

Watershed September 2008 Podcast

Picking up from last month's sign off, I did indeed make it to Tilda Swinton's *Ballerina* Ballroom Cinema of Dreams in Nairn. Whilst the Scottish summer weather moved through various shades of grey the festival made up in the way of colour. The high street frontage of the old ballroom was hung with a colourful flower welcoming display and inside the hall was decked with Chinese lanterns. The all-essential rake for ideal cinema viewing was achieved on the flat floor with bean bags for lying followed by two rows of deck chairs, the front row cannily lower slung than the second. These were followed by upright, if a tad unforgiving, plastic chairs. By the time we arrived audiences were already selling out and the deck chairs were at a premium. Such was testament to the festival's success that Margaret Rutherford as Miss Marple in **Murder Most Foul** was on its 3rd repeat screening.

The intimacy of the inaugural festival was evident from our first screening where Tilda Swinton with her entourage of kids mingled freely. The lights darkened and Marilyn Manson's version of *My Own Personal Jesus* blasted from an excellent sound system. Tilda and festival conspirator Mark Cousins kneeled and rocked under ladders, which were strategically placed either side of the screen. A single spotlight traversed the audiences' heads highlighting the occasional fist punching the air. Towards the end Tilda and Mark climb the ladders hoisting a banner that reads 'State of Cinema': a simple but effective theatrical moment. We are in the newly proclaimed state of cinema – established Nairn 2008 – perhaps resonating with a tradition of oppositional cinematic moments such as *Dogme 95* or the *Oberhausen Manifesto* of 1962, or perhaps it's a cinematic reference of solidarity to the republican revolutionary ethos of *Passport to Pimlico*, or maybe we are simply being invited to reflect on the state of cinema! From aloft ladders, each screening is introduced to an enthusiastic clapping and cheering audience. The Margaret Rutherford film allowed those dressed in pyjamas in for free. The sight of Tilda Swinton climbing the ladder in her dressing gown will stay with me for a long while. The less said about Mark Cousins' furry slippers the better.

There was however a serious point to the state of cinema. The *Ballerina* was trying to put centre stage – and very aware of the importance of star power to do so – the reclaiming of the cinema experience as a communal immersion and celebration of the history of world filmmaking that can be forgotten in the commercial sweep of the now, the latest and the next blockbuster. The selection of films was a mixture of, yes the idiosyncratic – the childhood pleasures of the aforementioned Margaret Rutherford and Basil Rathbone's *Sherlock Holmes* – but also the extremely rarely seen by the relatively unknown.

Amongst these the revelation for me was Sergei Parajanov's 1964 **Shadows of our Forgotten Ancestors**, a free form love story which mixes the carnivalesque and the spiritual with a striking cinematic language and great soundtrack. Parajanov is probably best known for **The Colour of Pomegranates** from 1968. There was a strikingly topical element about the screening as Parajanov was born in Tbilisi Georgia from Armenian parents and his adult life was spent in opposition to the oppressive soviet state system. For more information on this extraordinary artistic talent see www.parajanov.com

The other was the Bill Douglas Trilogy – **My Childhood, My Ain Folk and My Own Way Home**. A series of films which increasingly stands apart from most British filmmaking as flowing from a rich European tradition but being distinctly and

austerely Scottish. As Mark Cousins indicated in his introduction this was filmmaking as a form of personal recovery. Indeed the near final shot of the now stripped childhood room resonates with primal scream intensity. I was absolutely convinced that whilst the first two parts were in black and white, the final part was in colour. It made sense as a. I was sure I had seen it so, and b in the third it seemed to me to make perfect aesthetic sense that the character had made the journey from the austere black and white of his childhood to possibility of happiness and colour at the end. Fired by such feeling I confidently bet my sceptical colleague who quietly insisted it was all in black and white. We watched the film and as the third part came on I was shocked – and thankful we hadn't wagered any cash – to discover it was indeed in black and white.

I mentioned this to Mark Cousins. He, to my slight relief, said that in the early screenings the labs had cocked up and printed out on colour and it might have been one of these copies. On getting back home I reached for the Lanternist Diary, a fascinating and definitive account of Bill Douglas and his small but increasingly significant and powerful body of work. It recounts the commissioning and production process for the trilogy and how there was much scepticism about the commercial wisdom of black and white. Douglas was persuaded by the then production division of the British Film Institute to shoot on colour stock and have the option of out putting onto either black and white or colour. Interestingly the Scottish Film Council chose not to invest in the film, as they were concerned about the negative perception it would create of Scotland. I wonder what they think of that decision now? The trilogy stands increasingly as a major, monumental piece of filmmaking – Scottish or otherwise – and is most definitely the ying to the other Bill's Local Hero yang.

This month at Watershed we have a focus on Austrian filmmaker Ulrich Seidl, someone who I feel more than exemplifies the spirit and ethos of the state of contemporary cinema. Seidl's new film Import/Export was in Cannes last year and kind of went under the critical radar to the Romanian Palm D'Or winner 4 months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days. I saw it at the films competition screening and was struck by its rawness and bleak but somehow optimistic humanism and warmth. It tells the story of two characters: Olga a young nurse and mother from the Ukraine who cannot earn enough to keep her family. She tries to earn money on the side resorting to perform sexual acts live on the internet. She eventually migrates to Austria where she ends up as a hospital cleaner treated with casual and not so casual disdain and racism by her Austrian employers. Paul is an unemployed young Austrian who cannot hold down a job and ends up taking second hand gambling machines to the slums of the Ukraine with his violent, drunken, depraved stepfather.

I didn't know this at the time but Seidl films in real locations and often uses real people. So it is a real internet porn set up, it is a real Ukrainian slum. The blurring of boundaries of reality and fiction is bracing and the effect to force the viewer to think about the reality of these people's lives in the brave new economic, new European world.

Without knowing any of this, my initial Cannes viewing of Import/Export was to feel the presence of a director with significance, with a significant cinematic eye and importantly something to say about the contemporary world we live in. My immediate comparison was with the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, for me the most important European director of the 2nd half-century of cinema's lifespan. I was determined to find out more about this director. The result is Between Heaven and Hell: the films of Ulrich Seidl, which opens at the Cambridge Film Festival and

Watershed at the end of September before touring the UK and Ireland. We also have a preview of Import Export with a talk by the director.

I now do not feel the comparison with Kieslowski, in particular his Decalogue, is too disingenuous. It transpires that Seidl's early works are all documentaries that unsparingly and unflinchingly observe his fellow Austrian obsessions that range from the intimacy of prayer to aspiring young models and people who love their pets. Of the latter, *Animal Love* Werner Herzog said "Never in cinema have I looked so directly into hell!" And that's from Werner Herzog!! Kieslowski similarly in Poland started out in a raw documentary tradition. The documentary eye provides both – perhaps ironically, I'm not sure – with an essentially cinematic style.

Seidl's body of work to date is brave filmmaking; confrontational yes, unflinching yes but also deeply humanist. There is no easy polarity of good and evil in his cinematic universe only the space that we all occupy – somewhere between Heaven and Hell.

For more information see watershed.co.uk/seidl