

## Cannes 1998

By Ron Holloway

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No film deserved the Golden Palm -- and the Ecumenical Prize -- more than Theo Angelopoulos's *Eternity and a Day* (Greece-France). Ever since Angelopoulos's *Travelling Players* was awarded the International Critics Prize in the Directors' Fortnight section at the 1975 Cannes festival (he was to receive the FIPRESCI award a half-dozen times more over the next two decades), the Greek filmmaker has been generally referred to as a "critic's director."

The cinema of Theo Angelopoulos is the result of meticulous preparation and teamwork in collaboration with a closely knit production crew. Yorgos Arvanitis, his cameraman from the very beginning, is internationally renown for his long-take sequences, powerful rhythmic movements, and deliberately orchestrated zooms timed with the changing positions of the protagonists. Italian screenwriter Tonino Guerra has been with Angelopoulos for the last six films, ever since *Voyage to Cythera* (Cannes, 1984). Yannis Tsitsopoulos has edited his last four films, for which Eleni Karaindrou has also composed the music.

Voyages, landscapes, and spatial entities can be found at the core of Angelopoulos's cinematic vision. In *Eternity and a Day* Alexander (Bruno Ganz) is putting his affairs in order in his roomy villa, ready to depart for the hospital "on a long voyage" as the pain is no longer bearable. For the moment, however, he has time to reflect on his past, triggered by the letters of his wife Anna (Isabelle Renauld). But the present too has a way of breaking the spell -- in the person of a little Albanian boy. The lad, a street-child who speaks Greek and has left his village in the mountains to earn small-change as a car-window-washer, is befriended by the poet during a police roundup. The gesture restores the cancer victim's feeling for humanity while at the same time evoking images of the past and a painful memory of a departed wife who gave more of her love than he did. In return, the boy "finds" a few new words for the poet-guardian who had lost the will to write.

Although Alexei Gherman's *Khrustalyov, My Car!* (Russia-France), Cannes's most anticipated entry, went away empty-handed, it would be better to withhold judgment on the film until it can be viewed again outside of the rush of a high-powered festival. By far the most complex and intriguing film at Cannes, *Khrustalyov* suffered visibly from Gherman's slow manner of shooting, the inflation of the ruble, and five prolonged interruptions. Finally, after the coffers of no less than eleven separate Russian and French backers were squeezed out of the last kopeck, the St. Petersburg director declared himself satisfied with the latest edited version of a project he had struggled to bring to creative light like a Michelangelo lying on his back at the Sistine Chapel.

This sombre, solemn, melancholic black-and-white film on the theme of the anti-Semitic "Doctors' Plot" of 1952-53 is best viewed as the companion-piece to Gherman's prior film, *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (1982/85), three years on the shelf and voted by Russian critics as one of the "Ten Best Soviet Films of All Time." Set in the early 1930s in provincial Russia near Leningrad (St. Petersburg), and based on the writings of his father, Yury Gherman, *Ivan Lapshin* focused on the exploits of an idealistic police investigator intent on wiping out a band of criminals in accordance with the prevalent Stalinist doctrine of timely liquidation.

Now *Khrustalyov* closes the circle. Just as *Ivan Lapshin* sketched the origins of the Great Terror under Stalin in the early 1930s, *Khrustalyov* defines the dead end into which it has catapulted itself a quarter-century later in the mid-1950s: intrigue and betrayal, night arrests and labour camps, all the preconditions for today's mafia violence, political corruption, and poverty among the masses. One scene will surely go down as unique in Russian film history: the banality of Stalin's death. When the military doctor is recalled from the gulag in a last-minute effort to save the dictator's life, Beria's advice is simply: "Make him fart!" A press on the stomach, Stalin bubbles and foams at the mouth in the throes of death, and the light is extinguished on the Great Terror of 20 million dead. In a final moment of irony, Beria calls for his car ...

The hype for Lars von Trier's *Idiots* (Denmark) began just prior to the festival, when the "Dogma 95" Manifesto was published in *Le Monde*, and it peaked when fellow Dane Thomas Vinterberg was awarded a Special Jury Prize (ex aequo) for *The Celebration*. The manifesto reads less like a modern-day rehash of the Ten Commandments than a list of random recommendations: (1) stick to location shooting, (2) rely on

real sound, (3) always use a hand-held camera, (4) yes to Collor film, (5) no to optics or filters, (6) down with superficial action, (7) up with here-and-now atmosphere, (8) forget genre movies, (9) use 35mm format, and (10) don't credit the director -- rules, however, that both von Trier and Vinterberg arbitrarily broke. Still, as Vinterberg pointed out, "limitations can be a major source of inspiration," all of which adds up to a resounding yes for low-budget productions. Moreover, Dogma 95 offers a ready European response to overblown Hollywood productions while at the same time effectively countering "certain tendencies" -- specifically, the *auteur* in contemporary cinema.

The results of the new dogma? Both *Idiots* (for which the director does take a credit) and *The Celebration* (artificial lighting is once used) come across as tangled, convoluted "group portraits" along the lines of bare-all, sensitivity-seeking documentaries of the 1960s, with stylistic traits reminiscent of prior cinéma-vérité and early *nouvelle vague* films. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in *Idiots*, a portrait of (apparently therapeutic) commune life in which a lonely outsider, Karen (Bodil Jørgenson), is diverted from personal pain (the loss of her child) by the group's "playing idiots" games and gradually comes to the realization that only she can help herself. By contrast, Vinterberg's *The Celebration* digs deeper by exploring the bitter side of family relations on the occasion of a well-to-do father-patriarch's 60th birthday. Here, the sure hand of an -- ok, *auteur* -- director is felt as family secrets surface to puncture the hollow façade of the celebration.

So far as stylistic innovation is concerned, the Chinese continue to impress. In Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Flowers of Shanghai* (Taiwan/Japan) the director's self-styled "quiet naturalism" and the dense, obscure, enigmatic texture of this beautifully mounted film leaves you breathless. The "flowers" referred to in the title -- Crimson, Emerald, Pearl, Jasmine, and Jade -- decorate a house-of-pleasure reserved only for affluent Chinese gentlemen in Shanghai's British Concession at the end of the 19th century. Into a contained world, one with its own rites and rituals, the men come to dine and converse, play mahjong and smoke opium, and otherwise relax with courtesans who, in general, are as witty and sophisticated as the men are vain and profligate.

Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole* (Taiwan/France), which was awarded the FIPRESCI Prize, incorporates the same pessimistic themes he explored in previous award-winning films: the world in decay, fatalistic natural forces, lonely people in isolated surroundings, non-communication down to the most basic level. This time, his moral concerns appear to culminate on a note of finality: the downpour of rain swamping a seedy lower apartment never ends. Yet the performance of Yang Kuei-mei (she was the real estate agent in Tsai's *Vive l'amour*, Golden Lion, Venice 1994) as the beleaguered neighbour, as well as the intermittent relief provided by Grace Chan's songs from popular Mandarin musicals of the 1950s, make *The Hole* more accessible than his other profound minimalist statements.

Shohei Imamura is one of only four directors (the others being Francis Ford Coppola, Bille August, and Emir Kusturica) to be awarded the Golden Palm twice, winning for *The Ballad of Narayama* in 1983 and for *The Eel* last year. And *Kanzo Sensei* (Japan/France), his 25th film (programmed out-of-competition as a kind of festival homage), marks the fifth occasion he has been invited to participate -- indeed, if Akira Kurosawa was not representing Japan at Cannes, then Shohei Imamura usually was.

*Dr. Akagi* -- or "Dr. Liver," as the Japanese title of the novel by Ango Sakaguchi (1906-1956) translates -- practices medicine in a seaside village at the end of the Second World War and is concerned about the spread of hepatitis among his patients. Like Imamura's own physician-father, to whom the film is personally dedicated, he believes that "medicine is a benevolent art" and that "being a family doctor means running on all legs" -- which actor Akira Emoto does through much of the film. Also, as is usual in his cinema, the writer-director focuses on outsiders and outcasts, on those who live on the fringes of society and those driven there in search of a last refuge. Among Dr. Akagi's friends and supporters are a degenerate monk, a morphine-addicted surgeon, a bar owner, and the daughter of a prostitute who applies for the position of nurse -- mostly because young Sonoko (Kumiko Aso) has fallen in love with this worn-out doctor who refuses to capitulate to the disease. Shohei Imamura's most personal film, *Kanzo Sensei* is the one he apparently wants to be remembered by in the future.

The "revelation" of the festival was Erick Zonca's *La vie rêvée des anges*, the feature film debut of a 44-year-old writer-director who had spent two years just crafting the scenario and searching for the right faces before the camera to fit the visual images in the landscape of his mind. *The Dreamlife of Angels* pairs two young talents: the already accomplished Elodie Bouchez (awarded a César as "most promising young actress" in

André Téchiné's *Wild Reeds*, 1993) and newcomer Natacha Régnier (an acting talent to keep an eye on in the future). Together, to the surprise of few, they were handed the Best Actress award at Cannes.

Isa (Elodie Bouchez), 20-years-old, wanders through France with a rucksack on her back, picking up part-time jobs to keep her going and never wishing to stay anywhere for longer than necessary. Innocent and optimistic by nature, she is quite comfortable with her destiny -- in contrast to Marie (Natacha Régnier), another 20-year-old loner but a solitary type of a different hue. Hyper-sensitive and in complete rebellion with her immediate surroundings, Marie is as unsocial as Isa is outgoing. That the two should make a pair at all is half of what the film is about; their encounters with others is the other half. What impresses is the sheer immediacy of the film. There's a lot of hand-held camera work, with scenes shot in cramped interior settings on Super-16 to "soften" the image with saturated colours and thus visually sketch the "dreamlife" of the girls. The rigorous shooting strategy (camerawoman Agnès Godart) also stresses the frightful psychological pressure placed on Marie when her brief, intense love affair runs aground, and she seeks a way out by leaping from a window.

The award for Best Actor might have gone to Italian comedian Roberto Benigni had not his accomplished work as director on *La vita è bella* (Italy) merited him the Special Prize of the Jury instead. By far the most daring film at Cannes (it was attacked by some as "tasteless" at his press conference), it stars Benigni in a warming Chaplinesque performance as an Italian Jew deported with his young son to a concentration camp, followed there willingly by his non-Jewish wife. Benigni perishes in the Holocaust, his wife and son survive. *Life Is Beautiful* had already confirmed its merit as a runaway comedy hit in Italy -- and it might further surprise its critics by proving a draw on the international scene too. For the simple reason that Benigni poses a question of moral relevance: can comedy be aesthetically interjected into a Holocaust theme? The answer is yes.

Nanni Moretti's *April* (Italy), running at just over an hour, pokes good fun as writer-director-actor at local politics and the malaise of the media in trying to catch up with the winds of change at election time. Playing a frustrated filmmaker crippled by his phobias, Moretti-the-actor turns to documentary to clarify his thinking just when his wife is expecting a baby. In addition to fabricating a string of farcical puns via a film-within-a-film technique -- once the would-be documentarist is seen swamped by thousands of newspaper clippings on the coming election -- Moretti-the-director clearly enjoys taking his audience down the zig-zag path of his own real-life introduction to parenthood.

British directors, particularly Ken Loach, have a knack for entertaining audiences with socially committed, slice-of-life portraits carved from the working class. Peter Mullan, as an ex-alcoholic coaching "the worst football team in Glasgow" and fighting a private war on the side against a local drug dealer, was awarded Best Actor for his sensitive, vulnerable, straight-forward *My Name Is Joe* (Great Britain/Germany). On-camera practically the whole time, Mullan (who had a small role in Loach's *Riff-Raff*, 1991) carries the film almost effortlessly with his nonstop chatter and wrestling-match with his conscience.

No sooner has one gotten used to hearing a fracturing Glasgow dialect than along comes Brendan Gleeson's lilting Irish brogue in John Boorman's *The General* (Ireland), a true-life portrait of Martin Cahill, a legendary Dublin thief whose robberies were so daring they earned him the nick-name "The General" and ended in blood when he was apparently betrayed by one of his own men. John Boorman, awarded Best Director for this carefully crafted, finely toned black-and-white film, also wrote the screenplay and penned some witty, pungent dialogue for a top-grade acting ensemble.

American and Australian Independents are now a regular feature in the main program at Cannes. Hal Hartley -- whose reputation in Europe has grown since his *Simple Men* (Competition, 1992) and *Amateur* (Directors' Fortnight, 1994) were invited to the Riviera -- returned again with *Henry Fool* (USA), awarded Best Screenplay. An urban fable about a garbage man who is helped by an enigmatic house guest (Thomas Jay Ryan as Henry Fool) to realize his writing potential, "Simple Simon" (James Urbaniak) rises to international fame when his poems are adopted by, of all people, donut shop teenagers (!) who then swamp the media as though a Walt Whitman has more to say to them than a Michael Jackson.

No film at Cannes left a more lasting feeling of creative accomplishment than Rolf De Heer's *Dance Me to My Song* (Australia). Written by Heather Rose, a victim of cerebral palsy who can neither speak nor take

care of her fundamental needs, the film is about herself. Even more astonishing, Heather herself plays the part of Julia, her paralysed alter ego. To the credit of both writer and director, it's the story itself, rather than the excruciating on-camera presence of the laming illness, that wins respect. We see Julia fighting for the love of a man at the same time as we sense Heather battling for the right to contribute something meaningful to society.

Another independent production unfortunately overlooked by the international jury, yet worthy of recognition as a minor masterpiece, was Lodge Kerrigan's *Claire Dolan* (USA-France), set in New York and produced entirely with French backing (Marin Karmitz's MK2). Katrin Cartlidge (*Naked, Breaking the Waves*) plays an Irish call girl who works to pay off a debt after her mother's death, falls in love with a cab driver (Vincent D'Onofrio), decides to have a child, and in the end finds the courage to break off with the pimp and pick up the pieces to start all over again. Kerrigan's minimalist approach to filmmaking avoids voyeuristic pitfalls in the story, focusing instead on a fragile, caring individual who doesn't really know how she has gotten into this mess in the first place. But now -- bravo, Katrin Cartlidge! -- she has become a woman of decision and consequence.

#### **Awards**

Golden Palm

*Mia eoniotita ke mia mera (Eternity and a Day, Greece)*, Theo Angelopoulos

Grand Jury Prize

*La vita è bella (Life Is Beautiful, Italy)*, Roberto Benigni

Best Actress

Elodie Bouchez and Natacha Régnier, *La vie rêvée des anges (The Dreamlife of Angels, France)*, directed by Erick Zonca

Best Actor

Peter Mullan, *My Name Is Joe (Great Britain)*, directed by Ken Loach

Best Director

John Boorman, *The General (Ireland)*

Best Screenplay

Hal Hartley, *Henry Fool (USA)*, directed by Hal Hartley

Special Jury Prize (ex aequo)

*La classe de neige (Class Trip, France)*, Claude Miller

*Festen (The Celebration, Denmark)*, Thomas Vinterberg

Golden Palm, Best Short Film

*L'interview (France)*, Xavier Giannoli

Jury Prize, Best Short Film

*Horseshoe (Great Britain)*, David Lodge

*Gasman (Great Britain)*, Lynne Ramsay

Camera d'Or (Golden Camera for Best Debut Film)

*Slam (USA)*, Marc Levin (in Quinzaine des Réalisateurs)

International Critics (FIPRESCI) Awards

Competition: *The Hole (Taiwan)*, Tsai Ming-liang

Quinzaine des Réalisateurs: *Happiness (USA)*, Todd Solondz

Ecumenical Award

*Mia eoniotita ke mia mera (Eternity and a Day, Greece)*, Theo Angelopoulos

#### **Views from *Un Certain Regard***

*Killer (Kazakhstan)*, Darezhan Omirbaev

Critic, theorist and director, Darezhan Omirbaev is a charter member of the "Kazakh New Wave" that

burst upon the scene at the Moscow festival in 1987. His *Killer* is framed in the moralist aesthetics and minimalist narrative style of Robert Bresson: it's an innocent who experiences violence in today's Almaty and pays the penalties for social disorders he cannot even grasp. When Marat (Talgat Assetov), the driver for an institute director, borrows his employer's car to bring his wife and new-born child home from the hospital, he unfortunately has an accident. His quest to borrow money to pay for the repairs releases a chain of nightmares: his sister is bankrupt by a bank scam, his employer commits suicide, the baby falls ill and needs expensive medical treatment, and Marat is robbed by a gang of thugs. Finally, the only way out is to accept an offer from an old army friend, now a barman in a nightclub, to kill a troublesome journalist. A 40-year-old *auteur* director with remarkable stylistic credentials, Darezhan Omirbaev may well be the best director working in Central Asia today.

*The Shoe* (Latvia), Laila Pakalnina

Laila Pakalnina arrived at the 1996 Cannes festival with a pair of short films under her arms -- and returned home with an International Critics (FIPRESCI) Prize in her pocket. *The Ferry* (1994) and *The Post* (1995), both under 20 minutes in length, charmed critics and audience as a pair of poetic, impressionistic, long-take documentaries about everyday life in the Latvian province. This year, she returned to *Un Certain Regard* with her promising debut as a feature film director. Shot again in black-and-white, "because for me the interplay between light and shade in all its variations is very valuable," *The Shoe* is a delightful, tongue-in-cheek comedy set in her native town of Liepaja in the late 1950s, at a time when the western coast of the Soviet Union was a security zone jealously guarded by border patrols. One summer morning, three guards discover footprints in the sand -- and a woman's shoe, apparently left behind by a "dangerous enemy". So they set out on a mission doomed to failure from the start: every "Cinderella" in town has to try on the shoe.

*Passion* (Hungary), György Fehér

Awarded both the Hungarian Jury Prize and the Foreign Critics Prize at the Budapest Festival of Hungarian Films, György Fehér's *Passion* is yet another free-style adaptation of James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, that seminal hard-boiled detective story published in 1934 and twice filmed in Hollywood. When Giuseppe de Santis and Luchino Visconti collaborated on the latter's Neorealist classic *Ossessione* (Italy, 1942), the film could not be shown in the United States due to copyright problems although it was only loosely based on Cain's original. Running at two hours plus, about the same length as Visconti's *Ossessione*, Fehér's *Passion* leans heavily on experimental techniques: hand-held camera, long takes, static monologues in close-up, highly stylized monochrome black-and-white images all of which cloak the story in a claustrophobic, hypnotic state-of-mind approach that, taken together, poses a depressing, atmospheric, personal view of the universe.

*The Apple* (Iran), Samira Makhmalbaf

At 18, Samira Makhmalbaf is surely the youngest director ever to present a feature film in the official program at Cannes. For *The Apple*, scripted and edited by her father, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, the point of departure is an ordinary street in a poor district of Tehran. Several families have written to the Social Services Office about a father who had locked up his two young daughters since birth. When a social worker calls on the family, the father responded: "My daughters are like flowers -- expose them to the sun, and they will wither away!" But that's only half of the story: since the mother is blind, the girls are necessary to mind the house. The moral quest for answers to the dilemma prodded Samira Makhmalbaf to go further: she wanted to know how the sisters would respond to the city once set free to explore it with young companions -- one of whom carries an apple around on a stick.

**Notes from *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs***

*Of Freaks and Men* (Alexei Balabanov, Russia).

No stranger to Cannes, Alexei Balabanov impressed critics in 1995 with his feature film debut in the *Un Certain Regard* section: *Happy Days*. This stunning black-and-white Beckett adaptation also introduced actor-collaborator Viktor Sokhorukov, a stage personality celebrated for his knack of interpreting the crank and lunatic. In *Of Freaks and Men*, a bizarre tale of fantasy and eroticism set in St. Petersburg at the beginning of this century and appropriately rendered in sepia tones, Sokhorukov plays the berserk henchman of Johann (Sergei Makovetsky), a diabolic photo-pornographer, who has a thriving business going as the supplier of pictures depicting bare-bottomed women. Just as more possibilities emerge in the new vogue

of cinematography, the diabolic Johann is smitten by the lovely Lisa -- played by Dinara Drukarova, the winsome ingénue in Vitaly Kanievsky's *Freeze, Die, Come to Life* (1989) and *An Independent Life* (1992), both previously seen at Cannes -- and soon capitulates to the designs of his evil henchman. The musical score alone for this highly original erotic melodrama makes for a haunting experience, along with the feeling that Balabanov is focusing his attention on perversities in Russia at the end of this century too.

*The Stringer* (Great Britain), Paul Pawlikowski

Everyone into documentaries has probably seen Paul Pawlikowski's *Tripping with Zhirinovskiy* (1995) -- that tongue-in-cheek portrait, as scary as it is hilarious, of a bumbling political threat to Russia's young Russian democracy. It also provided the springboard for Pawlikowski's first venture into making features: *The Stringer*, inspired by an encounter with a lad the director met while working on the Zhirinovskiy documentary. Sergei Bodrov Jr. (currently the heart-throb of Russian cinema) plays Vadik Chernyshov, a struggling Moscow teenager with a video camera in his hands in hopes of filming something that might prompt a sale to Western press agencies. The twist in the fiction story comes when Vadik falls helplessly in love with Helen (Anna Friel), a Western news journalist who represents everything he lacks and could fill the vacuum in his humdrum life. An extra doze of social satire is supplied by Yarvovsky (played by Vladimir Ilyin, an uncanny Zhirinovskiy double), a sad and lonely figure who sees his sham world slipping away, yet hopes that a spark of news (like a fake assassination attempt) might help re-ignite his career. *The Stringer* hits a raw nerve.

*West Beirut* (Lebanon/France), Ziad Doueiri.

An autobiographical account of a teenager in the streets of West Beirut in 1975, the first year of the Lebanese Civil War, Ziad Doueiri looks back at events in the Muslim section of Beirut (Beirut in English) over two decades ago and speaks frankly about conditions as he remembers them. The film begins with the massacre of passengers in a Palestinian bus by the militia, witnessed by Tarek and Omar, teenaged Muslim boys. Since the Christians control East Beirut and the city is now torn apart, the boys decide to make the most of their free time by ignoring altogether the tragic events occurring around them and roaming the streets with their Super-8 camera to film what they see, "turning the battlefield into a sort of playground" (Doueiri). Joined by May, a young Christian girl from the neighbourhood, they make friends with shopkeepers, talk to the militia, communicate with neighbours, stop off at a brothel (visited by both Christians and Muslims), and gradually get drawn deeper into a violence far beyond their control. Filmed on actual locations, *West Beirut* is a film of harsh realism about a period of tragic relevance for the cosmopolitan population of the entire Near East.

*Happiness* (USA), Todd Solondz

Awarded the prestigious FIPRESCI Prize for only his second feature film, Todd Solondz's *Happiness* confirms that the young American independent director, whose *Doll's House* (1995) was awarded the Grand Prize at the Sundance festival, is a filmmaker with style and vision to reckon with. Solondz only has to cast a scurfilly gaze at his neighbours in middle-class New Jersey to come up with a peck of painful, bittersweet, laughable, ridiculous stories to tell, each weird tale cut from different branches of the same family tree. In *Happiness* the focus is on the three Jordan sisters -- Joy, Trish, Helen -- in search of that ever elusive bliss the American Dream is supposed to be all about. Seldom has so pitiless a portrait of Mid-America been depicted by a stellar ensemble of accomplished acting talent: a psychopathic father who likes boys too much, peculiar neighbour and eccentric in-laws, a boy in the throes of puberty waiting anxiously to have his first ejaculation. What happens when it finally comes? The roar of the audience could be heard halfway down the Croisette!

## Author Information

Ron HOLLOWAY (1933-2009) was an American critic, film historian, filmmaker and correspondent who adopted Europe as his home in the early fifties and spent much of his life in Berlin. He was an expert on the study of German cinema and against all odds produced, with his wife Dorothea, the journal *German Film*, keeping us up-to-date with the work of directors, producers and writers and the showing of German films around the world.

In 2007, Ron Holloway and his wife were awarded the Berlinale Camera Award. Ron also received the

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Ron was also a valued contributor to *Kinema* for the past fifteen years.