic exactly right, a film that understands the ways in which unspoken resentments tend to accumulate and unresolved conflicts later harden into regrets. Unfolding over the course of a single day, the picture brings together three generations of a middle-class Japanese family under the grandparents' roof to pay tribute to their long deceased eldest son on the anniversary of his death. As in any domestic drama, everyone's got his issues and in the hothouse environment of the patriarchal household in which nearly the entire movie takes place, most of them come to light. The grandfather, a doctor forced to give up his practice when his eyesight started to fail, locks himself in his study, refusing to speak with his surviving son and emerging only at mealtimes. That son, an out-of-work art restorer, shows up with his new wife, a widow, and her young child, a domestic arrangement that, along with his perceived inability to live up to the example of his dead brother, puts him at some odds with his parents, even as he points out that his family situation is hardly anomalous in contemporary Japan. Meanwhile, his sister is planning on moving her own family into the house, an arrangement with which her mother is having some difficulty coming to terms.

But while these familial resentments and anxieties may come to the surface, they're never brought to a point of crisis. Directing his own brilliantly measured screenplay, Hirokazu Kore-eda frames his characters in long, fixed takes, turning a coolly observational eye on the assembled party as they deflect rather than confront potential sources of conflict or submerge their accumulated regrets in the performance of domestic ritual: cooking, eating, bathing. But if the film's restrained aesthetic and refusal of expected closure leads to a certain dryness in the presentation, then Kore-eda smartly portions out a few generous flourishes—like a perfectly lovely sequence in which an orange butterfly, taken by the grandmother to be the embodiment of her dead son, flutters around before landing on the picture of the deceased, and the film's epilogue, signaled by an ellipsis of shattering abruptness, which is unusually wise about the ways in which, for all our deepest regrets, life continues heedlessly on.

- *Andrew Shenker / Slant Magazine*

## **Welcome**

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**Dir: Philippe Lioret      France      2009      110 minutes      Cert: 15A**

**Starring: Vincent Lindon, Firat Ayverdi, Audrey Dana and Derya Ayverdi**

**Language: French, Kurdish**

**Available: August 2010**

*Welcome* is set largely in Calais, where illegal immigrant Bilal (Firat Ayverdi), a 17-year-old Kurd from Iraq, phones London to tell his girlfriend Mina that he'll soon be crossing the Channel to join her. The intrepid boy has already made an arduous three-month journey to France, and believes that the final leg will be easy. But he finds himself amid crowds of illegals stuck in Calais and desperate to get to England at any price. After an unsuccessful crossing as a stowaway on a lorry, Bilal conceives the desperate notion that perhaps he can swim to his goal.

Enter swimming instructor Simon (Lindon); he's in the throes of a divorce from teacher Marion (Dana), who works for an organisation that provides aid for refugees. Simon agrees to give Bilal swimming lessons, then becomes increasingly involved with, and protective of, the boy - initially, it appears, in the hope of impressing Marion, but eventually for more complex emotional reasons.

The action takes place against a topical background, with the film offering a quietly impassioned critique of the French government's harsh policies towards illegal immigrants. Lioret also targets French xenophobia in general, one of the film's heavier-handed touches being the characterisation of Simon's hostile neighbours, who snitch to the immigration services.

It might be seen as a compromise that the film is ultimately more Simon's story than Bilal's - but that also makes *Welcome* more immediately pertinent to a French audience, as well as ensuring its originality. An engrossing question is that of Simon's motives: has he suddenly woken up to his humanitarian tendencies, is he just out to win back Marion, or is he a middle-aged man in the process of meltdown? Vincent Lindon's gruff, hangdog persona limns Simon as a hard-bitten type guy with a soft, needy core. The actor's non-nonsense turn - in rusty English as well as French - confirms Lindon as French cinema's current incumbent of the Jean Gabin niche of bullish-but-sensitive blue-collar roles. He is well matched by up-and-comer Dana as Marion, while newcomer Ayverdi is a significant discovery, his tough, candid ease persuading us of Bilal's reckless determination. A cast of Kurdish non-professionals convincingly flesh out the roles of Bilal's fellow refugees, and of Mina's family, intermittently glimpsed in London.

While the logistics of refugee life are not, finally, the film's main topic, an early section depicting the perils of cross-Channel people smuggling is extremely evocative, recalling Michael Winterbottom's more documentary-styled *In This World*. Formally somewhat conventional in execution, *Welcome* nevertheless gains credibility from the fact that the narrative takes a darker turn than we at first expect. Its harder edges are regrettably softened by a sometimes too lyrical score. - *Jonathan Romney / Screen International*

*Winner - Europa Cinemas Label, Berlin International Film Festival 2009*

**White Ribbon, The**

*Das weiße Band*

**Dir: Michael Haneke Austria, Germany 2009 144 minutes Cert: 15A**  
**Starring: Christian Friedel, Leonie Benesch, Ulrich Tukur, Ursina Lardi, Michael Kranz, Burghart Klaussner, Maria-Victoria Dragus, Josef Bierbichler, Rainer Bock, Branko Samarovski, Roxanne Duran**  
**Language: German**  
**Available: August 2010**

*The White Ribbon* marks the high point of a journey that Haneke began over twenty years ago with his remarkable first feature film, *The Seventh Continent*. This latest work, set in a small farming village in northern Germany on the eve of the First World War, is shot in sparkling, iridescent black and white, a film of shimmering surfaces that conceal a much darker reality. True to his style, this reality is hinted at but rarely shown, and it gradually informs every moment of our watching.

Haneke has always had an eerie ability to unsettle, and this quality is in full force during the opening scenes of *The White Ribbon*. Beneath the sun-dappled fields lurks a series of disturbing events recounted by the local schoolteacher: a horseman has a strange accident, a worker is killed in the nearby sawmill, a young boy is kidnapped and beaten, a man savagely takes his scythe to a crop in a field, a barn is torched. This provides the backdrop to Haneke's brilliant and ruthless examination of a society that admits to nothing and hides everything.

As the young schoolteacher begins to court a shy governess, the brutalizing reality of village life is slowly laid bare. The local children play a key role; as they gravitate toward every violent incident, it soon becomes apparent that they are members of a society that prizes discipline as a virtue, even if it borders on abuse. Their elders, Protestant to the core, are committed to a value system based on obedience and punishment. As the schoolteacher attempts to assert his principles, he finds that they inevitably collide with the strict, harsh rules of the village.

All this is accomplished with utmost rigour and control on the director's part. Though an analysis of the roots of Nazism can be read into the narrative, the film has a more universal reach. Haneke maintains that the work is as much an investigation of terrorism as it is of fascism. Both provocative and elegantly executed, this is essential viewing – an examination of how violence can perhaps unwittingly take root in a society that ostensibly believes in other values. - *Piers Handling / Toronto International Film Festival*

*Winner - Palm D'Or, Cannes Film Festival 2009*

*Winner – FIPRESCI Film of the Year, San Sebastian International Film Festival 2009*