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## **Watershed March 2010 Podcast**

Last month I attended the Berlin Film Festival, one of the high points in the film festival year. In addition to simply catching up on what is happening in the world of film I was on one of the juries – the Europa Cinemas label - which selects the best European feature film from the Festival's Panorama strand. This strand is very much about discoveries and new talent in the world of cinema. There were 12 eligible European films and we were looking for that film which had most potential to cross national boundaries and which would appeal to wider audiences across Europe. It's a good award, I think, for the filmmakers because it is given by exhibitors – my co jurors were from France, Germany and Brazil (via France) - and is about a film's potential to reach ours and other cinemas' audiences.

As I worked my way through the films I became very aware of films which would play extremely well in their own country but which would find it difficult beyond that. A prime example was Italian comedy **Loose Cannons** which I felt would play brilliantly in multiplexes in Italy but would find it difficult in e.g. the UK. There is an interesting footnote here I think about the notion of popular national cinema and so called arthouse cinema i.e. one nation's popular or mainstream cinema does not necessarily mean it should become another nation's arthouse cinema. **Les Visiteur** or **Taxi** are probably prime examples of this - where this hugely popular French comedy became specialised fare in the UK by dint of it being subtitled.

Another title in the Berlinale line up which to me had another kind of national exclusivity was the German film **Boundaries**. A bunch of young people go to rehearsals for Hamlet in a small village. I watched it with a German audience and where there were laughs or moments of recognition in which I was just left bewildered. The national references were so specific it just didn't translate. A bit like if Casualty was shown in German cinemas I felt.

However there were titles that worked and indeed two of the strongest worked at the level of the nationally specific but resonated wider beyond national boundaries. The first was **Kawasaki's Rose** from the Czech Republic, about an

eminent respected doctor whose hidden past in the communist era catches up with him. The fragility of relationships has a universal resonance. The unanimous winner was the German film **When We Leave**, a confident first time feature film about the sensitive subject of family honour within a Turkish immigrant population. The themes of cultural difference, family values and the role of women has very real timely relevance. I hope it may get a UK distributor.

I am pleased that there was a unanimous decision because beyond that there was an intriguing gender split in the jury. The women were comfortably supporting the overplayed humour of the aforementioned Italian gay comedy and the men were happy to relish the deadpan melancholy of the Finnish comedy **Bad Family**. There is surely a sociological case study in that divide?

In the festival proper as it were there was much to catch up with, think about and enjoy. There were a handful of titles that had come straight from critical acclaim in Sundance: these included Chris Morris' satirical take on terrorism **Four Lions** which is both hysterically funny and seriously thought provoking and scheduled for a May release in the UK I gather. Lisa Cholodenko's **The Kids Are Alright** which has a fantastic performance from Annette Bening as a lesbian mum trying to keep her family together when their kids' sperm donating father turns up on the scene. Actually, the performances from Julianne Moore and Mark Ruffalo are all wonderful and the script is excellent, a really enjoyable film. **Winter's Bone**, the winner from Sundance, is an altogether different experience, a tough story of survival in the harsh hinterlands of America with not a star in sight.

And of course there was **Exit Through the Gift Shop** from artist provocateur Banksy, a spoof documentary – or is it – about a filmmaker documenting a graffiti artist who becomes bigger than them all. There is a sharp intelligence here with some serious poking of fun at the mythmaking and pretensions that surround the modern art world. I have described it thus – it will do for graffiti what Spinal Tap did for music. **Exit Through the Gift Shop** open on **Fri 5<sup>th</sup> March** at Watershed.

Elsewhere Roman Polanski was back on thrilling form with the adaptation of Robert Harris' **The Ghostwriter**. A book written with a lot of passion about a former Prime Minister who is called to account for his decision to take the country to war. Ring any bells? Well, the author used to be friends with Tony Blair. Polanski

cranks the tension with relish and great cinematic ease and with hints of Chinatown. We will be showing it April here at Watershed.

A highlight for me was the Norwegian film **A Somewhat Gentle Man** starring Stellan Skarsgaard as a newly released criminal trying to go straight and finally get to know his grown up son but drawn inextricably back toward a life of crime. It is great fun and good to see Skarsgaard in a lead role again, it has the most jaw dropping sex scenes I've come across and gives the dark humour of the Coen Brothers a run for their money.