

# Tribeca? –Or not

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Dan Stefik wrote about Bruno Dumont's *Twenty-Nine Palms* in *Synoptique 2*. This is Part Two of *Synoptique's* coverage of the *TriBeCa Film Festival*. [see *Synoptique 3* – “Festival de TriBeCa : Compte Rendu“ par P-A Despatis D.]

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For those of you unfamiliar with the grid of streets and avenues that is Manhattan Island, Tribeca (**T**riangle **B**elow **C**anal) is an upscale area just above the former heart of New York—Ground Zero. Yet the vestiges of the former WTCs and that one fateful day are not only found at Ground Zero environs; beyond the construction crews and souvenir stands, the traces of the past are present in motions, actions and words, though rarely spoken at ease. All of these aspects make for some great cinema and cinema-going experiences.

Tribeca is a fairly young festival that understandably hasn't found its niche or target audience. Which is troublesome, only because of the abundance of Film Festivals, the majority of which have carved out an audience or central thematic. Take for example the *San Francisco Black Festival*, the *Human Rights Watch Int'l Festival in New York*, touring festivals such as *HDFEST*, or the *Int'l Wildlife Film Festival*. There's no shortage of festivals in North America, and even if a great deal of overlapping occurs, each festival offers its own personality or lack thereof. Although I've experienced many festivals at home in Montreal, I've never had the opportunity to attend festivals elsewhere.

My itinerary was not as all encompassing as that of my

fellow *Synoptique* festival reporter, Pierre- Alexandre Despatis; his dedication to cinema going and picture taking was remarkable. However, this having been my first lengthy stay in NYC, and fully aware of the concentration of a portion of the Festival's content on NYC films, I wanted to get a feel for the general area, venues, crowds and climate which make this Festival attractive beyond the dark rooms, the white screens and embattled dreams. My only goal, if possible, was to screen films from all of the program categories: competition and non-competition, feature and short, fiction and documentary. Here's what I found.

## RESTORED AND REDISCOVERED

In light of the Cinémathèque Québécoise's recent tragic announcement concerning the cancellation of summer programming, it was a pleasure to witness the restorations of two 50s classics, Elia Kazan's *East Of Eden* and Mikhail Kalatozov's *The Cranes Are Flying*. The former screened at Stuyvesant High School to a rather impressive crowd made up of filmgoers from all walks of life. Unbeknownst to most, a guest speaker was swiftly introduced, none other than Martin Scorsese, dear friend of cofounder Robert DeNiro and co-curator for this section of the Festival. Hearing Scorsese articulate so eloquently his love and passion for cinema, and illustrating his fondness for Kazan, James Dean and the craft that united them and helped define a new generation of anti-heros, was a rare treat. Here was one of America's most influential filmmakers, presenting his very own print of the 1955 classic adaptation of Steinbeck's novel, shedding light on Kazan's film and the reasons why it left such an

indelible impression on his then sprouting film-student experience. Having never seen the film myself, I was thoroughly convinced, if not during his enthusiastic presentation then certainly thereafter, at the importance and stature of this film in its historical context. Even if its content is at times emotionally overwhelming, the experience was nevertheless unexpectedly affecting.

Also, I managed to screen (again, for the first time) a new print of Mikhail Kalatozov's classic B & W masterpiece *The Cranes Are Flying* (1957), courtesy of Mosfilm. Cinematographer Sergei Urusevsky's camerawork is dazzling in its relentless pursuit of its protagonist, Veronica, played by the beautiful Russian actress Tatiana Samoilova. The amenities and innovations which revitalized the moving camera throughout the latter half of the decade are in full view here. It's not difficult to imagine why Scorcese, as co-curator, would have chosen to present this film. Besides the utmost in quality screenings within this category, each presentation served to remind the public of the importance of screening films in their original format. And Scorcese's mandate is the result of two principles: overly decrepit prints circulating in repertory cinemas and the myth of DVD superiority.

## FICTION

None of the fiction which I digested ranked highly in my opinion, though I was less interested in feature fiction competition than other offerings which are less likely to resurface in the future for varying reasons. I would prefer not dwelling on films which will probably receive their fair share of forthcoming publicity, but there are some films worth discussing. Namely, *Blind Flight* (2003), John Furse's compelling drama based on actual events in which an Irish nationalist and an English journalist fend off their oppressors while captured in Beirut for four-and-a-half years. Ian Hart and Linus Roache deliver some pretty convincing performances, at least until the film degrades into a sentimental and sappy genre film, which is rather unfortunate given the film's timing and parallels to events unfolding in the Middle East/U.S. conflict in recent months. Given the somewhat shallow performances by the men's captors (no fault of their own, it seems), I could see this film making a better theatrical play than screenplay, in that it would afford the kinds of changes which come with time, maturity, and a better understanding of the kinds of relations between the West and their significant "others." These relations are often trivialized for the sake of fiction and mainstream audiences that putatively prefer one-sided introspection.

*Zaman, The Man From The Reeds* (Iraq/France, 2003) is a lushly photographed film which charts the plight of Zaman as he travels up the Tigris river to Baghdad in search of a cure for his wife's sickness. This is supposedly the first feature shot in Iraq in over a decade, five reels of which were confiscated by Saddam's regime and never recovered. While the film is remarkable for the way in which it represents the traditions, lifestyles and settings of a people whose history is rarely documented, its narrative is weak and predictable at best. One can't help but assume that endless compromises were made, possibly a result of the lost footage. Still, an interesting film in terms of its historical context.

Yukihiko Tsutsumi's *Love Collage* (2003) is a Japanese film that will probably fare well on the international circuit. An odd love story which combines several formats (Super 8mm, video, polaroids, B&W), it will appeal to those looking for hip, stylish antics, and can be interpreted as a treatise of sorts on the art and excess of photography in the modern age (in much of the same manner as *City Of God*). Although Tsutsumi's treatment of New York is inescapably fresh (the film's settings alternate between Tokyo and the Big Apple), the film eventually devolves into a mediocre action flick before ever coming to terms with the characters' lives and development. The overwrought plot twists essentially destabilize a potentially interesting character study of a Japanese teen who's life takes a turn when he moves to NYC in search of his ex and the love of photography which had united them initially, in Tokyo. A good chunk of the film consists of still frames, more than any feature film I've ever seen, which supports the claim that New York is the most photographed location in the world, Tokyo a potential runner-up.

On a much bleaker note, there's Brett C. Leonard's minimalist character study *Jailbait* (2004), which examines the relationship between two convicts, Randy and Jake, played by Michael Pitt and Stephen Adler Guirgis, respectively. The press notes misleadingly describe the film as a "stark, disturbing, and often comical study of one man's subjugation of another." The film was rarely comical or disturbing, and if I had previously imagined Pitt to be young actor with potential, this film asserts that while his pretty face may garner him some attention, realistically, his charming, boyish looks will work against him in the long-run. Imagine an interminable, rather feeble monologue by Guirgis interspersed with reaction shots from Pitt and you have the film. Another entry that would have been more convincing on stage.

*Happily Ever After* (2004) is Unsu Lee's light comedy, fairy-tale about an ambitious sister who hires a waitress (fairy-godmother?) to save her underachieving brother. Sound familiar? Yes, you've seen it countless times before, especially if you lived through the 80s. That said, the Q & A following the screening was worse: Lee stood at the mic, but the audience interest was focused on the film's leading star Jason Behr (this guy looks way too much like Jesus' Son). I had the sudden urge to leave, but admit that my curiosity at the whole star phenomena, primarily at the independent level, got the worst of me. You will undoubtedly hear about Behr in the future, but Lee, less likely. The whole thing was Sundance material, insofar as the moniker conjures up images of spoiled, narrowminded filmmakers and actors trying to sign a deal, make it big, and move on to better things before ever tapping into their potential.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

It's no wonder that with documentary film production and appreciation on the rise (*The Corporation*, *Super-Size Me*, and *Fahrenheit 9/11*) programmers at Tribeca were capitalizing on the same. There were three doc categories at Tribeca, including First & Second Feature filmmakers, more experienced filmmakers, and a special section reserved for docs examining New York at large. I've singled out four docs, three of which deal with important issues or current affairs and one of which deserves particular scrutiny.

The documentary competition presented films from all corners of the world including an impressive entry from Bulgaria. Adela Peeva's *Whose Is This Song?* (2003) follows the director as she maps out an itinerary through the Balkans, chasing the origins of a childhood song which each country claims as its own. She sits down to converse with the locals in each area and discovers that each has a story to justify the historical anthem as their national property. As her pilgrimage draws to an end, very little is resolved save for the fact that Nationalism can have dangerous consequences in which a given people stubbornly pit their own culture against another and claim supremacy. Peeva expertly weaves several issues together (nationalism, religious dogma, class difference) and follows a path of musical interpretation that transforms the original song into numerous forms: from ballad to religious hymn to street march, no form any more convincing than the next. Seeing the lower-to-middle-class locals meditate on their claims to history is both fascinating and disturbing. An acute examination of how 'word-of-mouth' media can create historical myths and legends.

Another quiet masterpiece in the same category is Sergei Dvortsevov's *In The Dark* (2004), a fortyminute film which observes a day in the life of an 80 year-old man who recently lost his sight and is looking to remain a part of his society. He lives with his cat in a tiny apartment and spends his time netting shopping bags with hopes of replacing the more common plastic bags. When he hits the street to offer them up free of charge, the locals ignore him and reject his plea. Without an ounce of sentimentality, this film manages to capture the essence of the old vs. the new, and in doing so highlights a basic problem in developed societies, regardless of location: the drive for convenience over union is dissolving any notion of community.

For something more controversial, Carey Schonegeval's sixty-minute information session the *Original Child Bomb* (2004) is yet another film which resonates particularly with our post-modern age, as Schonegeval examines the awe and fear inspired nuclear history of America, the proliferation of global nuclear armament, and the aftermath, including lingering physical and mental effects. This was one of the few films I screened in private on DVD, which didn't seem to detract from the film's powerful imagery and its ability to simultaneously affect, inform, and disturb. This should be essential viewing for early childhood education.

Another documentary which skillfully weaves the personal and the public is Bruce Weber's *A Letter To True* (2003). I haven't had the opportunity to screen his critically acclaimed documentary on Chet Baker from a few years back, but his latest is sure to connect with the masses and dog-lovers alike. Weber's photographic sensibility captures his five purebred dogs beautifully and the resulting footage is delicately intercut with meditations on a wide diversity of issues including war, the Black Civil Rights movement, and Classic Hollywood iconography to name but a few. Remarkably, nothing here seems out of place, a testament to Weber's holistic approach to America's historical legacy and the mark of a talented experimental documentarist.

### EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA : ALIVE & WELL-HONOURED

Thanks in part to curator Jon Gartenberg Tribeca had a committed, though informal, experimental section. Before each presentation, he spoke of the importance of using Festival culture to expose the public to fare that might not otherwise attract wide, divergent audiences. His point was well taken.

A personal highlight of mine was the discovery, several days into the Festival, that select works of and about Stan Brakhage were being screened as a Tribute to the late experimental filmmaker. The event took place on a beautiful, sunny Wednesday afternoon at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, a venue used for several screenings and events throughout the Festival. After passing through a metal detector and dealing with some pretty insensitive security measures, I was handed program notes which detailed the screenings and events to unfold. With the aid of Tribeca-based New York Filmmakers' Co-op (a non-profit organization devoted to distribution of experimental films) Gartenberg had curated four great silent, color films: *Wonder Ring* (1955), *Mothlight* (1963), *The Riddle Of Lumen* (1972), *Black Ice* (1994).

The films span forty years of Brakhage's career and capture a diversity of approaches and interests which made him one of cinema's most celebrated filmmakers. After having used the NYC subway system as my mode of transportation, the *Wonder Ring* screening was a rather eerie experience. The film, which I hadn't previously seen, documents the Third Avenue elevated train which has since been removed. Composed of beautifully fleeting imagery, and using rhythm and light in rich, innovative ways, Brakhage's unique perspective on public transportation was an indication of how early Brakhage had assumed a distinctive vision of his experiences of the quotidian world. Screening *The Riddle Of Lumen* for the first time, and knowing very well that it hadn't been included in the DVD collection of works entitled *By Brakhage*, I was ecstatic to say the least. The film presents fragments of reality juxtaposed one after the other. Our desire to make sense of the imagery is soon abandoned with reflection upon the film's title and acknowledging the work as a riddle. The film is a challenge and ploy to remove us from our basically centered thought processes and rationalist tendencies, and it works tremendously. In sharp contrast, and having forsaken reality entirely, both *Mothlight* and *Black Ice* are exemplary of Brakhage's tendencies toward abstraction. Seeing these pristine, colorful prints with a roomful of Brakhage enthusiasts (and a few who had never seen a single film of his) was a rare and exciting event.

Immediately following the screenings, Gartenberg presented three filmmakers and their respective documentaries on Brakhage. Benjamin Meade's fascinating interview (supposedly the last) entitled *Brakhage: The Final Word* is a most revealing portrait of Brakhage's views on everything from Americana to his early childhood orphanage in Kansas City.

Ken Jacobs was on hand to speak of Brakhage and their close relationship to one another, and audiences were privy to two sequences from *Keeping An Eye On Stan* (2003), a collaborative effort between Ken and his daughter, Nisi Jacobs. *The New York Irish Bar 1997* segment had a trio (Stan, his wife, and Ken) swapping a video camera in an Irish Bar and catching some candid moments, as we see Brakhage manhandling a digital camera with apparent ignorance as to how it functions—a true film purist, no doubt. During the course of the evening Jacobs films Brakhage as he scratches the emulsion off the surface of an old strip of film and offers it as a gift to his wife. The beard and generally scruffy appearance...that unique voice...the idealist/minimalist at work...fragments of a lifetime which have thankfully been captured for all those who love this unique man. Criterion, listen up! Couldn't this be worthy bonus material on an upcoming *By Brakhage Vol. 2* DVD?

The second segment was particularly eerie, placing the trio at New York's most famous tourist attraction, ground zero. I had just accidentally drifted into its path that day, and must admit a strange feeling came over me seeing Brakhage in the same area on video, almost seven years ago. Then again, strange New York related 'coincidences' had been occurring all week, and so regularly that I discounted the fate factor almost entirely.

The third film on Brakhage was the most intimate of the three, probably a result of seeing Stan bedridden, during his final months in Victoria, British Columbia. The work is only fifteen minutes long but has Stan reading from his own manifesto, *Metaphors on Vision* and looking rather calm and content all things considered. The scene is curiously reminiscent of Tarkovsky's late bedridden state and illustrates what I imagine to be a man who's somewhat more accepting and tolerant of death than the average person. His accomplishments and level of involvement within the avant-garde are truly unprecedented.

Later on that evening, after the spirit of Brakhage and all of its accompanying enthusiasm had left the building, the same venue was presenting a special screening of Jennifer Todd's *The Time We Killed* (2004), an experimental feature which had garnered an award at the Berlin Film Festival earlier this year. I wasn't convinced that this film deserved all of its attention, though it did have some rather evocative black and white imagery and offered insights of political vs. personal nature in a timely manner. The film follows

the perils of Robyn, an agoraphobic New Yorker who can't seem to withdraw from the events, memories and state of affairs which haunt her and make her a slave to her flat. A mix of both DV and 16mm film, *The Time We Killed* demonstrates an impressive low-budget stylistic alternative; however, its downside is the result of lacklustre acting and an overly fragmented, abstracted narrative which became increasingly difficult to follow.

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

Tribeca organizers and programmers have their work cut out for themselves and will need a couple of extra years to get on the right track. I must say that I was not impressed with the main venue (the Regal Entertainment Centre) which consisted of 11 theatres distributed over several floors. Every screening promised a long trek up three or four flights of narrow escalators and an ambience which was really no different than your average multiplex. Convenient location? Yes and no. The surrounding area has some nice touches (albeit a little upscale for my tastes) with the New Jersey skyline only seconds away and a great bagel joint which had me-repeat customer- coming back for every flavour of cream cheese they could muster up. But in the end, the time spent at the major venue is key, and in my opinion, the Regal centre has got to go. It offers nothing to the festival climate in general.

On the other hand, most of the secondary venues, including the schools and museums, were worthy additions to the Festival. And even if they were situated a little further, what better way than to capture some of the scenes the city has to offer. After all, it's New York for Christ's sake.

The Tribeca Festival Staff weren't exactly jovial, save for the ones handing out free popcorn on the city's many street corners, "compliments of American Express." But then again, having worked my fair share of film festivals, I understand the difficulties which arise when a couple of hundred people get thrown together for one major occasion and have to pretend that everything's going to work out as planned. Planned? There are often less plans than there are reactions and festival-going can be as much a pain for staff as for patrons. All in all, Tribeca was reasonably organized and there were no major problems in my experience. Though I was not a paying customer, in which case I tend to reserve my complaints for Festival revues and the like.