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45th New York Film Festival

Drake Stutesman

New York City, September 28–October 14, 2007

The 45th New York Film Festival had a strong selection from illustrious directors: Sidney Lumet, Béla Tarr, Alexander Sokurov, Catherine Breillat, Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, Brian De Palma, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Jia Zhangke, John Landis, Wes Anderson, Todd Haynes, Gus Van Sant, and the Cohens, among many others, all showed new work. Dominant themes were faith, women and dead children, comedy, adaptations, and father/son Oedipal fears. The last seamed the work of the older directors—especially Lumet, Chabrol, and Rohmer, now in their seventies and eighties—but it appeared in younger directors’ films too—notably that of the Cohens. Their *No Country for Old Men* was by far the strongest entry, and its first hour was a state-of-the-art blood-and-guts chase story, a perfect killing machine called cinema. The

film later dissipated into sophistic, what-is-life-about philosophy-ridden dialogue that carried a new kind of Oedipal subplot. The older man (here Tommy Lee Jones as the baffled sheriff) survived the “deadly son” (here the Terminator-like killer, Javier Bardem) but, then, forlornly longed for a mythic father’s comfort. This narrative—of implacable death and worn-out, nostalgic older men—became a suspicious metaphor for the Iraq war vs. World War II. The Cohens shouldn’t waste their art on parables when what we need from them is a direct Iraq war hit. War itself was little addressed except in the settings of Sokurov’s almost fablelike, spare *Alexandra*, set in a Chechnyan desert army camp, and De Palma’s unfortunate “antiwar” Iraq film, *Redacted*, the first war feature from a well-known U.S. director. His fiction-

alized version of a well-publicized, real rape and killing, structured as clips of videos, international TV reports, and Internet sites, is a morass of the worst army-platoon-gone-crazy clichés. No contribution to the anti-war effort, it trivializes the war as simply a place where psychopathology is acted out.

A few films were notable for their directors' pursuit of originality. Todd Haynes, one of American cinema's most interesting talents, lost the mark in his ambitious and ironic attempt at a biographic kaleidoscope of Bob Dylan's life, *I'm Not There*. Haynes states that we shouldn't be trying to "find out who we are" (which he sees as the philosophy of the last few decades), but rather we should be "reinventing ourselves," and he conceptualizes Dylan as the ultimate self-reinventor. The film is a collage of the supposed Dylan inventions—as husband, as cultural icon, as Billy the Kid, as a black runaway child, as folk singer—played by six actors, including an excellent Cate Blanchett. But none of the versions can carry this grand scheme. The film has no center. Haynes's rendition of Dylan's 1960s and 1970s are only gimmicky and, more, he promotes the ingrained prejudices of those eras as the film borders on racism and sexism. I think Haynes's best work is to come and will be in his take on contemporary reinvention, something far truer to his generation than to Dylan's.

Carlos Reygadas's film, *Stellet Lichet* (*Silent Light*), about an illicit affair within a Mennonite community in Northern Mexico, was fluidly

constructed, using monumental tableau shots set up within or against vast panoramas. Yet, despite this size, Reygadas managed to subdue its largesse in favor of stressing its formality, certainly a feat in itself. These orchestrations had the immediate feel of Carl Dreyer's forms and, indeed, Reygadas was attempting to re-create, in plot as well as in shape, Dreyer's magnificent, uncanny, and somehow profoundly realistic *Ordet* (DK, 1955), one of the world's greatest films. Though *Stellet Lichet* lacks pretension, Reygadas could not carry off this unheard-of task. He didn't anchor the narrative in a real examination of faith, which is *Ordet's* absolute groundwork, but rather let the Mennonite community stand in for "spiritual." He thus never touched the nature of belief and, thus, never touched the arcane actions of resurrection. He let the weight of this phenomenon ride loosely on a hackneyed version of a man torn between a doting lover and a doting wife. In *Ordet* the characters are entwined in faith as a social habit and faith as a truly weird, almost repellent mystery, but in *Stellet Lichet* none of this is explored. Rather the lover has sudden supernatural, messianic powers, which the script has never introduced.

Another exploitation of "faith," was in South Korean director, Lee Chang-dong's *Secret Sunshine*. This film plunges into the process of grief by following a mother's hysterical pain as she grieves the murder of her child and goes to enormous lengths to assuage her guilt. The actress, Jeon Do-yeon, gives a great performance

but the script has every cliché about a troubled woman (she has no friends, is a bad mother, and is superficial in her choices, etc.) and many narrative holes that could easily have been filled. This suggests that the writer-director does not really understand what he is trying to do in this portrayal of suffering, which is a shame because the storyline's potential is huge. The film also taps into the nature of faith but views it only in the most banal terms and, worse, throws away a moment worthy of the Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor, when the mother, a newly born-again Christian, confronts her son's jailed killer only to find that he has

also found God's forgiveness in a new conversion before she can bring him her own.

Finally, a celebration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Ridley Scott's (also Oedipal!) *Blade Runner* (US, 1982) and the release of its last Final Cut (the seventh version) included input from academics as well as the film's art director, production designer, and screenwriter and from the audience in what became a three-hour discussion. This was a welcome synthesis of what a film festival can offer: a conglomerate of ideas, opinions, experiences, and belief in cinema. I hope NYFF plans more of these kinds of events.

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