



On Heroines, High Heels and Hierarchies: Challenging the 68th Festival de Cannes' "Year Off"

Festival review by Bradley Warren

If I were to identify two major characteristics that distinguish this year's Festival de Cannes, I would point towards the increased security on the Boulevard de la Croisette, as well as the toxic critical reception to the films on offer. The first of these qualities—security—is doubtlessly a ripple effect of the attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris five months earlier. Of course, Cannes is no stranger to an intimidating police presence. Every year, I am stunned at the small army that convenes each evening to block off the Croisette from the casino to the Hotel Barrière, in anticipation of the cavalcade of limos delivering red carpet guests. Where do these police come from, who would otherwise be unnecessary in this small Riviera resort community?

Regardless, the most visible change was not in the presence of police, but in the circulation of people in and around the Palais des Festivals et des Congrès. It may seem insignificant, but the placement of barriers outside the main doors to the Palais (used to enter the market or visit the Nespresso bar for some much-needed coffee) extended to the crowded sidewalk and enforced a unidirectional movement of foot traffic. This would often result in unexpected traffic jams and language barriers to accompany physical ones, as people did not comprehend—in French—the restrictions on their movement. In one memorable moment, a stampede of accredited students and cinephiles being refused access to the Palais to see Natalie Portman's directorial debut *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (2015) collided with the black-tie queue feeding into the Grand Théâtre Lumière for the premiere of *Mia madre* (Nanni Moretti, 2015). I was not destined for either screening but simply wanted to get into the building to pick up the following day's schedule.

This exertion of control onto the movement of press and professionals—evidently to satisfy the needs of security, rather than in the interest of efficiency—dovetails with the

other major characteristic of the festival's 2015 iteration: the arrangement and quality of the films, insofar as the profile and relative access to the features are dictated by their placement within the festival's programming structure. The hierarchal organization of the program begins with the prestigious official competition, which not only translates to prizes but greater visibility to the press and more saturated international distribution. Following this is Un Certain Regard (screened in the smaller-but-still-massive Théâtre Debussy), other non-competitive selections, and the "unofficial" sidebar programs of the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs (Director's Fortnight), the Semaine de la Critique (Critic's Week) and the ACID (l'Association du Cinéma Indépendant pour sa Diffusion). These selections are programmed independently of the official selection and run parallel to the Festival de Cannes proper.

Each of these various programs has a different stated purpose—for example, only first and second features are selected for the Critic's Week, and they receive greater attention in a shorter program that offers only one premiere each day. Regardless, the press understands this as a stratified system speaking to the quality of the films on display. When a bold work such as Miguel Gomes' tripartite *Arabian Nights* (2015) shows up in the "lower" rung that is the Director's Fortnight, the taste of Cannes' frontman Thierry Frémaux (understood to have the first choice of films on offer) is called into question by the international media. Of course, Gomes' opus, projected at the JW Marriott in three parts over the course of three days, would never have been permitted to reign over the red carpet of the Lumière for as many sessions—the *tapis rouge* itself a "path" with its own designated purpose. These famous black-tie screenings demand two or three new cinematic (and fashion) spectacles each evening, a routine which would not be broken to accommodate Gomes' long-form experimentation with structure and duration.

The demand for immediate reactions—Twitter makes the daily news cycle of trades like *Screen Daily* seem slow and old-fashioned by comparison—creates an urgency to making definitive statements on the quality of the festival as a whole, often in advance of the closing ceremonies. The dailies cease publication on the ninth or tenth day as

they are most strongly tied to the market aspect of the festival. Journalists often leave early as well, if only to save on airplane fares; the advantage to this trend is that the last screenings are easier to access. The final films to premiere—*Macbeth* (Justin Kurzel, 2015), *Valley of Love* (Guillaume Nicloux, 2015) and the non-competitive closing film, *La Glace et la ciel* (Luc Jacquet, 2015)—often are excluded from the majority of critical discussions and perhaps less likely to receive prizes as a result. My lack of attention to the former two films (I was unable to see Jacquet's documentary) in this review is less a testament to their quality than a sign of festival fatigue.

If one was to pronounce a time of death for this year's slate, it would have been the day following the first press screening of Gus Van Sant's *Sea of Trees* (2015), a film that was excessively derided.¹ For this reason, as well as those stated before, the critics were quick to label Cannes as taking a "year off" in terms of quality. The atmosphere created by this derision was tangible throughout the festival's eleven-day span culminating with the official competition's awards on the final Sunday.

Blinded by Cannes' hierarchy—an established path to experience the festival which is determined by purpose, individual taste of program directors and, of course, industry demands—the collective press is more interested in criticizing the organization of the films on display rather than making their way through the overall selection and being enriched by the patterns that form. Certainly, there are exceptions; Laura Kern presents one interesting counter-strategy in her report for *Film Comment*, limiting her purview to those films exclusively on display in the market.²

¹ Without sounding disproportionately apologetic, *Sea of Trees*, while not necessarily great (or particularly good), is yet another film marked by a compelling female performance (Naomi Watts, here playing against type). The afternoon screening attended by this writer—and intended for the industry guests, not press—was met with the same polite applause that characterizes most screenings in the Lumière. However, it is likely a direct result of the caustic reception in the trades that Van Sant's film, as of January 2015, remains undistributed worldwide.

² Laura Kern, "Slumming It: Days and Nights in the Market," *Film Comment* 51.4 (2015): 66.

The subsequent observations are of my own path through the sixty-eighth edition of the Festival de Cannes (I was able to fit in about thirty-odd films), which was characterized by the presence of notable female leads. My own navigation of Cannes is informed by a number of factors: accreditation and conditional access to tickets, familiarity with a film's pedigree, the country of production (South Korean cinema is particularly tantalizing) and the program in which a film appears (the competition as a consequence of its visibility, and the surprises to be found in the Critic's Week).³ Above all, considerations must be made for scheduling—the repertory films are almost always a conflict—and acclimating to the time that will be spent in queues, the distance between venues and navigational obstacles such as the aforementioned blocked-off streets and traffic jams.

The awarding of prizes (either sponsored by the festival or “unofficial” honors such as the Queer Palm or FIPRESCI) are one means of recognizing the achievements of individual films, albeit as an expression of the subjective taste of an individual or small collective navigating a pre-determined path through the selection. It is also here in which one can observe the most direct connection between the 2015 edition of the Festival de Cannes and this issue of *Synoptique*, as its filmmaker in focus, Xavier Dolan, navigated his own path through the festival by serving on the jury for the official competition. Following the awards ceremony on closing night, rumors persisted that it was by one jury member's insistence that Emmanuelle Bercot of *Mon Roi* (Maïwenn, 2015) share the Prix d'interprétation féminine *ex-acqueo* with Rooney Mara for her supporting role in *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015). It does not take a leap of faith to understand why the Québécois filmmaker might have been the one to actively campaign for Bercot's performance. Despite moments of over-sustained melodrama, the character fits comfortably alongside the celebrated emotional range of Anne Dorval and Suzanne Clément in Dolan's own films.

³ One of the most pleasant viewing surprises of the festival—*Paulina* (Santiago Mitre, 2015)—was a consequence of mixing up the venue for an early morning screening of *Coin-Locker Girl*. I did not realize the error until the production credits indicated a film from Argentina, rather than South Korea.

The *roi*, or king, of the film, is Georgio (Vincent Cassell), a DJ and businessman who at times reduces his wife, Tony (Bercot), to a concubine. However, the story remains hers, beginning with her own skiing accident that is insinuated to be intentional. The increased capacity of her knee to bend backwards serves as a reflexive justification for the film's flashback structure. Even as Tony becomes aware of the dark side to Georgio she continues in the relationship in the capacity of wife and later mother, despite the better counsel of her family and friends. In between the outbursts of emotion and hostility the film challenges us to accept her agency, even when she has a tendency to be self-destructive. The end of the film implies that this *amour fou* will, to some degree, always exist between them.

I would also single out three other features for the visibility of their female characters within genre templates: *Coin Locker Girl* (Han Jun-hee, 2015), *Sicario* (Denis Villeneuve, 2015) and *The Assassin* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2015). The first is a South Korean film presented as an out-of-competition selection of the Critic's Week, described by program director Charles Tesson as a hybrid of the thriller and romance schemas currently popular in that country. The premise revolves around a baby, Il-young—portrayed as an adult by Kim Go-eun—abandoned in a coin locker at a train station. In her youth, the resourceful girl becomes involved in a loan shark's criminal operation. When an eighteen-year-old Il-young chooses to pursue a normal life the organization's madam, nicknamed "Mother" (Kim Hye-soo), sends her henchmen after the protagonist.

Arterial blood spray had audience members fleeing to the exit, leading them to miss the critical denouement on the maternal lineage at the core of this film and the alternative society it presents. The selection of the film is itself a savvy counter-strategy on the part of Tesson and the Critic's Week. The matriarchal focus of *Coin Locker Girl* may not be representative of contemporary South Korean crime thrillers, and for that reason, it is worthy of heightened visibility on the international festival circuit. More to the point, it is a stronger film than the "official" Un Certain Regard selection from South Korea, *The Shameless* (Oh Seung-uk, 2015), itself informed by patriarchal film noir tropes.

On the other hand, *Sicario* often places its female hero, Kate Macy (Emily Blunt), in the role of witness to the machinations of masculinity and the morally unsound decisions made by men in the war on drugs. After the opening sequence, in which innumerable dead bodies are found boarded up in the wall of an Arizona home (traumatizing imagery which evokes one of the film's genre idols, *Silence of the Lambs* [Jonathan Demme, 1991]), Kate's moral drive motivates her to join an FBI task force, which is accompanied by Benicio del Toro's enigmatic, menacing Alejandro. The team illegally entering Mexico is only the first of its ethically dubious practices, which culminate with the revelation of Alejandro's true identity and purpose.

Kate, unwilling to abandon her values as her male peers do, is unable to pull the trigger at a key moment and might, at first glance, appear powerless. Instead, this encounter highlights the reality of defying immense patriarchal organizations, specifically the military and the drug trade, and how challenging it is to dismantle or operate against them. This is a reality in which Kate's agency is already circumscribed, as her ability to impact change is contingent upon the information provided to her: the identity of Alejandro, the operating powers of the task force and the motivation behind her recruitment. The American government's effort to control the cartels is effectively fruitless and cinematically serves to drive the film's genre leanings. *Sicario's* treatment of its protagonist within the world of law enforcement proves to be just as insoluble and even more illuminating.

In the world of *The Assassin*, however, one important life (or death) is able to make a difference in the fragile political balance; it is this balance that the female protagonist, unlike Kate, is able to affect and determine. In Hou's film, set in ninth-century China, Shu Qi portrays the nominal assassin Nie Yinniang who is sent to kill her cousin (and once-suitor) for ambiguous political reasons. Characteristic of the filmmaker's work expository details are kept to a minimum, therefore demanding the spectator's rapt attention. After seeing the film twice, it's still not clear why Nie Yinniang was trained to become a legendary killer, and moreover, assigned to the position of maintaining the equilibrium between the Imperial government and its provinces. Certainly, a *wu xia* film

is expected to be populated by such figures but by eliding this information, it is suggested that it does not matter why *she* takes on this role over a male figure. Even if the tropes motivating Yie Ninning's social position are rooted in the classic Chinese folk tales that influenced *The Assassin*, the context of its presentation at Cannes, juxtaposed with other female-centered films, highlights this quality above other meticulous aspects of the film.

The above-mentioned features are only a handful of works that exemplified an unusually high presence of strong female characters, often within genre cinema. Also worthy of consideration is the Palme d'Or winner *Dheepan* (Jacques Audiard, 2015), which includes the most compelling woman within Audiard's cinema of masculinity, and one who does not have to take on masculine traits in order to assert herself. I do not wish to state that the festival's programming is an inadvertent expression of its heightened security state and emphasis on controlled circulation of its guests, but it is compelling that the women of *The Assassin*, *Coin Locker Girl* and *Dheepan* illustrate societal counter-strategies, whereas *Mon Roi* and *Sicario* serve to highlight the restrictive structures in place. If the films selected for Cannes aspire to be the "best" and most representative of what world cinema has to offer, it is, therefore, reasonable to expect these works to provoke a productive engagement with the contexts of their production and distribution.

It has been my intention to illustrate that, despite the press' malaise toward Cannes' selection of films this year, there remain important thematic undercurrents that circumvent the festival's organization of films into hierarchical programs. The discourses around the festival, including its dearth of female filmmakers and controversies about standards of footwear on the red carpet, draws attention to a continuing, larger relevance of these themes which will hopefully take on the same prominence in years to come.⁴ Indeed, why is Cate Blanchett's performance in *Carol*—akin to those I have

⁴ Pat Saperstein, "Cannes Clarifying Red Carpet Shoe Policy," *Variety* 20 May 2015, 27 December 2015 <<http://variety.com/2015/film/news/cannes-clarifying-red-carpet-shoe-policy-1201501516/>>. To summarize, a woman was denied admittance to a formal dress screening of

explored herein—of more “value” than Bercot’s, instead of being *also* of value? Such an understanding is narrow and limits itself to the films’ respective award trajectories and a conscious process of canonization that the festival selection and juries are expected to be in sync with. It idealizes the subjective experience of the jury members, such as Xavier Dolan, whose contributions are marked by unique paths through the festival, alternative engagements with its security and, of course, more parties. Even in Cannes’ supposed “year off,” it remains a cinematic lightning rod and one that can be mined for further productive discussions.

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Sea of Trees for wearing flat-heeled shoes, with no special consideration made for medical conditions or other extenuating circumstances. This imposition took on an ironic resonance with the theme of female agency so prevalent in *Carol* and *Sicario*.

Works Cited

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