

Searching in the Dark: The Film Festival Scene in Montreal, 2008

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For a long time, especially during much of the 1990s, Montreal was the place to be in North America to enjoy film festivals. Most people now recognize that the very first (and still the only) Class A competitive film festival recognized by FIAPF (Fédération internationale des associations de producteurs de films) in North America, the World Film Festival/Festival des Films du Monde (FFM), has been in decline for a long time.¹ There are various reasons for this decline, but the most obvious is the concomitant increasing worldwide importance of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), which although remaining a non-competitive event has more and more been able to attract the award-winning films from other major film festivals. (It used to be called Toronto's "Festival of Festivals.") This situation is a problem because if a film goes to Toronto, in early September, it cannot be shown in Montreal's FFM at the end of August. If the FFM's director Serge Losique was not so insistent on only screening World or North American premieres (like his counterparts in Toronto), we would, perhaps get to see important films a few months or a year later than they have been shown elsewhere. But, in any event, there are many other festivals that should be filling these screening gaps in Montreal, including the Festival du Nouveau Cinéma (FNC), which is held in October, and which, in its various guises, has been running un-interrupted since 1971. The FNC is based at the ExCentris cinema complex and has always shown a large number of feature films which are due to be locally released, as well as many French-language titles and films with French sub-titles. (The dominance of English, rather than French subtitled films at the FFM continues to be criticized in the local French-language media.) The wonderful Chinese film festival, run by Hong Kong-based Tammy Cheung, disappeared in the mid-1990s, and the city has also lost its notable Women's and Jewish film festivals. But, so many ethnically and regionally specific—e.g., Arab, Latin-American, East-European—or, content-based film and video festivals—e.g., documentary,

gay/lesbian, children's—have been added to the local calendar, that one would think that we would eventually get to see everything on our Montreal cinema screens.

There are a few factors that mitigate against this, however. The distribution of films in the province of Quebec is extremely problematic. With costs rising in all sectors, it becomes decreasingly cost-effective for local distribution companies to try to disseminate (so-called) marginal films or films with a limited-potential audience. Although locally made French-language films, and popular French films are not risky propositions, films in other languages are. Normally, separate prints would have to be struck with English and French subtitles—a costly exercise—and, unless a local distribution company also has the rights to the rest of Canada, it is unlikely to venture into Quebec, alone, with only French-language prints. With fewer non-mainstream films being distributed in Quebec, it means that the film festivals' role in screening these films is ever more crucial. Into the mix have sprung a few European-based companies, like Wild Bunch, Celluloid Dreams and Fortissimo Films, who partially fund “art films,” and search for regional distributors, knowing that most of the time their market is limited to film festivals. Consequently they charge fees to festivals with deep pockets, or restrict the exposure of their films to cities where they have an opportunity to sell to a small, local distributor, e.g., Paris and New York City.

One local film festival that makes a consistent effort to show undistributed films is FanTasia. Begun in 1996 by some local fans of Hong Kong and Japanese genre films, from martial arts to anime and “monster movies,” the summer FanTasia festival was expanded in 1997 to include all kinds of genre films, including North American and European horror. Over the years it has built a regular audience, of mostly young fans, who are willing to line up outside of the Concordia University Hall building, often deep into the night, waiting for a delayed midnight screening. Typical of this phenomenon was this year's screening of *Tokyo Gore Police*, with first-time feature director, and F/X wizard Yoshihiro Nishimura, and actress Eihi Shiina (the star of Takashi Miike's notorious, *Audition*) in attendance, and dressed to abandon. From the beginning to the end of the film + performance, the crowd went suitably wild. Some might complain that FanTasia never contextualizes

its most outrageous films, but, almost to a person, the crowd attends the festival to appreciate big screen presentations and to share the excitement and fun of deliberately ridiculous extravaganzas like *Tokyo Gore Police*. As usual, there were many interesting Korean, Japanese and Chinese-language films in the programme and this year showcased three films by one of the world's greatest action genre directors, Johnnie To—*Mad Detective*, *Sparrow*, and the last, and by far the most successful of the three parts of *Triangle* (the others being directed by Tsui Hark and Ringo Lam). We can thank Hong Kong cinema aficionado King-wei Chu for getting veteran martial artist, Gordon Liu to host the screening of a new 35mm print of Shaw Brothers' 1985 *Disciples of the 36th Chamber* and this year's most notable retrospective spotlight was devoted to Nikkatsu Action films of the 1960s, a three-film tribute, mounted to coincide with a new FAB press book.² The twelfth edition of FanTasia was also notable for premiering some excellent new European works, including the finest new vampire movie seen in these parts for a while, Tomas Alfredson's *Let the Right One In*, from Sweden, and two films from Spain, the amazingly complex time travel narrative, *Timecrimes*, directed by Nacho Vigalondo, and Jaime Balagueró and Paco Plaza's shocking *[REC]* which begins as a reality TV episode and ends as a zombie nightmare. Because it is considered to be a "popular" film festival, FanTasia tends to miss out on government funding, and it is only because of the persistence of its President, Pierre Corbeil, who seems willing to prop it up with his own money, that it keeps returning every July. Unfortunately, mainstream distributors are unwilling to give the festival the premieres it deserves—this summer, both *Wall-e* and *The Dark Night* were released during July—and FanTasia did not have enough "clout" to steal these titles away from TIFF. Nonetheless, the fan base ensures that more people attend per screening than any other Montreal film festival, by far, and it is, arguably, the only local film festival that clearly fulfills its mandate.

Most Montreal cinephiles would no doubt argue that the FNC is the best local film festival, and, it is hard to argue against these claims. Since it falls after TIFF on the festival calendar, the organizers are able to attract many of the best new films available; including many that had shown at the Cannes International Film Festival earlier in the year. This year, I counted 105 new feature films showing at the FNC. Not

surprisingly, many of these were from France or Belgium (23) and Quebec (20). Indeed, if one then adds films from the rest of North America (USA 13, and Canada, 7) and Europe (27), it leaves only 16 spots for the rest of the world: 3 from Latin America, only 1 from Africa (an Algeria/France co-production), and the rest from Asia (12, including 5 from the Middle East). If it were not for Julien Fonfrède's edgy, *Temps Ø* series, there would have been only 2, not 7, East Asian films in the 37th FNC, Aditya Assarat's *Wonderful Town* (Thailand), one of the 19 first or second feature films in the Louve d'Or competition, and the much-awaited Cannes prize winner in 2007, Naomi Kawase's *The Mourning Forest* (Japan/France). There were many excellent films in this year's programme, including a number that have since been released, Ari Folman's *Valse avec Bashir* (Israel), Kelly Reichardt's *Wendy and Lucy* (USA), and, Luc Bourdon's *La mémoire des anges* (Quebec). With my heavy work schedule in October at Concordia University, coupled with my jury duty at the FNC—Focus on Canadian and Quebec shorts—and the fact that I was out-of-town for the first 3 days of the festival, I was not able to watch some films, including Steve McQueen's *Hunger* (UK), Matteo Garrone's *Gomorra* (Italy), Kim Ji-woon's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (Korea), Sergey Dvortsevov's *Tulpan* (Kazakhstan/Germany) and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Tokyo Sonata* (Japan). Interestingly, all of these titles are supposed to be released in the Province—3 of them by Séville Pictures. But, the way things are going—ExCentris cinemas closing their doors, small distributors like the long running New Yorker Films going bankrupt—I would be surprised if they ever show up on our screens again. They might go straight to DVD.

Perhaps the best model for a smaller film festival like the FNC, which caters to a mainly “art house” audience, is the New York Film Festival. This year, the smallest, and arguably the best, film festival on the continent showed only 28 feature films, 16 of which had premiered at Cannes. Eight of their choices have been released in Montreal, and I have seen all of them. But, I have only been able to see two others: Antonio Campos' very interesting high school drama, *Afterschool* (USA), which I saw at the FNC and one of the 2008 Cannes selections which I most wanted to see, Jia Zhangke's *24 City* (China), which I caught at the Cinémathèque Québécoise's brilliant Chinese series at the end of last year. Of the remainder, there are two South American films, Lucretia Martel's *The Headless Woman*

(Argentina), and Chilean Pablo Larrain's *Tony Manero* that will probably never show on a Montreal screen. These are exactly the kind of experimental "new cinema," narrative films that should be picked up by the FNC. Too limited in appeal for Hispanic film festivals like Festivalissimo, these films come highly recommended by "film people" like Cinematheque Ontario's James Quant and senior *Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman. But, we do not see them because the FNC has a very limited budget, and is not willing to risk paying the shipping and screening fees for work that will have such a limited audience.

This brings me to a discussion of the film festival which used to screen almost all of the most important films that were not showing at the FNC, Serge Losique's FFM. For people like me, who are actually looking for particular films that interest them, the FFM is still a good festival. This year I saw a couple of excellent films, a 3rd Cinema parable, Eric Khoo's *My Magic* (Singapore), and, Bakur Bakuradze's Bressonian work, *Shultes* (Russia). There were also many good and very good films, but the problem, as always, was in finding them. It is only when one possesses some kind of pass allowing one to leave a really awful experience, and try another film, with time on one's hands, that the experience can be worthwhile. Also, it is high time that the powers that be (Mr. Losique and Ms. Cauchard) admit that their festival is one that, while it certainly covers the whole world—and continues to do this very successfully—is not one that necessarily shows the most experimental and creative films on offer. It attracts spectators of all ethnic groups. One finds Chinese audiences for Chinese films and Russians for Russian films, for example. And the quality of many films is very good. But these films, including the winner of the Grand Prix des Amériques in 2008, *Departures* (Japan), which also won the most recent Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and swept the recent Japanese Academy Awards, are more mainstream than most of the films which show at the FNC and New York Film festivals; perhaps, we could call them "middle-brow" rather than high-brow films. In this regard, the FFM plays a very important role. But in the absence of some of the most important recent feature films on Montreal screens—in festivals or in release—we pine for earlier times when the FFM played this role much better.³

I will conclude by noting a positive recent development involving Celluloid Dreams, and the U.S. DVD company Criterion in the worldwide online distribution of classic and contemporary films through “The Auteurs,” <http://theauteurs.com>. They currently have over 1500 films in their catalogue, including 42 from 2008-09, but virtually none of them can be accessed in our “region,” for copyright reasons. Thus, I still can’t legally watch in Montreal, even in my own home, 30 potentially great new films from Celluloid Dreams, 20 of which have never been screened here, including the aforementioned *The Headless Woman* and Lisandro Alonso’s *Liverpool* (also from Argentina), Hong Sang-soo’s *Night and Day* and Kim So-yong’s *Treeless Mountain* (both from Korea), and the Oscar-nominated *Revanche* directed by Götz Spielman (Austria), as well as 10 which have not been released, including three mentioned above which were on view at the FNC, *Tokyo Sonata* (Japan), *Wonderful Town* (Thailand), and Steve McQueen’s *Hunger* (UK). Hopefully the rights will come our way, and we will be able to legally stream all of the best films being made anywhere in the world, in the not-too-distant future. But, purists like myself still want the real “cinema” big screen experience, shared with an appreciative audience, however small it is.

Notes:

1. The other eleven competitive “category 1” film festivals, recognized as such by the International Federation of Film Producers Associations are Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Moscow, San Sebastián, Tokyo, Shanghai, Karlovy Vary (which used to alternate bi-annually with Moscow), Mar del Plata, Cairo and Locarno (since 2002).
2. See my online article, published by *Offscreen* in a special Fantasia issue, Volume 12, Issue 11, Nov. 2008 http://www.offscreen.com/biblio/pages/essays/nikkatsu_action/
3. The one really bright light for off-mainstream film viewing experiences in Montreal continues to be the great Cinémathèque Québécoise. They somehow manage to stage wonderful series such as the contemporary and historical Chinese series at the end of last year on amazingly limited budgets. Long may they thrive?