



## Is It Dead Yet?: The 42<sup>nd</sup> Festival du nouveau cinema

by Bradley Warren

It is surprising that, in 2013, we are still pronouncing the death of film; rather, it should be pronounced dead, past tense. It is expected that film festivals, just like the cinemas that are equipped to support them, will proliferate content in digital formats or other less salient media. Of the films that I viewed during this year's edition of the Festival du nouveau cinema—in this facet, identical to my experience at Cannes in May—only one was projected on film: Robert Altman's *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean* (1982). Obviously, this reliquary of the past was an archival print, with such attention paid to its condition that there were gaps between reels. The film found only a very small and appreciative audience, despite it being very difficult to see Altman's film and even more so to see it *on* film. The superb performances and dizzying staging, with the symmetrical set bifurcated by a two-way mirror that allows two temporalities to occur simultaneously, leaves one to conclude that availability is the only reason that this is not discussed as a major work of Hollywood *auteur* cinema of the period, or as a seminal early queer film.

The small audience for this forgotten film was not particularly shocking, since audiences flock to this festival to discover lauded works from the festivals of Cannes, Locarno, and Venice. In this regard, the Festival du nouveau cinéma did not disappoint, beating TIFF and NYFF to the North American premières of modest Golden Lion winner *Sacro GRA* (Gianfranco Rosi, 2013) and Amat Escalante's Mexican extremity, *Heli* (2013), also recipient of the Louve d'or. For the greater part, I would like to focus on a pair of holdovers from Locarno, namely Corneliu Porumboiu's *When Evening Falls on Bucharest or Metabolism* (2013) and Hong Sang-soo's *Our Sunhi* (2013). The former, constructed of sequence shots so long and few that you can count them (seventeen by

my count), makes no pretence to hide its reflexivity in a narrative about the production of a film. The opening sequence is a two-shot of the diegetic director and his lead actress, as she questions him about his form and style. Porumboiu establishes his rigorous style through narrative demands, as his intra-narrative surrogate acknowledges the capacity of digital formats to allow for increasingly long takes, but displays an appreciation of the structure offered by the limits of film in regard to shot duration. At this point, *When Evening Falls* has set a challenge for itself; *plan séquence* becomes a stylistic mode that is pure play, rather than signalling a functional aesthetic of mainstream filmmaking with celluloid or digital cameras. This reflective formal discourse is surprisingly captivating, and the Romanian *auteur* finds moments of beauty in the deliberate cinematography and *mise-en-scène*.

If Porumboiu endeavours to play within an established structure derived from the technological restraints of celluloid, Hong Sang-soo does the exact opposite in *Our Sunhi*, manipulating the digital format to draw out individual shots to spectacular, unruly lengths. His repetition of these shots manifests in the way that we might expect of a Hong film; that is, permutations of a limited number of characters in a pair of settings in which they drink to excess and acting out what Kim Kyung Hun frames as a cinema of insobriety (217). *Our Sunhi* might be considered a regression compared to the gender representation of *Nobody's Daughter Haewon*, released earlier in 2013 and a film I consider as a major work for the South Korean *auteur*. Nonetheless, Hong transforms the single spectacular bar scene in that film into an inebriated, *plan séquence* leitmotif. The long take encounters between Sunhi and her three suitors within the two settings—first, a Western-style restaurant where alcohol can't be served without an accompaniment of chicken, while the second is a more traditional Korean bar—progressively knit the relationships in Hong's insular cinematic world. Notable as well is the presence of a recursive song, inexplicably played on each visit to both drinking spaces. This acts as a fixed variable, further provoking the question that is so prescient in Hong's cinema: Do these moments belong to a linear narrative, or create parallel ones? One of the major jokes in the film has Sunhi's professor rewriting a letter of recommendation for her to travel to the United States for postgraduate studies, with

both efforts reframing the same characteristics in a positive or negative light and equally composed without much consideration. Hong underlines the arbitrariness of privileging one of many forking paths, instead displaying a fascination with their variances.

Whereas for the Romanian *auteur*, the opportunities of digital filmmaking demands reflection upon the influence of technology on standards of form and filmmaking practices, Hong seizes the opportunity for new experiments within his cinematic microcosm of filmmakers and students. As an antidote to the austerity of these two films, Sion Sono's gonzo *Why Don't You Play in Hell?* (2013) continues the film-about-film obsession, shifting focus to amateur filmmakers in a genre hybrid that fetishizes the death of 35mm. Sono sets up a tangle of narratives originating in a celluloid past; the youthful filmmaking club unfortunately named the "Fuck Bombers" is doomed to cross paths with splintered Yakuza factions. All the while, the jingle from a toothpaste commercial is certain to get stuck in your head. The film is replete with allusions: a Bruce Lee imitator wears a yellow track suit referencing *Kill Bill, Volume 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003), which is further referenced in the last act's showstopping blood bath, alongside the work of contemporaries Takashi Miike and Takeshi Kitano, while the narrative's professional projectionist is a dead ringer for 1960s innovator Seijun Suzuki. As much as Sono waxes nostalgic for celluloid, there is an underlying resignation to the medium's passing that belies his kitchen sink approach. If audience reception is any indication, Sono's film—recipient of the Temps Ø People's Choice Award—points towards an ongoing participation in the eulogy for celluloid, albeit in a palatable, aesthetically hyperactive form, rather than a minimalist one.

#### Works Cited

Kim, Kyung Hyun. "Too Early/Too Late: Temporality and Repetition in Hong Sang-su's Films." *The Remasculization of Korean Cinema*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 203-232. Print.