

Watershed November 2007 Podcast

This month we go into the world of Short film...

I recently attended the Uppsala Short Film Festival in Sweden. It's one of the most established short film festivals in Europe and now in its 26th year. I was on Jury duty to select this year's winner of the international grand prize. This involved watching all the international programmes of short films over four days and with my fellow jurors debating the merits and selecting an overall winner.

My co-jurors were from different areas of the film world and indeed the world. Richard Raskin teaches screenwriting and video production at Aarhus University in Denmark, where he is also organizing an international short film symposium every year. He is also an American who has been based in Denmark for about 30 years. I ask him the obvious question: so, what is an American doing in Denmark? His answer? "If I said Richard Nixon, would you understand?" And I do. Richard – Raskin, that is - has written some fascinating books on the short film and evolved a series of parameters for what constitutes strategies for making good, well-formed films. He holds a lecture during his stay in Uppsala for students at a film school offering his insights, but he is well aware that with any rules there are always exceptions. Following the talk I am invited on a panel to discuss the issue of good short filmmaking with Richard and with a commissioning editor from the Swedish Film Institute. I am asked whether I would use something like Richard's parameters to judge films and it occurs to me that I don't, nor do I use any rules, as it were, as I find it too difficult to be prescriptive. However, it is no use just saying that a film is good or bad. The interesting question is why and how does it work?

I feel the ideas of rules or parameters are useful for students to understand the structure of filmmaking and to clarify their thoughts on the how and why they are making what they are making. You also have to understand the rules in order to break them. As indeed Richard demonstrated by showing a Swedish short film, Natane, which breaks his system but which won the major award at Clermont Ferrand short film festival a few years ago. I use this as an opportunity to revisit a debate which took place on the judging of DepicT!, Watershed's online 90 second filmmaking competition. The DepicT! Jury was passionately split between two very different kinds of short films: Non-Fat and 6 Goats; you can watch them at depict.org

What seemed at stake here was narrative coherence (Non-Fat) versus visual ambiguity (6 Goats). The films were posted on the DepicT! website and watchers could contribute thoughts. There was of course universal acclaim for Non-Fat's sharp, succinct, if brutal scenario, whereas 6 Goats prompted bewilderment at the polite end of the spectrum and abuse at the other. Slowly, however, an understanding of 6 Goats lyricism started to appear and I think one contributor nailed it when they said it reminded them of a car journey as a kid and the way you would draw onto a steamed up window. It is film's ability to open up this space of contemplation for the audience, to think for themselves rather than be guided by narrative logic, which interests me.

Also on the Uppsala jury was Kathrin Resetarits, whose short film 'Ich Bin Ich' won an award at Watershed last year. Amongst the many things Kathrin does is to work with the great Austrian director Michael Haneke. If you want an illustration of abstraction/ambiguity used to great effect in feature films take a look at the opening of his brilliant film Hidden. The camera is kept static on one house for much longer than a conventional narrative film would dare to and it shifts the audience from being led by the nose through the story to asking questions for themselves. Equally, David Lynch in Lost Highway creates tension through extended period of nothing quite happening.

The other jury members were Swedes, although one was born in Prague. The mix of nationalities prompted discussion of how the recent past is dealt with and the fact that in Eastern European countries in particular, but not exclusively, it is coming out that people were either involved in some way with supporting Nazism in World War 2, or supporting Stalin or Stalinism in the Cold War. The discussion is intense. Finally, I am asked how are things in Britain on this issue and I realise that we simply do not have these kinds of issues. There are of course many others, but the relationship with the 2nd World War and the Cold War is reasonably clear-cut. It strikes me that this is another reason why Britain is culturally so separate from mainland Europe. Our issues are historical baggage from empire and colonialism and are currently more around ideas of national identity rather than the carried guilt (or not) of our grandparents or public figures.

Our jury viewing is carried out in a cinema which I find out is where Ingmar Bergman was taken by his grandmother to watch films. It is strange to think that a young Bergman was entranced by cinema in this very auditoria – the seats are most possibly the very same seats, they have an severity to them softened by the free cushions given out by the usher – I wonder if Bergman had the same luxury.

As we work our way through the films it becomes apparent that this is going to be an opinionated, robust jury and consensus might be something of a struggle. There are at least 10 of the 70 odd films vying for the main prize. However, come the reckoning we surprise ourselves by coming to a conclusion relatively painlessly. There is a moment of tense standoff between two films in particular, but the weight falls down on the Romanian film *The Tube With The Hat*, which is an extraordinary mini epic of a journey by a father and his young son to repair their television. Through the journey, the short film reveals the warmth of the relationship between father and son. There is clearly something happening in Romanian cinema: a couple of feature films, *12.08 East of Bucharest* and *the Death of Mr Lazerescu*, have been highly praised by critics and the forthcoming *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, which we will be screening in January 08, won the grand prix in Cannes this year.

You can see a full list of the winners at: shortfilmfestival.com

We will be screening *The Tube With The Hat* at the Encounters International Short Film Festival in Bristol in November.
For more information on Encounters, visit: encounters-festival.org.uk

One of the other questions that was addressed to the panel in Uppsala was what our views were on the future of the short film. My view is that it is going from strength-to-strength, and in fact offers more range and excitement than feature films. The problem with features is that once money gets involved creativity gets put under pressure and invariably becomes compromised, whereas shorts, at their best, have the freedom and space to be more creative.

If you go to depict.org you can view this year's shortlist of 90 second films and get a taste of the range and creativity online. You can also vote and contribute comments on the films. The winner will be announced at the Encounters International Short Film Festival. And maybe we can discuss even further if you can make it to the Encounters Short Film Festival.

That's all for now – for more on what is happening at Watershed, visit us at watershed.co.uk on the world wide web.