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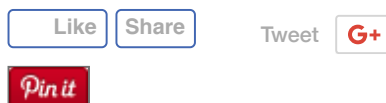


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## Found in Translation

### *59th Cannes Fest Offers International Visions*

By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Jun 22, 2006



#### Features



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Part of the excitement of Cannes has always been its international flavor, the notion that for 12 days in May in this little Mediterranean town bursting at the seams you can sample films from far-flung corners of the globe, from Turkey, to Romania, to Finland, to Tadjikistan-and now, this year, Paraguay. In the 59th edition, *Babel* from Mexican *auteur* Alejandro González Iñárritu snagged the award for Best Director-but from its first press screening it took on special meaning. Shot in four languages on three continents, this globe-straddling film became emblematic of the festival itself: an assemblage of cinematic visions in a babble of tongues, with precious little lost in translation. As González Iñárritu put it during a roundtable for journos (neatly dispatching a steak between answers), "Cinema is today's Esperanto."

The language of anger and anxiety at the current state of the world, heard across a broad spectrum of films, seemed to dominate the festival this year. Though *Babel* feels like a tinderbox ready to blow, in some ways it was the least despairing in this category. It posits the notion (which some critics found sentimental and pandering) that despite being condemned, per the Biblical tale, to a hopeless lack of communication, we are, in fact, all connected; a single, random act in a distant corner of a desert can reverberate globally, powerfully affecting people's lives.

This third-and apparently final-collaboration between González Iñárritu and screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga follows the model of their *Amores Perros* and *21 Grams*: Multiple intercut narratives are linked by a single tragedy. In *Babel*, one ill-advised sale of a gun unleashes far-reaching consequences, when two young brothers, practicing their marksmanship in a remote area of the Moroccan desert, inadvertently wound an American tourist (Cate Blanchett) who's traveling through Morocco with her husband (Brad Pitt, managing an honorable turn as a graying father of two.) Cut to the Mexican nanny back home who looks after the couple's kids; unable to find a substitute sitter, she decides to take them with her across the border to Mexico for her son's wedding, in a car driven by her hotheaded nephew (Gael Garcia Bernal), a recipe for disaster. Meanwhile, in the story least notched into the master theme, a deaf-mute adolescent girl in Tokyo struggles to escape her solitude through sexual overtures to every passing male, whether a schoolmate, a dentist or a cop.

*Babel* invites awe through its sheer amplitude. Avoiding touristy condescension, it convincingly uses local non-pros in three different countries. And technically it's a stunner: Using a range of film stocks for each locale, DP Rodrigo Prieto plays the arid desert against the steely blue palette of Tokyo. In a much-cited sequence, the soundtrack flips between blasting rock and silence during a disco night to reveal the deaf-mute girl's sensory isolation and point up her need for connection. Narrative tension is sustained by withholding till the end the precise connection of the Tokyo story with the others. Still, critics were divided, some finding the largely positive resolutions facile. (It takes a taste of Third World violence to heal a troubled marriage? Oh really?) Another cavil: The stories felt created to feed the thesis, and not nearly as authentic as the geographic locales. But one of the film's ideas post-9/11 resonated widely: Who can feel insulated anymore from the world's violence?

If Lars von Trier was last season's America-basher, in this edition Richard Linklater delivered a double whammy with the competition film *Fast Food Nation* and Un Certain Regard entry *A Scanner Darkly*, a Philip K. Dick adaptation and futuristic nightmare about an America controlled by narco-terrorists. *Fast Food*, a fictionalized version of Eric Schlosser's expose, takes a cleaver to our meat-packing industry, affirming it's poisoning the world. As an industry flack (Bruce Willis in a spot-on cameo) puts it, "Americans just need to grow up. We all have to eat a little shit now and then."

As in many films in Cannes 2006, Linklater chooses the omnibus form: the story of a fast-food waitress, who wises up about what she's serving; a company innocent played by Greg Kinnear, who must decide whether to kick ass or get promoted; the illegal immigrants who get assigned the vilest tasks. ("I found you a spot on the killing floor," a supervisor tells a young Mexican woman.) Is the multiple-story trend dictated by the fear that a single one would fail to hold viewer attention in today's fractured world? Sadly, Schlosser's original non-fiction never quite coheres into a feature; its characters seem stand-ins for concepts. But to his credit, Linklater mounted a guerilla operation to shoot on location in abattoirs in Mexico (though not, of course, in the U.S). I say, God bless him for putting his message out there with enough brio to cut down Big Mac consumption wherever the film screens.

If consumerism is despoiling America, a vicious inhumanity grinds down the little guy at the center of *Lights in the Dusk* from Finnish gloomster Aki Kaurismaki. Koistinen is a security guard, derided by his co-workers and living in near-total isolation in a bunker-like space (decorated with castoffs from dumps; the three-headed lamp is priceless). He hopes to form his own security firm, but is laughed off by the bank, then used by the blonde moll of a "businessman" as a patsy to set up a robbery in the galleria he patrols, ending up in prison through no fault of his own. The Kaurismaki style is on full display: the poker faces; compulsive smoking; short scenes with fades to black; stylized drabness, with gels and spots used to create intense hues-and, of course, the canine cameo. Many tableaux evoke the paintings of Hopper, and a gorgeous soundtrack mixes tangos with garage rock. But though the figure of Koistinen suggests a neo-Wozzeck, the film feels less a feature than a novella. Ever irreverent, at the press conference Kaurismaki asserted he sometimes shoots his films dead-drunk, adding, "I leave it to you to decide which ones."

In addition to *Babel* from the newly created Paramount Vantage division, Paramount Classics offered the must-see doc *An Inconvenient Truth*, in which Al Gore counts the ways the planet is degraded by CO<sub>2</sub> exhalations-and offers a measure of hope about how to reverse, or at least halt the damage. Gore's brilliance so eclipses our current D.C. clan, it also unleashed wild hopes around the Croisette that he might contemplate a second run. Just how much the world needs a few good men/women in charge was demonstrated by *The Right of the Weakest*, the dark new film from Lucas Belvaux which examines a society ready to implode. Laid off from work by outsourcing, a fundamentally decent group of former Belgian steelworkers decide to rob the till of the factory they helped build. "What have we got to live for? Is it worse than prison?" one of them asks. "The film is not an apology for violence," said Belvaux at the press conference, "but the weakest can't be heard. The political authorities have abdicated their authority."

### **The language of memory and history**

Ken Loach's 13th trip to Cannes turned out to be his lucky one. The multi-national jury topped by Chinese auteur Wong Kar-Wai (itself a mini-Babel) unanimously tapped *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* for the Palme d'Or. The film chronicles Ireland's 1920 fight for independence through the story of two brothers who battle the British "Black and Tan" squads, but, when civil war erupts, tragically turn against each other. Though the political message resonates, and Cillian Murphy shines as a young Irish doctor, the film seemed somewhat pallid and lacking in energy. ("An off-year," remarked one American programmer about the 59th fest.) In his acceptance speech at the Lumière Theatre in Cannes, Loach said, "If we tell the truth about the past, maybe we can tell the truth about the present." About Iraq, maybe?

The entire male cast of *Indigenes* helmed by Rachid Bouchareb was awarded the prize for Best Actor. Set in 1943, the film follows the fate of heroic North African soldiers forgotten by history, who fought in the French army against the Nazis, along with 130,000 other "natives." *Pan's Labyrinth* from Mexican Guillermo del Toro (*The Devil's Backbone*) revisits Spain during the

Franco era, infusing history with fantastical elements involving an ancient satyr. While in *The Caiman*, Nanni Moretti plumbed more recent history to savage former Italian premier Silvio Berlusconi.

### **The language of the body**

Of course, Cannes has always been sex central. But 2006 proved a lollapalooza. Leading the pack of envelope-pushers was John Cameron Mitchell with his much-anticipated *Shortbus*, the name of an underground sex emporium, calling up, for those of long memory, New York's now defunct Plato's Retreat. The high-spirited opener sets the tone: The camera pans over a stylized mock-up of Manhattan's cityscape; invades the apartment of a fellow in the plough position, attempting to give himself a blow job; moves on to a naked couple seemingly running through the positions of the Kama Sutra; and on to a dominatrix with a dildo, whose client climaxes at the expense of a Jackson Pollock on the wall. And that's just for starters. There's even a storyline of sorts, involving an Asian/Canadian married-couples counselor on a quest for her first orgasm, and a gay couple seeking to "open" their relationship (leading to a hilarious threesome in which "The Star-spangled Banner" gets sung into someone's bum). Good dirty fun and generally well-received, with critics solemnly intoning about breaching new frontiers and the entry of porn into the mainstream (well, in San Francisco if not Peoria). This viewer found *Shortbus* pornographic only when it attempted to explore the characters' emotions.

Truly, it was hard this year to find a film that did not involve explicit sex: macho and violent in *Climates* by Turkish *auteur* Nuri Bilge Ceylan, about the unraveling of a couple; frankly lubricious in *Les Anges Exterminateurs* by Jean-Claude Brisseau (from the Directors' Fortnight section), about his own real-life casting couch and women's supposed pleasure in erotic transgression; a relentless slog in the Chinese *Summer Palace* by Lou Ye (which had not yet cleared the homeland censors before Cannes), about a college girl's crazy love for a fellow student.

### **The language of women**

The women's view has rarely been so eloquent as in Pedro Almodóvar's *Volver*. The film took the award for Best Screenplay (remaining front-runner till zero hour for the Palme d'Or), along with the prize for Best Actress, awarded to the ensemble of women—a precedent breaker—led by Penelope Cruz. *Volver* resonates because, unlike the more conceptual approach of competing films, it emanates from Almodóvar's gut, his deep personal memories of the female community that surrounded him as a child, topped off with his trademark baroque twists—women, as he revealed in a roundtable lunch, who gave him his appetite for storytelling. The film's porous line between living and dead, mixing fantasy with pathos, is haunting and strangely comforting. And the gorgeous Cruz is reinvented by the Spanish *auteur* as an Anna Magnani-style Mother Courage, complete with padded backside and killer cleavage.

Among many other films reflecting a female perspective were Jury Prize winner *Red Road* from Brit

Andrea Arnold, starring Kate Dickie, and *Babel* and its two standout actresses: Cate Blanchett, luminous and classy, even though she's either in agony or passed out in a village hut, and Adriana Barraza as the Mexican nanny. Also, of course, the much-anticipated Kirsten Dunst starrer *Marie Antoinette* from Sofia Coppola, which re-envisioned the period through a modern lens, complete with rap music, and divided critics like no other film this season.

That American programmer's comment about an "off year" echoed the opinion of many journo's, frustrated at not being able to embrace an undisputed masterwork. Yet even in an "off year," even with the indignities suffered by wearers of the lower badges (one journo claimed he identified with the cattle in *Fast Food Nation*), even with the dearth of prestige party invites extended to the lower orders, even with the pathetic celeb hounds posted on ladders before the famed red carpet-and yes, even though my \$2,000 new Portege Toshiba laptop was stolen from my rented apartment (by one of many savvy thieves who arrive for the festivities)-Cannes remains the queen of festivals, run for 12 days like a small pre-Revolution state, and unequalled as a barometer of world cinema. This year Chinese cinema took a back seat to Spanish-language and Romanian films, while American *auteurs* Linklater and John Cameron Mitchell made waves. And the French? With the exception of Xavier Giannoli's lovely *Quand J'etais Chanteur*, well, what was with the French and the home product? On hiatus, it seems.

And finally, of course, there's always the thrill of discovering that one jewel. This year, by broad consensus, it was a German film from the Directors' Fortnight called *Summer of '04* from Stefan Krohmer, a young helmer positioned for a brilliant future. *Summer* is a chamber piece with the confidence to explore all the permutations of a single story, versus the multiple-story trend. In a *Claire's Knee*-style setup, a precocious 12-year-old girl comes to visit her boyfriend and his attractive fortyish parents in their vacation home on the Baltic coast, drastically altering the family dynamic. Enter a dishy, mildly mysterious stranger, who may or may not be courting the girl-and who ignites passionate desire in the older woman. What follows plays out with a subtlety and suspense that teases the viewer at every turn, delivering in the last scene the sting in the scorpion's tale. With any justice, *Summer of '04* will be headed this way soon.

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