

Toronto 2013

By Brandon Wee

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TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

Toronto's 38th edition (5–15 September 2013) was as big and diverse as its ambitions allowed, but its stubborn public image partial to Euro-American content continues to weaken its “international” status. The festival hasn't struck a respectable balance between indulging the puffery of dominant film industries and supporting lesser-known cinemas. Indeed, this year's milestones went largely unplugged. There were encores: at least five directors – Hong Sang-soo, Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Kim Ki-duk, Brillante Mendoza and Sono Sion – returned with films for the second year running. There was discontinuity: Miyazaki Hayao and Tsai Ming-liang delivered what could be their last features after retiring. There was politics that ordained merit: no film was as insincerely hyped as *12 Years a Slave*, Steve McQueen's take on Solomon Northup's 1853 autobiography about chattel slavery – a lifeless adaptation writ large given this skeleton's dead weight. On the other hand, here were ten films that flew under the radar:

The Bit Player (Jeffrey Jeturian, The Philippines 2013)

It's hard to imagine a film about television background actors as anything but comedic, but Jeffrey Jeturian's glimpse at the lowest rung of the thespian chain also insists on compassion for its denizens. Vilma Santos plays a careworn single mother who scores her big break when she lands a bit part in a popular soap. While the serial's behind-the-scenes antics supply the film's laughs, it is fellow filmmaker Marlon Rivera's pesky turn as its harried director that fuels much of the drama. The film's Tagalog name uses the Anglicized loanword *Ekstra*, which differs in meaning from its English title.

The Fake (Yeon Sang-ho, South Korea 2013)

In his second animated feature, Yeon Sang-ho surpasses his bleak chronicle of juvenile bullying in *The King of Pigs* (2011) with a darker tale about the vagaries of morality. In an unswept hamlet, gifters masked as evangelicals convince its residents to decamp for a dam construction, but only the community's violent boozier (voiced by filmmaker Yang Ik-June) sees through the con. When none of the faithful believe his doubts, he decides to take matters into his own hands. With an urgent story for the times expressed through skilful character animation, Yeon's saga ranks among the festival's best films this year.

Intruders (Noh Young-seok, South Korea 2013)

A writer retreats to a pension in the mountains to work in solitude, but is thwarted at every turn by gangs of strangers who prey on his kindness. Once the first body surfaces, paranoia and prejudice between all parties pour forth in abundance for relations to snowball toward calamity. There's a fair bit of narrative clutter that could be excised, but Noh Young-seok's second feature after his acclaimed *Daytime Drinking* (2008) is otherwise a taut and riveting tale that recalls some of the best winter mayhem thrillers around. Like the bitter cold, this one doesn't let go once it bites.

The Lunchbox (Ritesh Batra, India/France/Germany 2013)

Mumbai's unique tradition of tiffin lunch deliveries is the inspiration for Ritesh Batra's seductive feature debut, in which a blind romance develops between two strangers in epistolary fashion. When a neglected housewife's (Nimrat Kaur) tiffin meant for her husband is misdirected to a lonesome widower (Irrfan Khan), a passionate exchange of missives sprouts between the lovers, who stash them in the receptacles. An audio glitch at the film's gala screening allowed Batra and Khan to regale the audience with the culture of tiffin couriers. Unlike the fortuitous error committed in the film, *dabbawalas* are renowned for rarely getting deliveries wrong.

Moebius (Kim Ki-duk, South Korea 2013)

Kim Ki-duk's laconic nineteenth feature recalls his provocative output in the early 2000s, although it also heightens the naked distress. A fantasy parable enacted against Korean society's rigid patriarchy, it's a

cinematic story of a mother who severs her teenaged son's penis to spite her cheating husband. But it's the effect of the boy's humiliation compounded by his father's guilt that sends the narrative spinning cleverly on its head. The irony of sterilizing a film about emasculation was plainly lost on South Korean censors, who demanded excisions to guarantee a release. Only the Venice Film Festival has screened it uncut.

Ningen (Guillaume Giovanetti and Çağla Zencirci, Japan/Turkey 2013)

Following their Pakistan-set feature debut *Noor* (2012), Guillaume Giovanetti and Çağla Zencirci present a beguiling Kyoto-set love story forged by the myths of Japanese folklore. Here, they interpret the legend of the fox and raccoon dog – known for their multiple guises to trick greedy humans – through the contemporary allegory of a beleaguered company president who checks into a facility after a nervous breakdown. Like their first film, a similar ethnography and documentary-inspired strategy is at play, with real life husband and wife Yoshino Masahiro and Wajima Masako playing embellished versions of themselves as central characters. The film's Japanese title means "human".

Real (Kurosawa Kiyoshi, Japan 2013)

The brand of cognitive horror that has defined many of Kurosawa Kiyoshi's films achieves demonic heights in his adaptation of Inui Rokuro's 2011 novel, *A Perfect Day for Plesiosaur*. In this romantic science fiction tale, a young man undergoes a high-tech procedure to enter his comatose lover's mind to learn why she attempted suicide, with startling results. The same conceit of a sentient human infiltrating the unconscious mind of another to influence reality was explored to frightening effect in Tarsem Singh's *The Cell* (2000), but aided by terrific SFX, Kurosawa's take has enough surprises to keep this an enthralling ride.

Stray Dogs (Tsai Ming-liang, Taiwan/France 2013)

Tsai Ming-liang's purported final feature retains all the visual and narrative aesthetics that has defined his style, yet whose commercial stigma has apparently frustrated his will to carry on. Effectively a companion piece to his enchanting *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), it observes a vagrant family living in Taipei's abject crevices. Lee Kang-sheng plays a single father who works a menial street job while leaving his two young children to their innocent devices. There are several political swipes in the mix, but this is Tsai's most literal story – and an elegant swan song if indeed retirement awaits him.

This is Sanlitun (Róbert Ingi Douglas, China/Iceland/Ireland 2013)

For all its wit, Icelander Róbert Ingi Douglas' yarn about two British immigrants (Carlos Ottery and Chris Loton) at various phases of their love affairs with China doesn't quite hit the spot. At its heart is a middle-aged misfit whose plans to strike it rich and reunite with his ex-wife in Beijing are foiled by several oddball characters. Named after Beijing's chic hangout, China-based co-writers Douglas, Loton and Ottery have mined an array of foreign blind spots of the Middle Kingdom to fashion this comedy of errors.

Trap Street (Vivian Qu, China 2013)

While mapping the streets of Nanjing, a young cartographer (Lu Yulai) pursues an attractive woman (He Wenchao) whom he spies frequenting an alleyway residence that is curiously missing from all official maps. But no sooner does their relationship develop than suspicious parties induce him into fearful retreat. Producer-turned-director Vivian Qu's feature debut about a romance-turned-nightmare has a solid premise, but a miscalculation to underplay its potential as a thriller renders the result flat. Coincidentally, Bill Condon's *The Fifth Estate* – the festival's opening thriller about Julian Assange and WikiLeaks – was also a casualty of taste despite espionage being all the rage now.

Author Information

Brandon WEE lives in Toronto. He has written for *Asia Pacific Arts* (Los Angeles), *Cineaste* (New York), *Cinema Scope* (Toronto), *Ricepaper* (Vancouver), and *Senses of Cinema* (Melbourne).