

# Toronto 2012

By Brandon Wee

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## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2012

Trends at TIFF's 37<sup>th</sup> edition (6-16 September 2012) weren't hard to spot. While its strength in sampling established global cinemas prevailed, it also strove to profile nascent filmmaking movements. The festival chose Mumbai to front its 'City to City' program with ten non-Bollywood Hindi-language films—a nod to India's rising independent filmmaking scene, but also likely a tribute to India's filmmaking centenary in 2013. Special mention also goes to the rare North Korean presence, with three films from (or involving) the hermitic state. On the one hand, there were the political documentaries: José Luis García's *The Girl from the South* (profiled below) and Marc Wiese's *Camp 14: Total Control Zone* (2012), in which the first self-exiled North Korean recounts the ordeals of his life and escape. On the other hand, there was North Korea's first foreign-funded feature film: Anja Daelemans', Nicholas Bonner's and Kim Gwang Hun's *Comrade Kim Goes Flying* (2012), a delightful romantic comedy about a coal miner who dreams of becoming a trapeze artist. Ten other remarkable titles were:

### **The Act of Killing (Joshua Oppenheimer, Christine Cynn and Anonymous, Denmark/Norway/United Kingdom 2012)**

At the request of the filmmakers, a gallery of rogues gaily recounts their salad days as paramilitaries during Indonesia's 1960s anti-communist purge by dramatizing their executions in a campy movie. But the most revealing aspect in Joshua Oppenheimer's and Christine Cynn's controversial profile is the group's admission that American popular culture—especially the machismo of the era's Hollywood heroes—had inspired how they tortured and killed scores. The fact that Western governments such as the USA were also complicit in Indonesia's genocide makes things doubly ironic. Noted documentarists Werner Herzog and Errol Morris are credited as the documentary's executive producers.

### **Cloud Atlas (Tom Tykwer and Andy & Lana Wachowski, Germany 2012)**

An ambitious project by all accounts, Tom Tykwer's and the Wachowski siblings' adaptation of David Mitchell's 2004 novel weaves six stories set between past and future epochs and across several cultural dimensions in a stark reminder of how connected humanity is. Supported by a gallery of international stars playing multiple characters across all stories, the effect is markedly Buddhist: the actions of those living in the past will influence those reborn in the future. Despite its genre bending feats and triumph in production design, this film would have been better digested in serialized doses than presented in one piece.

### **Bwakaw (Jun Robles Lana, The Philippines 2012)**

Jun Robles Lana's latest feature is a beautiful character study that thankfully doesn't salivate over the societal squalor associated with a branch of Filipino cinema popular today. Eddie Garcia plays Rene, an embittered bachelor who has chosen seclusion and a canine stray as balms for old age. Although no longer in denial about his sexuality, his sheltered outlook inevitably botches his decision to stray outside his bubble for companionship. Garcia, who must be at least an octogenarian, looks and moves a few decades younger. The film's title is Tagalog slang for "greedy" and is the name of Rene's loyal dog.

### **The Cowards Who Looked to the Sky (Tanada Yuki, Japan 2012)**

A modest if over-charted drama, Tanada Yuki's adaptation of Kubo Misumi's eponymous 2010 novel maps the rifts and chasms between several young adults and their relations in a small town. Pressured by her mother-in-law to bear a child, a housewife's cosplay obsession leads her to regular trysts with a guileless high school boy. Meanwhile, the boy's more sensible classmate struggles to care for his grandmother and deal with his absent mother's debts while surviving on minimum wages. The two strands cross when all parties are involved in a humiliating scandal. Tabata Tomoko leads this outstanding ensemble as the restless housewife.

### **Dormant Beauty (Marco Bellocchio, France/Italy 2012)**

Without taking sides, Marco Bellocchio skillfully sculpts a polyptych of stories around the true case of the late Eluana Englaro, who was comatose for 17 years after a car accident. Set in early 2009, each story's

dramatic arc uses Englaro's final days to illustrate how her case had gripped Italy whole, when her father won his long fight to take her off life support. European actors Isabelle Huppert and Tony Servillo star in two of the more remarkable segments as public personalities wrestling with their experiences with euthanasia. The film's Italian title sounds more poetic: *Bella addormentata*, meaning 'Sleeping Beauty'.

### **The Girl from the South (José Luis García, Argentina 2012)**

In many ways, José Luis García's profile of South Korean teacher, activist and politician Lim Su-kyung continues what he started more than 20 years ago, when he first documented her appearance at a 1989 global meeting for communist youth in Pyongyang. North Korea then saw a valiant Lim as a powerful symbol for reunification, but at home she was branded a criminal for daring to broker revolutionary peace as an individual. Traveling to South Korea two decades later, García now presents Lim as a woman jaded by time and circumstance, their cordial reunion nonetheless beset by cultural and political apprehensions.

### **In the Name of Love (Luu Huynh, Vietnam 2012)**

A sterile fisherman's hopes for a child spur his wife to secretly approach a fellow villager to impregnate her. But her folly soon engulfs her family when the interloper—a belligerent, boozing brute—lays claim to the child. Set in a floating village, Luu Huynh's bruising domestic drama escalates neatly into a thriller in its last act. Luu's admission that this film was a labour of love was laced with tragic irony: in an interview he revealed how lead actress Dinh Y Nhung was so committed to her role that she kept her pregnancy a secret, but miscarried during filming.

### **Penance (Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Japan 2012)**

After a primary school girl is murdered, her mother lays a curse on four of her classmates for being unreliable witnesses: unless the killer is caught, they must atone for their complicity. Recut as a feature from a five-part television serial, Kurosawa Kiyoshi's adaptation of Minato Kanae's eponymous 2009 novel catches up with the girls as adults, each still disturbed by the past. Although free from supernatural elements, its horrors of human frailties easily betray Kurosawa's existentialist signature. Koizumi Kyoko leads the ensemble as the mother, with Aoi Yu, Koike Eiko, Ando Sakura and Ikewaki Chizuru in key supporting roles.

### **Pieta (Kim Ki-duk, South Korea 2012)**

An inscrutable middle-aged woman insinuates herself into a young man's life and slowly but surely destroys his sadistic nature. Claiming to be his mother who had abandoned him as a baby, she endures great indignity at his hands to seek atonement for her neglect. Kim's latest film may be dressed with Christian allusions and literary slants toward their perverse relationship, but its tenor is also heavily perfumed with the scent of vengeance that has given Korean cinema considerable charm. Along with Bong Joon-ho's *Mother* (2009), Kim's take on maternity would rank easily as the mother of all Korean mother films.

### **Shanghai (Dibakar Banerjee, India 2012)**

An ambitious town's reputation hangs in the balance after assassins brazenly target a visiting social activist fighting its government's lust for industrial development. Abhay Deol plays the square civil servant tasked to investigate the case independently—which includes questioning the local police, but his indifference turns into curiosity when he detects the stench of the regime's rot. Although it feels like an abridgment of a grander narrative, Dibakar Banerjee's low-key political thriller still satisfies as a murder mystery. Based on Vassilis Vassilikos' 1966 novel *Z*, the film's unusual title refers to the fictitious town's aspirations to become a burgeoning megalopolis.

## **Author Information**

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