

# The Unbearable Lightness of Cannes, 2005

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The excitement of Cannes is that it matters: 40,000 professionals, journalists, and business people descend on the upscale Mediterranean city to showcase products, make deals, find producers, distributors, funding, and spread the word. Ever since this event was invented in 1939 as a political move to upstage the biggest film festival at the time—Venice—which had become the fascist voice-piece of Mussolini, Cannes has angled itself as the queen of film festivals, attracting both newcomers in its side-divisions (Director’s Fortnight, Critic’s Week, Un Certain Regard, etc.), and established directors in its “Competition.” It also sports an “Hors Competition” category for directors who either don’t want to compete (like Woody Allen) or who shouldn’t compete (like George Lucas), films that generally attract with their high-star glitz. What distinguishes Cannes as well from other festivals are the grill fences and police: only accredited professionals can attend, while those who still believe in film as glamour rather than as product line up behind the grills to press their faces upwards towards the red-carpet: the famous “Les Marches” where the stars (and the accredited) trip up to the big screen, to some extra-dramatic music, this year, to electronic improvisations by Jean-Yves Leloup and Eric Pajot. The public can also attend movies on the beach as well as the movies screened in the “Market.” In total: over 160 films screened, and hopefully just as many funded within the week.

The thrill of this year's Cannes was evenly divided between the experience of waiting in line (where one meets, for example, a Hungarian-born Argentinean, living in LA, scoping Spanish language films for his distribution company) and actually seeing the films. The lines are social network affairs. On a good day, one can meet a full range of people in or out of the industry: private individuals running cinephile magazines, the lazy rich who own apartments all over the world, and why not Cannes, outspoken journalists from the Eastern bloc, and eager publicists. One also meets a few directors, such as one New York based Russian "Igor" distributing cards with a flurry of a high pitched voice to make people come to his screening. As for those behind the films—the producers and bankers—they are too busy to actually watch a film: they are in meetings all day long, held in posh hotel rooms, at the Noga Hilton or the Majestic. And at night the networking continues at the parties: also divided into "big event" (such as Lucas' extravaganza with ice-sculpture forms of Yoda at the entrance), insider parties with a few stars, and sidebar garden cocktails, such as one hosted by Italian government officials to get journalists to advertise the fact that Tuscan land is for the renting

In other words: Cannes means industry, at the peak.

The films were not, however, themselves at the peak this year, none shining with genius in either execution or story, a view shared by many, even by the festival jury president, Emir Kusturica. In the final press conference, Kusturica, wild-haired with a grizzled beard, waved his hand nonchalantly and said, "I felt that most of the films were a little bit less good than I expected. We had a selection where I think the average wasn't very high." It was a feeling that went in waves beginning from the first competition film shown, Dominique Moll's *Lemming*, which began like the mythical rodent itself, eager for drama only to sink into soggy self-destruction, to the "Hors Competition" feature by Martha Fiennes, *Chromophobia*, which closed the festival. *Lemming* was graced by the fact that nobody ever mentioned it again. Fiennes' film, which had an upper-class female slant (and was the only film in or out of main competition by a woman) suffered the intolerance of film viewers who just couldn't give her merger of experimental American-style crosscutting—its stagey postmodern deconstruction of an Antonioni-*bis* family—and high style melodrama (sumptuous breasts, pedophilia, white collar crime) a chance, especially in its third hour.

Similarly, people seemed dismissive of Atom Egoyan's new

feature, *Where the Truth Lies*, a thriller which, to my mind, still has provocative echoes of Egoyan's usual intellectual theme: our relation to constructed realities. In this film, a young woman struck by a fantastic moment in her childhood when she met a star who sweetly shed tears for her polio affliction, goes back to write this man's biography, as well as to investigate his relation to a scandalous murder. Her own "memory" of a kind event becomes inverted when the film flashbacks from the other's perspective. And like *Felicia's Journey*, once the "truth" of the constructions comes out, the only choice is "forgiveness," a Beckett move acknowledging the human lapse.

The charge against Egoyan was that he—like several of his colleagues this year—had gone to the commercial extreme. Not only did the film have an enormous budget, conspicuous in the glitziness of the sets, but its dialogue and characters seemed, at times, to be Hollywood caricatures.

David Cronenberg admitted that he was doing the same: going big budget and Hollywood plot in order to shoot for a commercial success. *His A History of Violence* was a big leap from the experimental first films of this disease-obsessed director from Canada, who once probed the gooey innards of human beings in stark grayish settings, with a sense of dream-nightmare murky death-impulses predominating. This new film mixes popular genres—the gangster movie, the American frontier small-town family drama—with Cronenberg's passion for the creepy. Here the creep is a good husband and father who turns out to have, like the mad scientist in *The Fly*, another side to himself, perhaps not insectlike, but certainly on the bestial order. Gradually he develops his *Hyde* side, pulling out his primordial force as the movie develops into a suspenseful gangster flick, with one spectacular gun-whip-it-out scene making Olympic acrobatics look like a toddler's first steps.

"But Vigo Mortensen is no Jeff Goldblum," noted one of the festival organizers, film buff Frédéric Boyer. "He lacks the dark side." Well-noted. No inner tormented psyche seems to plague Vigo, or the film. Rather than scarily perturbing, this film goes camp: the last half hour consists of heads spurting blood as in monster movies of old. *The Fly* also had borderline comic moments, such as the man ripping off his own ear, but the uncanny dominated. Here the uncanny gives into pure pleasure—the fun of imaginative perversion. "Violence and sex go together like bacon and eggs," quipped Cronenberg at the press conference, mimicking his film's campy Americana tone.

Despite its unevenness and its mixed registers, Cronenberg's movie does work. We can sense an "artist" behind it, which was not the case with the other much-anticipated films of the masters. Wim Wender's *Don't Come Knocking*, for example, was packed with journalists who did not want to miss a potential Palme D'Or winner. And yet this film, which also indulged an American myth—the cowboy on the road—was an embarrassment to both the director and his screenwriter Sam Shepard. It rehashed Wim Wender's childhood love for America—a "love we of a certain generation in Europe can all identify with, but that was years ago," noted Swiss cultural editor Martin Walder—and repeated as well the plot of Shepard's *Fool for Love*. A half-brother and half-sister have been severely damaged by their missing "father," and the errant aging cowboy only now recognizes his need to take care of his sown wild oats. The bad acting and forced confrontations makes this tired story drag, and one sorely feels the absence of Robby Muller's dreamy landscapes. One also feels sad for the shocking divergence between the drive of Wender's startling *The American Friend* (1977) and this lackluster journey.

"Are you in a midlife crisis?" one game journalist asked not Wim Wenders, but his protégé Jim Jarmusch, who also made a film about an erstwhile ladies man, now on the road to reclaim his own bastard son. Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* grabbed the tired audiences because it entertained. Who wouldn't want to watch charming Bill Murray go on the road to meet his former loves? Using such top-notch stars as Sharon Stone, Jessica Lange, and Tilda Swinton, Jarmusch also seemed to be aiming for a bigger market. Echoes of the earlier offbeat artist still lurked, however. Like *Stranger than Paradise*, this film features a hero stumped between action and nonactivity, between scenes that progress and scenes that simply act as black-outs, mental moments of waiting. The opening sequence features Bill Murray, stunned by his own aimlessness, sitting before a big screen tv and watching a champagne glass, scenes that imitate the poetry of *Stranger than Paradise*, where characters also require objects to stare at, to hold their lost attention. As when *Stranger than Paradise*, the remedy to stasis is a road-trip west.

The sets, designed by rising star Mark Friedberg, are fantastic pastiches of American pop culture. In one scene where Murray meets his hippy-turned-yuppy real-estate agent ex-girlfriend, Frances Conroy, the pre-fab yuppy house is decorated with pictures of pre-fab yuppy

houses. The sets also move up and down the classes: the small bungalows of “trash” America, all the way up to “animal communicator” Jessica Lange’s new-age practice nestled in upscale woods, then down again to the trailer home of leather-and-chains babe Tilda Swinton. But at the end of the film, one is left with emptiness. Where did this journey take Bill Murray, and where has it taken Jim Jarmusch? Jim Jarmusch responded: “I make road movies because life is a journey.” *Tout court.*

Still, this film—ultimately saying nothing doing nothing—worked. It had style. It had comedy. Everyone could enjoy a movie with such few pretensions, and a highly attractive plot. Most audiences were pleased, although I myself began to have nostalgia for films of more ambitious artistic expression. A far cry from Bergman’s angst, Tarkofsky’s filmed grass, or even Jarmusch’s own *Dead Man, Broken Flowers* marked a unspoken crisis in the art film. And yet, thankfully, it did not win first prize: it won instead the “Grand Prix.” Cannes apparently cannot tolerate such a breezy film attached to its Palme D’Or.

Not all of the celebrated masters returning to Cannes could be accused of being lightweight. Michael Haneke’s *Caché* (Hidden), which won “Best Director,” earned the respect of all who saw it. The story of a television producer haunted by creepy cassettes, videos of his own house sent him by an angry Algerian in his past, it is Haneke’s boldest venture into the issue of first-world seclusion from the third-world. And the culprit, as usual with Haneke, is the insular family. In this film, everything is “hidden”: the wife’s flirtation with a friend of the family, the son’s nightlife, the father’s past. Emphasizing the morbid quality of the relationships, *Caché* features bland beige interiors, walled bookshelves filled with unread books, and a huge tv screen, favorite statement of Haneke’s about media’s collusion with our alienating numbness. In Haneke’s words: “Each of us pulls the blanket over our heads and hopes that the nightmares won’t be too bad.” Notably, the producer (played with tortured intensity by Daniel Auteuil) watches his own nightmares as if with a wide-angle lens.

Haneke stands out as a truly engaged director, driven if not by inner demons, at least by consciousness of outer ones. His treatment is intelligent, pertinent, with memorable concepts (the unfair legacy of privilege; the dire need for a dramatic confrontation between first and third worlds) and memorable images, such as an Algerian boy as a “dark” reflection in an elevator full of blondes; a rooster with his throat

cut, an omen of worse to come; and the mysterious closing shot of two boys, Algerian and French, conversing on the school steps, a mute “dialogue” which we can only glimpse through a grate—reminiscent of the closing shot of *The Pianist*.

Message-laden films were not lacking at the festival. Lars Von Trier’s *Manderlay*, the second of his American trilogy, teaches us about America’s hypocritical democracy through an invented story of the continuance of slavery in the South. The problem is that while in previous films, Von Trier created innocent Saint Joan characters we can empathize with who move us into a central ethical drama here the film is carried by a woman Von Trier plainly hates. The new Grace is a do-gooder pansy who stupidly proposes to liberate the slaves, impose democracy, and later (over)sees the horrific results of her good efforts. The allegory about Iraq unfortunately overkills. Using Brechtian techniques (for example, the same bare sets we saw in *Dogville*) for no purpose (asked why he used them, he shrugged his shoulders), the film provokes yawns rather than political introspection. Even Von Trier seemed to feel regret for the heaviness of his own film, stammering out that he might not even make the third of the trilogy.

Similarly, but with more charm, Amos Gitai’s *Free Zone* puts an American, Palestinian and Israeli together to make them make peace. The opening shots appealed to technical buffs, as it played with at least eight different superimposition of image. Nevertheless, yet the journey soon becomes dull, contrived, especially at the artificial climax, when a village burns and the villagers seem as upset as extras called on to a set. What saves this film, however, is the natural intelligent liveliness of Hanna Laslo, a one-woman show in Israel, who earned at Cannes the prize for best actress, well-deserved.

At the other extreme in the competition from the ideological confrontations with otherness was artsiness. Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *Three Times*, which many claimed should have won the Palme D’Or, to me reached the height of empty self-consciousness when the camera posed on smokey mist rising from a tea-kettle. The film does enchant in the first twenty minutes with lingering shots of a billiards table, each rounded shiny ball in once-upon-a-time Taiwan, while the song “Smoke Gets In Your Eyes” lulls us into the mood. This allure of nostalgic love, paced to the unrolling of love letters, will later contrast with the “third time” in this trilogy of love stories, a vignette that consists of fragmented hectic images of desperate cell phone callers: love in the year 2005.

Another artsy film, Carlos Reygadas' *Battala en el Cielo*, received a standing ovation for its hypnotic appeal. It packs many emotional punches, with a blow-job opening the film, a pretty pierced-lipped girl kneeling gratefully before a fat older man, all this to symphonic score. The movie develops into the story of these two characters: the rich girl Ana and her chauffeur Marcos—both equally lost in Mexico City. Ana, for no understandable reason, volunteers in a brothel, while Marcos suffers from an inner crisis from which he will never recover despite the girl's solace. We follow Marcos' depressing movements up until his final pilgrimage, on his knees, stumbling helplessly into a church to heal his soul.

The woman next to me in the theater, Reygadas' former publicist (and behind me was Carlos Reygadas himself) helped me appreciate this film. "Marcos is not a professional actor. Reygadas picked him because he has extraordinary soul. Watch how the camera watches him." And it was true that the man drew our gaze: the dark haunted eyes, the embarrassed shift of his hands. His expression fascinated more than the graphic images of naked flesh. Indeed, during the standing ovation, Marcos stood uncomfortably, a blush of deep timidity in his eyes, and the pretty Anapola Mushkadiz, sitting next to him, delightfully reached over and kissed him on the cheek.

I joined in the standing ovation, although I wondered what I participated in. There was no way to connect the dots among the images of the Mexican flag, the obsessive shots of Christ on the cross, the class issues between rich Ana and poor Marcos. So I asked the director himself: what connections was he making between religion, state, and class? What was he saying about faith? Reygadas, in a spunky interview on the Hilton Hotel terrace, dressed in a white bathrobe, said he had nothing particular to say: "The important thing is these two human beings. Just watch them and be patient. Cinema is a means of expression, not communication. I don't want to say anything. When you kiss someone, are you trying to communicate anything?" Our conversation turned into a debate about rationality and art: provocative, like the film, about the role of both.

Shamefully, *Sin City* was also in the competition. Its spectacular computer graphics won the prize for best techniques at the festival, even though watching it was as meaningful as watching the lights flash in a pinball machine. With rock music and no dialogue, the film would be a great accompaniment to a pizza party.

The hard-pressed jury seemed tired at the end of festival, as did most journalists, who, while enjoying the excitement of the lines, felt hard-pressed to say what was happening to film in 2005: either too artsy, too message-oriented, or plain too commercial (a critique leveled Gus Van Sant's *Last Days*).

"Lightness is the symptom of our times," Luc Dardenne stated, speaking about he and his brother's film *L'enfant*. "Our main character Bruno [a 20 year old vagabond thief] resonates with today's world because of his lightness. He lives in such lightness, where nothing has any importance."

It was no surprise that the Dardenne film won the Palme D'Or.

As did many of the other films in the festival, either by being too light themselves or by approaching this theme with a desultory lack of faith, *L'enfant* addresses the issue of having no connection, no responsibility, no motivation towards the future. And yet it was the only one that attempted to deal with "lightness" with some conviction. In the Dardenne film, Bruno, who initially sells his own baby to get a buck, eventually "works on himself by himself" to become a human being. At the end of the movie, he regains his infant—and his paternity—and restores the family unit.

Using realistic sets—situated in the same town in Belgium, the Dardenne brothers explained, that they film all their movies—as well as noticeably cheap film techniques ("we want the film to be alive"), *L'enfant* is neo-realist drama, a story of human beings in a simple conflict. It appeals through the liveliness of its scenes, the fresh sense of vivacity in the acting. One memorable scene occurs when Bruno and Sonia, his girlfriend, playfully hit and bite each other in a borrowed convertible, almost causing the vehicle to crash. We feel the real spirit of these two underclass people in love. We also feel that the directors care, which is confirmed when one meets them: an enthusiastic duo who claim that they treat vagabonds like Bruno simply because that is this social class that interests them, while the bourgeoisie does not.

*L'enfant* is a good film, a safe choice for the "Palme D'Or."

The jury voted safely here, but surprisingly gave two prizes to Tommy Lee Jones' *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*: best actor to Jones and best screenplay to Guillermo Arriaga. In this film, so offensive in its Manichean set-up that I didn't bother to consider it when noting possible Palme D'Ors, Tommy Lee Jones plays a man who forces an amoral gringo who killed his best friend, a Mexican, to

dig up the corpse and bring it back across the border. Most of the film is an inexorable account of that journey, as Tommy Lee Jones handcuffs, pistol-whips, and starves the bad gringo, until the bad boy finally recognizes the error of his ways and cries uncle. It is a macho Western simply told from the politically correct side.

I questioned the jury about their choice of best screenplay to writer Ariago. Why did such jury members as Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, who so thoughtfully treated violence in her own novels, and Emir Kusturica, whose films are so amazingly imaginative, vote for such a screenplay glorifying macho vigilante ethics? The film was not only predictable but dangerous: in the aftermath of Abu Gharib, the world doesn't need any more encouragement for do-it-yourself torture. Kusturica responded that he picked the film "not for rational reasons." Mexico was evocative in the Yugoslavia of his past, so anything with Mexico in it appealed to him. He also liked the music and the landscapes. Toni Morrison explained that "this is vengeance that leads to justice," a strange response from a member of the Helsinki Watch Committee on Human Rights.

When a film like *Three Burials* wins two top prizes, it makes one question not only the jury but the selection process for the twenty-one films in the top competition. Indeed, some of the most moving films in the entire Cannes festival were not in the Competition but in the side-divisions. Critics raved about Norwegian Bent Hamer's *Factotum*, based on a Charles Bukowski novel and starring Matt Dillon. Another film with promise was the short *Jewboy* by Australian Tony Krawitz, a simple film that goes into *Taxi Driver* expressionistic madness as a Yeshiva boy tries to figure out his connection to his roots.

One of the strongest films in the festival won the Directors Fortnight: Kim Longinetto and Florence Ayisi's *Sisters-In Law*. In this lively documentary about a female African magistrate who deals the law to wife beaters and child abusers, the directors placed a camera unobtrusively in the courtroom to create a portrait of the magistrate as she speaks to the culprits: a man who beats his wife for leaving him alone at home, "which is against the Koran"; a woman who insists she only beats her child when she "is in a bad mood"; a man who claims it was the seven year old girl who raped *him*. The magistrate holds her own, as she teaches the defendants that what they did was *wrong*. The lyrical dialogue goes on and on, creating a musicality that plays strongly with the darkness of the stories and makes the film, rather than heavy

in educational ethics, quite captivating, even inspiring.

Inspiration was needed in this festival, and it was great to find it in the sidebars, from these lessor known directors. Next year, I would be curious not only to see the progress of the masters who keep coming back (Wenders, Jarmusch, Egoyan, Haneke), but also to see more of these offerings from newcomers vying for their chance in the spotlight.