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Review of the 2004 Montreal Festival of New Cinema

by Jon Doyle

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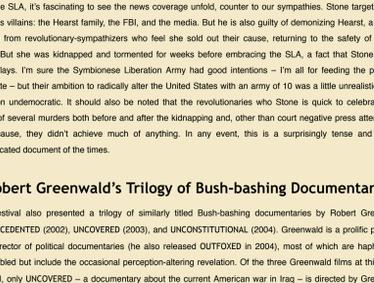
Montreal's Festival of New Cinema (formerly FCMM) is a mysterious festival with an incredibly broad mandate: "the dissemination and development of emerging trends in cinema and new media." In other words, the festival can show just about anything. Still, as you wander in and out of films, patterns take shape and a clear programming voice starts to emerge. This is a festival that values serious, bleak films. It is also a festival that values maverick artists (both filmmakers and their subjects) with a politicized vision of the world. These qualities are on full display in TOUCH THE SOUND (Thomas Riedelsheimer, 2004) and SUPERSTAR IN A HOUSEDRESS (Craig Highberger, 2004), two of the many non-fiction films I managed to see at this year's festival. The former is a startling and innovative look at deaf musician Evelyn Glennie, while the latter is an amateurish but loving tribute to playwright, Warhol collaborator, and gay icon, Jackie Curtis. As these films and countless others illustrate, non-fiction filmmaking is the area where the festival truly distinguishes itself. Read on as Jonathan Doyle, Synoptique's resident Splitter sprinter, spins an intertextual web in his reviews of 17 films.

Z CHANNEL: A MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION (Xan Cassavetes, 2004)

A personal favorite at this year's festival was Xan Cassavetes' (daughter of John) excellent Z CHANNEL: A MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION. For those of us too young to remember life before home video this is an eye-opening look at Z Channel's art-house cable channel of the 1980s. As home video was first coming into popular use, Z was already showing the uncensored version of HEAVEN'S GATE (Michael Cimino, 1980) in its original aspect ratio. This was a pioneering network that influenced countless filmmakers and laid the groundwork for home video as it's understood today. Cassavetes charts the channel's history through parallel narratives. The first is the troubled story of Z Channel mastermind Jerry Harvey. Along with his various wives and co-hosts (critic FX Feeney and filmmaker Michael Cimino), Harvey struggles to keep the channel vibrant amid increasing competition and tremendous psychological problems (Harvey made daily trips to a psychiatrist). As the film reveals fairly early on, Harvey's life came to an alarming end in 1989 when he murdered his wife and then committed suicide. The film's other narrative is a prolonged love letter to the Z Channel from those who watched the network, religiously (i.e., Alexander Payne and Quentin Tarantino) and those who benefited from it professionally (i.e., Robert Altman and Jacqueline Bisset).

Z CHANNEL over-flows with wonderful clips from wonderful films and, while most of these are familiar to devout film lovers, there are also some alarming revelations (Henry Jaglom's long unavailable A SAFE PLACE (1971), the films of Stuart Cooper, etc.). The film is also filled with memorable anecdotes, including the unexpected revelation that Tarantino absolutely loved the extended, uncensored version of Visconti's THE LEOPARD (1963) that played on Z. If nothing else, Z CHANNEL illustrates the positive effect that a genuine love for cinema can have on a film.

GUERRILLA: THE TAKING OF PATTY HEARST (Robert Stone, 2004)



Another standout documentary is Robert Stone's GUERRILLA: THE TAKING OF PATTY HEARST. This incredibly suspenseful re-counting of Hearst's kidnapping (by the Symbionese Liberation Army) and subsequent conversion to revolutionary bank robber is filled with alarming news footage from the 1970s and present day interviews with many of those involved. The audio recordings in which Hearst scolds her concerned parents are a hilarious highlight in the history of rebellious college students. The film situates these events in the context of Watergate, Vietnam and other political upheaval of the time. Stone gives credence to the SLA and defends their intentions in spite of the fact that those intentions obviously went awry. Once our sympathies have been aligned with the SLA, it's fascinating to see the news coverage unfold, counter to our sympathies. Stone targets all the obvious villains: the Hearst family, the FBI, and the media. But he is also guilty of demonizing Hearst, a popular star from revolutionary-sympathizers who feel she sold out their cause, returning to the safety of wealthy living. I'm sure the Symbionese Liberation Army had good intentions – I'm all for feeding the poor and destitute – but their ambition to radically alter the United States with an army of 10 was a little unrealistic, not to mention undemocratic. It should also be noted that the revolutionaries who Stone is quick to celebrate were guilty of several murders both before and after the kidnapping and, other than court negative press attention for their cause, they didn't achieve much of anything. In any event, this is a surprisingly tense and morally complicated document of the times.

Robert Greenwald's Trilogy of Bush-bashing Documentaries

The festival also presented a trilogy of similarly titled Bush-bashing documentaries by Robert Greenwald: UNPRECEDENTED (2002), UNCOVERED (2003), and UNCONSTITUTIONAL (2004). Greenwald is a prolific producer and director of political documentaries (he also released OUTFOXED in 2004), most of which are haphazardly assembled but include the occasional perception-altering revelation. Of the three Greenwald films at this year's festival, only UNCOVERED – a documentary about the current American war in Iraq – is directed by Greenwald. This is probably the weakest and most revelation-free of the three. It's basically a series of (poorly lit) talking head interviews with disgruntled former employees of the CIA and the FBI. Their assessments are highly informed and probably accurate but ultimately irrelevant. In recent months, the dishonesty of the Bush administration has come to be accepted and even embraced by the American public. For non-believers, it's nice to see Bush's lies further exposed but the constructive importance of this film is questionable.

More impressive is UNPRECEDENTED, a documentary about the notorious American presidential election of 2000. In addition to a truly disturbing breakdown of the voting irregularities that prevented many African-Americans from voting, this documentary features ominous warnings about the hazards of the Republican-funded, computerized voting technology that was used during the November 2, 2004 presidential election. In retrospect, these warnings may have been prophetic. Several weeks after the election, a few lone journalists continue reporting new voting irregularities (i.e., votes being subtracted rather than added). UNPRECEDENTED saw this coming and, while cable access production values may dull its impact, this is an eye-opening documentary.

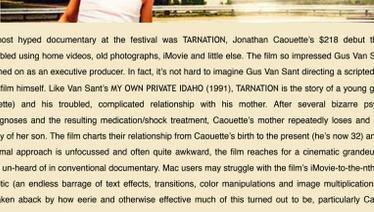
Even better and easily the best of the three is UNCONSTITUTIONAL, the first detailed account I've seen of the civil liberties violations stemming from the getting-more-bizarre-every-day "war on terrorism." Your fundamental belief in the inherent good of law enforcement will be shaken like never before as you see undercover police officers, posing as anti-war demonstrators, mace their fellow protestors (including the elderly). Unfortunately, Greenwald's films do little other than provoke and disturb their audience. This is the latest genre in exploitation: the non-fiction, political injustice film. Each revelation pushes the same button just as a good scare or joke would. On this level, the films are engaging. But a transcript of these films would have roughly the same effect. While Greenwald effectively communicates disturbing information, he does so without the ambition or imagination that characterizes the best non-fiction filmmaking.

MONDOVINO (Jonathan Nossiter, 2004)



Politics are also the focus of Jonathan Nossiter's MONDOVINO, a fairly thorough over-view of the international wine scene. Nossiter focuses on California vineyards for bribing influential wine critics and, even worse, homogenizing international wine tastes. With the increasing popularity of American wine – as well as the franchise-like spread of American companies throughout European vineyards – traditions of wine diversity are in greater danger than ever before. Those familiar with Nossiter's earlier, ultra-arty fiction work (SUNDAY (1997), SIGNS AND WONDERS (2000)) may be taken aback by this relatively straightforward foray into non-fiction. Nossiter is a professional sommelier (he knows a lot about wine) and that's his main interest here, not artfulness and formal precision. There's the occasional visual flourish or creative editorial juxtaposition but, more than anything, Nossiter's style is represented by dismissive cheap shots where detailed analysis might have been more effective. He seems more interested in generalizing about international politics and globalization than really revealing the truth about the world of wine. Still, this is an interesting subject handled in a light-hearted, entertaining manner.

TARNATION (Jonathan Caouette, 2003)



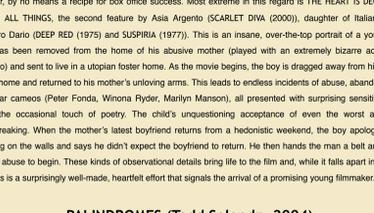
The most hyped documentary at the festival was TARNATION, Jonathan Caouette's \$218 debut that was assembled using home videos, old photographs, iMovie and little else. The film so impressed Gus Van Sant that he signed on as an executive producer. In fact, it's not hard to imagine Gus Van Sant directing a scripted version of this film himself. Like Van Sant's MY OWN PRIVATE DAHD (1991), TARNATION is the story of a young gay male (Caouette) and his troubled, complicated relationship with his mother. After several bizarre psychiatric diagnoses and the resulting humiliation/shock treatment, Caouette's mother repeatedly loses and re-gains custody of her son. The film charts their relationship from Caouette's birth to the present (he's now 32) and, while his formal approach is unconfused and often quite awkward, the film reaches for a cinematic grandeur that is almost un-heard of in conventional documentary. Mac users may struggle with the film's iMovie-to-the-nth-degree aesthetic (an endless barrage of text effects, transitions, color manipulations and image multiplications), but I was taken aback by how eerie and otherwise effective much of this turned out to be, particularly Caouette's striking use of music. That said, Caouette also suffers from drama queen indulgences and there's a general sense that something is missing. What does it all add up to? Not much, I'm sad to report, but it's still a revealing look at one man's hard-earned neuroses and lifelong desire to photograph himself.

THE HEART IS DECEITFUL ABOVE ALL THINGS (Asia Argento, 2004)



One theme that united many of the fiction films at this year's festival was a general sense of isolation and despair, by no means a recipe for box office success. Most extreme in this regard is THE HEART IS DECEITFUL ABOVE ALL THINGS, the second feature by Asia Argento (SCARLET DIVA (2000)), daughter of Italian horror maestro Dario (DEEP RED (1975) and SUSPIRIA (1977)). This is an insane, over-the-top portrait of a young boy who has been removed from the home of his abusive mother (played with an extremely bizarre accent by Argento) and sent to live in a utopian foster home. As the movie begins, the boy is dragged away from his happy foster home and returned to his mother's loving arms. This leads to endless incidents of abuse, abandonment, and star cameos (Peter Fonda, Winona Ryder, Marilyn Manson), all presented with surprising sensitivity and even the occasional touch of poetry. The child's unquestioning acceptance of even the worst abuse is heartbreaking. When the mother's latest boyfriend returns from a hedonistic weekend, the boy apologizes for drawing on the walls and says he didn't expect the boyfriend to return. He then hands the man a belt and waits for the abuse to begin. These kinds of observational details bring life to the film and, while it falls apart in its final act, this is a surprisingly well-made, heartfelt effort that signals the arrival of a promising young filmmaker.

PALINDROMES (Todd Solondz, 2004)



Less promising but occasionally interesting is PALINDROMES, Todd Solondz's latest exercise in nihilistic, misanthropic, anti-people filmmaking. Solondz's "big idea" is to have several actresses of different ages, races, and weight classes play the same character. He's trying to make some kind of vague point about audience identification that fails miserably. If I had to guess, I'd say this diversion stems from Solondz's lack of confidence in the story he's telling and his sense that it might benefit from a diversion. Not only does this diversion fail, but it isn't even necessary. In fact, in order to appreciate the film, it's probably best to just ignore the multiple identity device and try to follow the film's somewhat original narrative. Solondz inverts the conventional teen abortion paradigm: a 12 year old girl desperately wants to have a child but her parents force her to have an abortion. Rejecting her parents' anti-choice act, the girl goes on the lam and joins forces with another group of anti-choice activists: abortionist killers. There's potential here, but Solondz won't commit to any of his ideas. He wants to provoke and offend his audience without taking responsibility for a point-of-view. Ultimately, his important issues are side-lined in favour of a trivial, post-modern examination of "representation" and other film studies buzz-words.

MAREBITO (Takashi Shimizu, 2004)

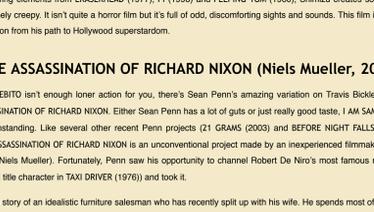
In the really unusual timing department, Japanese director Takashi Shimizu's low budget, digital video film, MAREBITO, played on the same day that his unwatchable blockbuster, THE GRUDGE (2004), opened across North America. THE GRUDGE marks the third time that Shimizu has directed the same source material (not including sequels) and it's clearly wearing thin. But not to worry. Shimizu hasn't lost it. In between production and post-production on THE GRUDGE, he managed to shoot his zig-zag of vampires and videographers on digital video in only 8 days. It's the story of a loner cameraman who records a suicide in the Tokyo subway. He becomes completely obsessed with the area where this incident occurred and soon discovers a bizarre underground world. This leads to a relationship with a nightmarish vampire woman and a surreal, Shimizu creates something genuinely creepy. It isn't quite a horror film but it's full of odd, discomforting sights and sounds. This film is a nice diversion from his path to Hollywood superstardom.

THE ASSASSINATION OF RICHARD NIXON (Niels Mueller, 2004)

If MAREBITO isn't enough loner action for you, there's Sean Penn's amazing variation on Travis Bickle in THE ASSASSINATION OF RICHARD NIXON. Either Sean Penn has a lot of guts or just really good taste. I AM SAM (2001) notwithstanding. Like several other recent Penn projects (21 GRAYS (2003) and BEFORE NIGHT FALLS (2000)), THE ASSASSINATION OF RICHARD NIXON is an unconventional project made by an inexperienced filmmaker (first-time, Niels Mueller). Fortunately, Penn saw his opportunity to channel Robert De Niro's most famous role (the crazed title character in TAXI DRIVER (1976)) and took it.

It's the story of an idealistic furniture salesman who has recently split up with his wife. He spends most of the film honorably struggling to reconcile with his wife and become a better salesman. But honesty and good intentions get him nowhere and, before long, he's ready to unleash his frustration on the ultimate salesman, the logical scapegoat for all that is wrong with the world in 1974, Richard Nixon. It's unfortunate that Penn won an Oscar for his routine work (by Penn standards) in last year's WYSTIC RIVER, as this is most certainly his most complex, disturbing, and satisfying performance to date. Admittedly, the film lays things out in an occasionally simplistic, cause-and-effect way but it is filled with unexpected detail, surprise, and humanity. Penn is incapable of performing a scene without throwing in a twist to keep the audience off-guard. This character may be crazy but, unlike Travis Bickle, we rationally understand every stage of his breakdown and we sympathize entirely. This makes for the kind of shocking and provocative filmmaking that is almost unheard of in 2004.

LAND OF PLENTY (Wim Wenders, 2004)

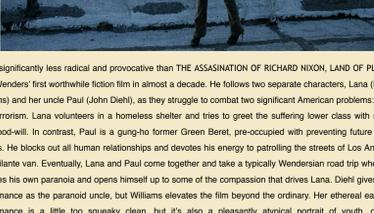


While significantly less radical and provocative than THE ASSASSINATION OF RICHARD NIXON, LAND OF PLENTY is Wim Wenders' first worthwhile fiction film in almost a decade. He follows two separate characters, Lana (Michelle Williams) and her uncle Paul (Jon Dieth), as they struggle to combat two significant American problems: poverty and terrorism. Lana volunteers in a homeless shelter and tries to greet the suffering lower class with sincerity and good-will. In contrast, Paul is a gun-ho former Green Beret who is pre-occupied with preventing future terrorist attacks. He blocks out all human relationships and devotes his energy to patrolling the streets of Los Angeles in his vigilante van. Eventually, Lana and Paul come together and take a typically Wendersian road trip where Paul exposes his own paranoid and opens himself up to some of the compassion that drives Lana. Dieth gives a solid performance as the paranoid uncle, but Williams elevates the film beyond the ordinary. Her ethereal earth-ethic performance is a little too squeaky clean, but it's also a pleasantly alypical portrait of youth, one that acknowledges the compassionate impulse that often separates young from old. Williams is the most mature, sophisticated, humane character in the film and she actually sets her hand on a less paranoid, more moral path. It's a welcome alternative to the conventionally vacuous, self-absorbed portrayal of youth seen elsewhere in mainstream entertainment these days. Unfortunately, the film lacks the cinematic ambition of Wenders' best work, but it's an inoffensive, good-intentioned film.

CHLDSTAR (Don McKellar, 2004)

Easily the worst film I saw at the festival and further proof that the Canadian film industry needs help, CHLDSTAR destroys any good will that writer-director-star Don McKellar might have earned with his directorial debut, LAST NIGHT (1998). To hear McKellar tell it, Hollywood films are shallow and lacking in craftsmanship. Unfortunately, McKellar is guilty of the same charges. Why is it that parodies of Hollywood movies always look cheaper and less intelligent than the real thing? If Hollywood films are as awful as they're supposed to be – and some of them are – filmmakers should parody them accurately. Instead, McKellar reduces everything to black-and-white cliché: the self-absorbed/sexually curious childstar, the arrogant/controlling childstar mother, the talentless but creatively tortured Hollywood director, etc. McKellar's material is fuelled by bitterness and frustration, not acute observation or analysis. Simply put, satire is not a good fit for his particular (and tiresome) brand of sardonic humour. There's nothing more off-putting in filmmaking than a moralizing sense of superiority; unfortunately, that's what McKellar is all about.

9 SONGS (Michael Winterbottom, 2004)



Another surprisingly weak effort came from British filmmaker Michael Winterbottom, one of the most prolific filmmakers working today. His films have been consistently intelligent, cinematic, and unique (all of THE CLAIM (2000) was a little too much like MCCABE & MRS. MILLER (1971), but what's wrong with that?). Always his films have always been characterized by a loose formal approach, until recently there was always a feeling of discipline and sophistication in the writing (usually by Frank Cottrell Boyce). In his last couple films, however, Winterbottom seems to be moving away from the rich, detailed worlds of WELCOME TO SARAJEVO (1997) and 24 HOUR PARTY PEOPLE (2002) and into an even more relaxed, seemingly script-less mode. When the form of these films is adequately worked out, as it was in this year's amazing and unfairly ignored CODE 46, the results are as impressive as anything Winterbottom has done. However, with 9 SONGS Winterbottom has bypassed content altogether and left us with very little formal invention to work the difference. Every serious filmmaker makes at least one film about sex and I guess this is Winterbottom's. But 9 SONGS is made with an extremely prudish sensibility. Winterbottom thinks hardcore sex is, in and of itself, alarming enough to sustain our attention. Even worse, he achieves the impossible and actually makes sex boring. Winterbottom has also inexplicably decided to combine his exploration of sexuality with a bunch of concert performances by alternative rock bands such as Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, Franz Ferdinand, and Super Furry Animals. All this plus two irritating protagonists and you've got a confused film from a director in flux.

SHE HATE ME (Spike Lee, 2004)

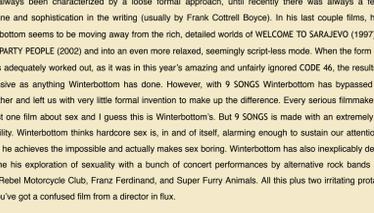
Continuing on the disappointment front, it should be noted that Spike Lee has a serious attention-span problem. Wrapping his head around a single hot-button topic isn't enough for the controversy-friendly auteur. In SHE HATE ME, he deals with at least two (and maybe more) provocative issues of our day: corporate scandals and lesbianing the whistle on his corrupt, white bosses (Woody Harelston, Ellen Barkin). Left with no income, he's forced to prostitute himself to lesbians desperate to get pregnant. His ex-girlfriend (now a lesbian pimp, basically) organizes all this and, of course, it all comes back to haunt Jack in the film's final act, a truly bizarre hybrid of THE GODFATHER (1972) and MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON (1939). Throughout the film, Lee's un-restrained handling of politically-charged material gets him into hot water as he suggests, among other things, that lesbians really need men and that black males are prostitutes at heart who will do anything for a buck (as a result of exclusionary white greed, of course). After the welcome maturation on display in his excellent 25TH HOUR (which Spike didn't write), he has returned to the unrefocused hijinks of earlier Spike Lee joints such as JUNGLE FEVER (1991) and GIRL 6 (1996). Like those films, SHE HATE ME is a well-crafted and entertaining intellectual train wreck.

PRIMER (Shane Carruth, 2004)



As any Kubrick skeptic will tell you, taking focus and attention to the opposite extreme can be equally problematic. Schematic, mathematical filmmaking is usually not a good thing, but, for once, it's kind of effective in PRIMER. This is the debut of Shane Carruth, a young mathematician who took an interest in filmmaking a few years ago and went to great pains to learn everything about that topic. All the technical stuff, anyway. This film is not particularly clear, but, from what I gathered, it's the story of two ambitious young inventors who inadvertently invent a time machine and take the first steps toward a practical application of this unwieldy device. The characters are deeply unappealing and uninteresting but the film's unique take on non-linear filmmaking is exciting in an unspohicating way. Multiple versions of characters weave through multiple planes of reality, traveling back-and-forth in time. As viewers, we are asked to do little more than put the pieces together – the film has no emotional or thematic content – but this, we are amused to do little more than put the pieces together – the film has no emotional or thematic content – but this, we are amused to do little more than put the pieces together – the film has no emotional or thematic content – but this, we are amused to do little more than put the pieces together. While I wouldn't expect any great artistry in Carruth's debut, this is everything but the catering diet.

A LETTER TO TRUE (Bruce Webber, 2004)



Finally, an astonishing change of pace and probably the best film I saw at the festival was Bruce Weber's beautifully-composed, humane, nostalgic, exploration of life in general, A LETTER TO TRUE. Clicking in at only 78 minutes, this film crams more passion, feeling, and cinematic adventurousness into its running time than any of the longer features I saw at this year's festival. Plot synopsis is fully as it's really a soul-searching essay film along the lines of Chris Marker's significantly more cerebral but equally affecting SANS SOLEIL (1983). Webber's film is structured around a lengthy voice-over – a letter he composed for one of his dogs while on the road. This format supports Webber's episodic structure as well as the innocent, even naive tone that is so central to the film's effect. Somehow, optimism and positive thinking are more credible when addressed to a really cute dog. For more than thirty years, Webber has been an acclaimed photographer who occasionally dabbles in filmmaking. During that time, his preoccupations have remained consistent – old movies, celebrities, dogs, and photography – and they all come together stunningly in this virtuoso, one-of-a-kind film. In a festival full of wonderfully negative films, it was nice to end on one as wonderfully positive as this.