

## **A Film Vanishes**

Adelaide-Melbourne-Sydney-Brisbane-Perth  
Australia's International Film Festivals 2007

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“19 days only”, so the subtitle of this years Melbourne International Film Festival. And it expresses quite well a strange tendency in contemporary cinema. Countless times the death of the dark room was proclaimed by means of digital distribution and representation. Then, since the classical came into crisis, a new appreciation for exactly this orthodox form has come to the fore.

Not only has the appearance of international festivals supported by major cities expanded, they are also attracting more visitors each year. Formerly the selection to a festival meant industry channelled screenings with a rising chance to find a local distributor. Today many emerging festivals run a double program that woos the audience as well as the professionals.

Certainly for the viewer, the international festival now carries the flair of the alternative, a certain plurality in being the primal place of representation, full of surprises and disappointments, pure and uncorrupted, before the demands of cinemas mass culture render down the edges. According to that its promise is not so different from the utopia of the new technologies, internet and dvd that were supposed to be its hangman.

But is the fringe reality? This years Sydney/Melbourne audience pre-shocker about bestiality Zoo (USA, 2006, Robinson Devor) turned out to be just another blurry documentary, it's off-voice reports carried the biggest danger of putting you to sleep. And in terms of plurality; in fact, many international programs appear quite alike and are second offshoots of wide canons from Cannes, Toronto, Berlin or other industry festivals. Certainly any other concept that is not hosted by a major city, any program range that specializes, that stands out, has to make high concessions: to limit the diverse range of expectations, marginalize the festivals global role that is again important to access certain films, and thereby destabilize the budget over years. Topographically the international festival will give every major city it's standing in the global playground with a special regard to its own productions. However, all these fragile parameters explain their tendency to stick to the canon. The good news is that the “festival-film” within this canon can be satisfied to find its distribution only within this widening global circuit. Sometimes without commitments to television or local distribution.

After all, any form of criticism within that development has to deal with recurring questions in the afterlife of cinema: First, can we use the overcome language of analogue production in the digital age? Does, for example, the word “film” refer to the “material of 35mm”? What is a “track shot” when only mimicked in an animated film? If we make no distinction: does a disinterest of

materiality of the medium finally force us to acknowledge cinema as nothing but the sensuous perception of ideas?

And if yes, again, can we then trust the political enlightenment, the discoveries, truths and facts offered in - global - documentary cinema? Especially since production devices have become so widely accessible.

Film may not offer a general answer, but it has historically revisited truth, fake and fiction. Yet, this years international productions have expanded this to the most current topics, which shall be given a closer look:

Festival darling *Still Life* (China/Hong Kong 2006, dir: Jia Zhangke) documented China's often critically commented Three Gorges Dam project by slowly unfolding the fictional story of two people seeking their former husband or wife. The film documents a torn open landscape that is always already waiting before the actors start to appear. This absence of the actor in favour of documenting its environment is certainly also contributed to Yasujiro Ozu and sharpened in the New Wave movement. Here the MIFF retrospective of Shohei Imamura brought a brilliant work to screen. *A Man Vanishes* (Japan, 1967, dir: Shohei Imamura) attempts to find reasons for the large number of vanishing people in Japan. Imamura accesses this phenomenon by investigating the case of such a citizen - who himself has never actually existed. We see actors in real and constructed settings, with real and cast passers-by, giving their reasons for this man's disappearance. The almost painful repetitiveness to look for any hint of truth behind the general absence must have influenced the film *Yokohama Mary* (Japan, 2005, dir: Takayuki Nakamura) shown on MIFF as well. The director sets out to investigate the vanishing of an eccentric post-war prostitute in the port-city Yokohama. In memories eyewitnesses are spinning myths and relationships around Mary, this ghostly white masked outsider from the time of the American occupation until her later disappearance. That she to the film team was probably all the time known to chill out in an old-people's home was kept a secret till the portraits final shots. Nevertheless the vanishing man, Mary, or even *Yella* (Germany, 2007, Christian Petzold) who sets out to Western Germany from a little village in the former East after her own death, are phantasmal characters. They are not the actual target of portrayal, but used to systematically reveal and observe a social-economic structure of the day.

On first glance Werner Herzog's documentaries could be mentioned here, as he is known for inventing stories, or spin allegorical hallucinations when necessary. This necessity, as he was never tired to point out, would serve the revelation of a pure truth, an almost ecstatic truth (often speculated to be an outcome of his Christian conversion). Herzog's latest film *Rescue Dawn* (USA, 2006, dir: Werner Herzog) is a feature based on his documentary of a survivor figure, a German born US Air Force pilot shot down and imprisoned in the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, the turn of the allegorical human nature struggle into a fact-based feature film simply collapsed. *Rescue Dawn* was now pointing out a truth that is bigger than fiction; recalling all heroic scripts that classical Hollywood had pushed out long before.

It was also in this year that the heroic antihero Michael Moore smeared the glance on the winners face to an exhausted, broken mask. *Sicko* (USA, 2007, dir: Michael Moore) is, unlike Moors former documentaries, much less a collection of facts and figures in the tradition of investigative journalism in the line of Chomsky and Klein. In the middle of a career of political filmmaking, that too often struggled in polemics between the general and the specific, Moore now presented a collection of stories and impressions, totally manipulative, naive and emotional, but now severely doubting in the power of truth via the media it possesses. *Sicko* is a polemic, but mainly a personal observation with a clear regard. Furthermore, it could even be a post-Marxist film that considers the physical and emotional vulnerability as stronger than the persuasive power of the better argument. It is - but only in that sense - similar to *Bamako* (France/Mali, 2006, dir: Abderrahmane Sissako). Here a court against the World Bank and IMF is staged in the backyard of the director's family mud walled house in the capitol city of Mali. This situation is absurd, but the collection of single speeches filled with realistic emphasis appears as a true document. Especially when the tonality and the sound of distress take over the regimes of reason. In *Colossal Youth* (France/Portugal/Switzerland, 2006, dir: Pedro Costa) reason has left long ago. As if a new material reality must be burned on screen, Portuguese immigrants wait in long takes loaded with inner tension during which only few words are uttered.

A long time documentary cinema was believed to be changing the outside in presenting facts and figures. Today facts and figures are corrupted. So is media. That comes as old news for film. It has largely shown that the voice needs to be true only one time: the moment it is played again. Just another argument for the dark room.

**Watch out in Melbourne:**

Peter Whitehead, Retrospective at ACMI, 7<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> Sept 2007

**Watch out in Sydney:**

Sydney Underground Film Festival, The Factory Theatre, 7<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> Sept 2007