

## Watershed August 2008 Podcast

I recently presented at a conference at the University of Salford on the subject of European exhibition and distribution. Whilst doing research I came across the extraordinary statistic that 1.3% of the cinema going population attend non-English language films. It shocked me - and still does – that such a small % goes to see foreign language films. Over 35% of our admissions are for foreign language films which if you are a statistician then a lot of cinemas out there are doing less than nothing – if that is possible - in screening non English language films. Does this matter? I think it does. And I'll come onto why in a minute, first of all another illustration of the imbalance.

I was talking to a PhD student on issues of taste, cultural value and curatorial choice and such other matters for their research. She asked me for an example of the above and why. This was on the day when **Batman The Dark Knight** was released with full-page ads, full exposure and all the leads in the film review sections of newspapers. It was also the day that **Buddha Collapsed out of Shame** was released – I could not see an ad anywhere and only a small paragraph review – if at all. My argument is that this expresses economic and therefore, unfortunately, cultural value.

My choice for screening **Buddha Collapsed out of Shame** was this: I had seen it at the Berlin Film Festival in February this year. It is a very powerful and moving account of a young girl growing up amidst the ruins of the blown up Buddha's of Bamiyan. The extraordinary immense sculptures were bombed in a defiant act of cultural barbarism by the retreating Taliban a number of years ago. The 7-year-old girl just wants to go to school like her peers. However she finds the whole process an ordeal partly because she is a girl in a society where girls and women have specific roles and partly because she doesn't have pencil and paper. The film is deeply humanist – who cannot relate to a little girl's very real aspiration of trying to go to school? It resonated with current ordeals in both Afghanistan and Iraq – in one extraordinary scene the kids play an all too contemporary game of hide and seek – with the caught kids given paper bags and sack clothes to wear, they are like miniature versions of the abused prisoners in Abu Graib. The film is neither didactic nor earnest neither depressing nor worthy. It is at times even entertaining. The young girl's – well - childishness is both beguiling and endearing but never sentimental. A finely balanced script leads us through dramatic scenarios to a satisfying denouement. What more could you ask for of a film?

**Batman** is great entertainment possibly a metaphor for good and evil with an outstanding performance by the late Heath Ledger. Lots of pyrotechnics, lots of dynamically edited action. It has the hopes and dreams of Hollywood riding on its stark opposition and by all accounts the financial returns will show Batman to be a true hero. I suspect **Buddha Collapsed out of Shame** will garner much less than 1.3% of Batman's admissions.

So why is that figure important? I think it is because if we desire to understand the world we are living in, and cinema and the moving image is one of the most important ways in which we consume information about the world, then seeing a diversity of cinema from around the world is surely important.

As if to underline this importance, I was at another conference – this time on cultural diversity and trade negotiations wherein a delegate from Morocco made an impassioned pleas for the need for cinemas to be built in his home city and country

which are committed to showing non-mainstream cinema. His argument is that the stranglehold mainstream commercial films have i.e. on the whole Hollywood films, means that other cultures do not get exposure. Why is this important? As he pointed out –if you want Africa to understand Europe and vice versa you need an exchange of culture and if one of the dominant forms of culture is indeed dominated by one style of culture, that understanding is going to be diminished.

**Buddha Collapsed out of Shame** opens at Watershed on the 15<sup>th</sup> August. **Batman** is on at many cinemas near you.

If you want to see other cinema from around the world this month at Watershed then we are screening, from Uruguay, **El Bano de Papa**, a humorous ironic view of the Pope's visit to that country where a poor local takes an enterprising approach to this event by building a public toilet for the relief of the pilgrim hordes. **Elite Squad** from Brazil is a powerful gripping exposé of that country's attempts to stop drug and crime in the favelas and its impact on the officers. The film prompted much soul searching in Brazil in its depiction of corruption in the police and the methods used, which surely demonstrates the powerful impact cinema can make on social political and cultural dialogue. **Mad Detective** is a quite ingenious thriller from China. The cop of the title is indeed mad, as if to illustrate this he cuts off his ear to give as a retirement present for his chief. The nature of his madness is that he can see the personality/personalities of the killers and can, through re-enactment, uncover the killer. The ending builds to a great homage to the famous mirrors scene at the end of **Lady from Shanghai**. This will definitely be remade by Hollywood, in the way **Infernal Affairs** was. I urge you to the inspirational originality of **Mad Detective**.

That relationship between Hollywood and the rest of the world in cinema terms is without doubt a complex sometimes-contradictory beast. No more illustrated by Sergio Leone's great spaghetti western trilogy. When I first saw the films as a kid I assumed they were American – filmed in the Mexican/American border – starring American stars – Clint Eastwood, Lee Van Cleef - amongst others. Of course as we now know they were famously filmed by an Italian in Spain with a large Italian/Spanish cast and crew and dubbed into English. What did these hybrid ostensibly European films do? They revitalised the quintessential all American genre the Western. The borrowing and payback between film cultures - Hollywood and European - has never been so evident. Leone's **The Good The Bad and The Ugly** is reissued this month in a new print and provides an opportunity to relish its operatic swagger, iconic score and thrilling action on the big screen.

That's it for this month – if you get a break from outdoor holiday summer fun try to make it to one of the many entertaining films from around the world we have on in August. I'm heading north to the inaugural **Ballerina Ballroom Cinema of Dreams** festival in Nairn. Set up by actress Tilda Swinton and writer/critic Mark Cousins it's attempting to reject the glitz and inject some cinephelia fun back into film festivals with an eclectic mix of amongst others Margaret Rutherford and Akira Kurosawa. See [www.ballerinaballroom.com](http://www.ballerinaballroom.com) for more information.

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