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Watershed January 2012 Podcast

A happy new year and a happy new year's film viewing is ahead of us all. I can say that with an alarming degree of confidence because I have seen a number of the films opening in the first few months of the year as reported from last year's festivals and they continue a rich run of independent and world cinema.

2012 kicks off in fine style with the much talked about **The Artist**. I was fortunate to see *The Artist* in the legendary 08:30 in the morning screening at Cannes. The legendary nature of that screening slot stems from the fact that this is the first time an audience will have collectively seen the film. Little is known and certainly no critical opinion is formed prior to this screening - thus it takes on a theatrical immediacy with a much anticipated sense of how the film will be received and how the audience will respond.

I have seen it go either way, and sometimes both at the same time. **Tree of Life** memorably split the audience with both boos and cheers at the end whereas in a film that shall remain anonymous the soundtrack to the majority of the film was the sound of chairs hitting the back of the seats as 2500 people filtered out of the cinema.

So it is with much anticipation that you take your seat for the 08:30 screening after a 7am rise followed by a rushed coffee and croissant whilst unceremoniously dashing down the Croisette grabbing the trade papers en route to get into your seat actually at 07:45. Yes, 07:45. You can't expect to turn up at 08:25 and casually take your seat - this is Cannes sweetie - and it gives you 45mins to read the trades, finish the coffee and watch the breathless, panicked fellow audience members arrive and scour the vast steep raked auditorium for an empty seat. Ah the joys. But back to *The Artist*...

The film hits the screen and you are immediately into judging what where and how this film is about, going and will take you there. With *The Artist* there was an immediate relocation to the Hollywood silent era of Douglas Fairbanks Jnr - largely

down to a quite brilliant exuberant performance from the lead actor Jean Dujardin. It is simply and extraordinarily a love letter to silent cinema, to Hollywood and to the idealism and optimism that that era now seems to engender.

I have never come across an audience response so joyous and uplifted. Usually when you leave the cinema there are debates about this and that but here was a unanimous collective smile. After all, *The Artist* is a celebration of cinema screened in the greatest event to celebrate the art of cinema. Since then stories of *The Artist* reducing critics' screenings to cheering and clapping are legion indeed. I gather when it was screened at BAFTA the response was such that the desk attendant exclaimed it the most extraordinary they had heard in there 20 years of working there.

So it is one heck of a cinematic way to kick off the New Year and if I were a betting man a clear winner for best film at any award ceremony. *The Artist* also nicely sets us up for **Slapstick** at the end of the month, Bristol's annual celebration of silent cinema which over the years has demonstrated that audiences still love and appreciate silent cinema.

Later this month is **Shame**, the second film from artist Steve McQueen which takes us on an equally uncomfortable and unsettling journey as his excellent debut film **Hunger**. Where in *Hunger* he explored the effects of The Troubles and in particular Bobby Sands' decision to go on hunger strike and what it did to his body and mind, in *Shame* he explore the modern urban male's inability to connect emotionally and the way in which sex becomes a refuge from feeling. What on paper might sound like a piece of sociological research is, in the hands of McQueen, a brilliant powerful piece of cinema with brave and outstanding performance from not only Michael Fassbender but also Carey Mulligan as his emotionally vulnerable sister. It is indeed this very emotional vulnerability that McQueen reveals. In *Shame* the male psyche has become a very modern heart of darkness and McQueen's intent is to leave the audience with more questions than answers. In the process actor Michael Fassbender may just have proved, if that were required, that he is the screen actor of our generation. Ironically his next performance is in David Cronenberg's **A Dangerous Method** which opens at Watershed in February. Here he plays psychoanalyst Carl Jung to Viggo

Mortensen's Freud. I wonder if Shame was preparation for playing Carl Jung or vice versa.

Also this month sees Ralph Fiennes in front and behind the camera in his bloody and modern updating of Shakespeare's **Coriolanus**. The updating is to near contemporary Balkan states where Shakespeare's tale of political manoeuvrings has an all too relevant resonance. It was not a play I was particularly familiar with but Fiennes' adaptation and performance are intense and gripping.

So already three moving, intelligent, powerful films in the first month of the year with the aforementioned Cronenberg and also Polanski's savage satire **Carnage** to come in February. Definitely a vintage year in cinema ahead.

For more information on the programme visit **watershed.co.uk** to see an interview with the producer of **Shame**, Iain Canning, who also produced The Kings Speech, see <http://www.watershed.co.uk/dshed/bafta-preview-shame-qa>.