

# Festival films are strange and wonderful

by Ira Nayman

A film festival gives you the opportunity to see movies you probably wouldn't be able to see at any other time of the year: documentaries, foreign films, Canadian films (!) and films too strange to get commercial distribution. If you can look past the galas, this year's Festival of Festivals is no exception.

*Closet Land*, for instance, is the perfect festival film: one set, two characters, lots of dialogue about states restricting freedom to protect themselves. It is hard to imagine a less commercial film.

*Closet Land* is about a writer of children's fiction (Madeleine Stowe) who is interrogated (and, ultimately, tortured) by a bureaucrat (Alan Rickman) who insists her latest book contains anti-State messages. The performances are riveting, and the set, with incongruous columns, furniture which serves multiple purposes and hidden drawers and closets, is visually fascinating.

Unfortunately, the first hour or so of the film invokes a strong sense of *deja vu* (Kafka by way of Koestler,



Groovy gangsters tool around Europe in John Woo's stylish *Zongheng Sihai*. Fine cars, fine sets, fine haircuts, fine sunglasses. All told, a mighty fine film and a fast-paced flick.

*Simple Mortel*, by proving the voices are *real* early in the film, leaves us with a different philosophical question: can we know what aliens would want from human beings? Because it is more removed from human experience, *Simple Mortel*'s question is ultimately less interesting to explore.

Although the tension builds nicely, the ending is something of a letdown. Too bad; Jolivet's direction is interesting, with unexpected images filling odd bits of the screen, and Volter's performance is convincing.

Directors Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper added interviews with the principles in the film (including stars Martin Sheen, Robert Duvall, Sam Bottoms and Dennis Hopper, director Coppola and production designer Dean Tavoularis).

The result is full of fascinating information: when *Apocalypse Now* was originally conceived, George Lucas was supposed to take a 16mm camera into Vietnam to film it while the war was still raging (around 1972-73). They couldn't get permission from either their studio or the State Department, so the project lay dormant for years, until Coppola revived it in the 1980s.

Apparently, Orson Welles had wanted to adapt Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, the basis of *Apocalypse Now*, with himself in the role of Kurtz. Sets had been designed and a tentative scenario worked out, but the funding fell through; Welles went on to make *Citizen Kane* instead.

As well as Hollywood trivia, the film is frequently funny. As the production spun out of control, with scenes being shot without any idea how they would fit into the whole and no ending planned, John Milius, the original screen writer, was called in to rewrite the script Coppola had largely abandoned. He was convinced it couldn't be done. But, after an hour and a half talking to Coppola, "I was convinced this movie was going to win a Nobel Prize."

The film paints a picture of Coppola as ambivalent megalomaniac. At times he wanted to explore the ethical dilemma of war, at times he wanted to make entertainment for the masses; at times he was very happy with what was going into the film, at times he thought it would be disastrously bad.

Coppola demonstrates that, in these days of emerging democracy throughout the world, film directors may be the last dictators. Whether or not you find his views and creative agony endearing is a personal decision, but you have to admire the film for capturing Coppola at his worst as well as his best.

*A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* details a creative process gone out of control. As Coppola himself admitted: "We had access to too much money and too much equipment, and little by little, we went insane." It seems like a fitting description of today's Hollywood.

## festival of festivals

**Closet Land**  
directed by Radha Bharadwaj  
starring Madeleine Stowe and Alan Rickman  
Produced by Imagine Entertainment

**Simple Mortel**  
directed by Pierre Jolivet  
starring Philippe Volter and Christophe Bourseiller  
produced by CAPAC/ FILDEBROC/ CINE CINQ

**Zongheng Sihai (Once a Thief)**  
directed by John Woo  
starring Chow Yun-Fat and Leslie Cheung  
produced by Milestone Pictures

**Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse**  
directed by Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper  
produced by ZM Productions/ Showtime Network

world still torture their citizens.

Foreign films are represented in several programs, including Latin American Panorama, Asian Horizons and *Que Viva Mexico!*

The French film *Simple Mortel*, directed by Pierre Jolivet (who co-wrote *Subway* and directed *Force Majeure*), is part of the Contemporary World Cinema series.

A linguist (Phillipe Volter) starts hearing a voice over the radio, speaking in an ancient language only he knows, which tells him to do certain things or face unpleasant consequences. As the film progresses, the acts and the consequences escalate to the point where he has to kill his best friend in order to save the planet from destruction.

"*Simple Mortel* fits into no genre," writes David Overbey in the Festival of Festivals program. "It is not science fiction, it is not a thriller, it is not a love story, although it touches on each of these genres. What it is is intelligent, moving, and, above all, mature."

Hmmm... There are shades of the Brazilian *Man Facing Southeast* in this film. But, where *Man Facing Southeast* explored the extremities of the human imagination (did the hero really hear signals from space, or was he insane?),

In a lighter vein, there's John Woo's *Zongheng Sihai* (*Once a Thief*). Woo, known for *The Killer* (which was released in Canada this summer) has created a charming, offbeat film.

Three orphans, raised by a gangster, become art thieves. Having come close to getting caught one too many times, the female member of the group (Cherie Chung) convinces the others (Chow Yun-Fat and Leslie Cheung) to retire, but they are pressed into service one last time.

*Once a Thief* features breathtaking European locations, sets dripping with wealth and taste, outlandish violence where the villain seems to command an unending supply of gunmen, and bizarre comedy. The humour doesn't always translate well, but the ending — a parody of typical American life — is hilarious.

One of the gems of the Festival may be, of all things, a documentary. *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* is about the making of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. It is informative and entertaining, with constant, delightful surprises and not a slow moment.

The heart of *A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* is footage Eleanor Coppola, the director's wife, shot during the filming of *Apocalypse Now*.



He doesn't love the smell of napalm in the morning: Francis Ford Coppola

although most people would cite Orwell). It's only in the last third of the film that a new wrinkle is added to the formula: the equation of totalitarian terror with men's domination over women — specifically, child abuse. The centerpiece of this section is an eloquent and brilliantly argued

monologue which redeems the familiarity of the rest of the film.

And, for those who believe state torture is not an issue now that the Soviet Union is on the verge of renouncing totalitarianism, the film ends by quoting Amnesty International's opinion that half the countries in the

coming next week

FILM FESTIVAL FRENZY

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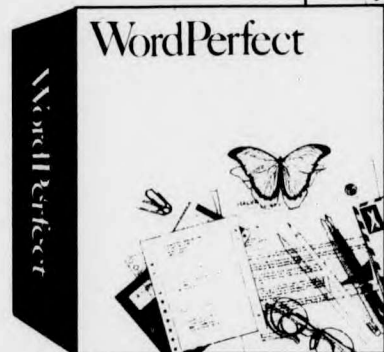
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