

ETC



New York

New Directors/New Films, Museum of Modern Art, New York. March 17 - April 2 1995

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Number 30, May–August 1995

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35761ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kaplan, S. (1995). Review of [New York / *New Directors/New Films*, Museum of Modern Art, New York. March 17 - April 2 1995]. *ETC*, (30), 21–23.

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PHOTO: GEOFFREY CLEMENTS

Living in Oblivion by Tom DiCillo.

There is a family resemblance between the *New Directors/New Film* series and the New York Film Festival. Both are projects of the Film Society of Lincoln Center, although ND/NF is screened and also sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art. At 24 years of age as opposed to the Festival's 32, ND/NF is certainly the younger brother or (in the interests of p.c.) the junior sibling. And like many sibling comparisons, the differences are those of emphasis rather than of type. It is the difference between spring and fall, between young shoots rising into first prominence and more established autumnal growths. While ND/NF has a particular mandate to showcase debut efforts of young filmmakers, it draws from the same constituency of American indies, low budget works and various arcane foreign cinemas. If a film has won accolades on the international circuit but cannot fit into the fall Festival, chances are we will see it in March at ND/NF. And if a particular national cinema - China, for example - is heavily represented in the Festival, a similar emphasis will generally pertain to ND/NF.

Of the 22 programs in this year's ND/NF, five are from China, including an opening night selection, He Ping's *Red Firecracker*, *Green Firecracker*. A sexual pot-boiler that never abates its tempestuous tone, it chronicles the love

affair between an itinerant artist and the daughter of a wealthy fireworks clan who must pretend she is a man to safeguard family power. As the title might suggest, *Firecracker* is explosive, a real bodice ripper, but ultimately unsatisfying in its strident will to overpower, with characters who never just talk; they scream. The period costumes, exotic locales and themes of gender confusion and sexual repression seem a rehash of what we have come to expect from Chinese art house fare. So when the film does not come on all frenzied and overheated, it's just more of the same old same old. To paraphrase a famous source, it is a tale full of sound and fury, signifying next to nothing.

Not so He Jianjun's *Postman*, a fascinating film set in Beijing's "District of Happiness", and confronting the loneliness, dislocation and anomie in contemporary Chinese society. Xiadou, a shy, taciturn orphan, is promoted to the position of postman after his elderly predecessor is fired for reading the mail. He soon falls into the same behavior, and not only opens everyone's letters but starts to meddle in their affairs. Privy to personal secrets - who is lovelorn, who is gay, who is a prostitute - he takes to answering their correspondence with missives of advice and exhortation. At first, we expect Xiadou will be exposed and punished, or that his voyeuristic invasions will lead to



Postman by He Jianjun.

a climactic denouement that will rip through his dour solitude and force him to experience life directly, not vicariously. This does not happen. Rather, there is a slow accumulation of detail. As the daily routine of the job establishes its undeniable rhythm and the emotional and physical topography of the neighbourhood becomes familiar, we realise that director He has something less melodramatic but more compelling in mind. With admirable Bressonian detachment, He employs his poker faced postman like a ferret, to dig below the veneer of public propriety (that quintessential Chinese concern for "face") and expose a seething underbelly of yearning and malaise. In this sense, *Postman* is not only controversial; it is positively subversive. In fact, the film could not be finished in China. Smuggled to Europe, it was completed with a special grant from the Rotterdam Film Festival.

Alienation is not limited to a kinky quarter of Beijing, but is alive and well in capitalist road Taiwan, as evidenced by Tsai Ming-liang's remarkable and formally audacious *Vive L'Amour*. A tour de force of gentle slapstick, bitter-sweet longing and pared down stylistics (no music at all, and virtually no dialogue during its first hour), the film follows three young citizens of overcrowded Taipei, who alternately camp out in a posh, vacant apartment without making any meaningful contact. She is a real estate agent eager to sell the apartment, who meanwhile uses it for brief assignations with her sometimes boyfriend, a cocky street peddler. Both are initially unaware of the third interloper, a gay boy who has snatched the extra set of keys. His meager earnings do not allow him to rent his own place, so he periodically crashes in what he assumes is an empty flat.

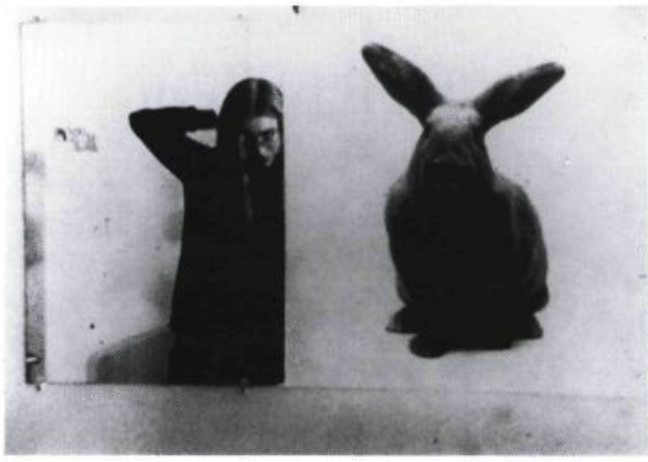
The near misses and barely avoided collisions between the three protagonists elicit an arch visual humour, even a bit of suspense. But Tsai plays down these overtly dramatic elements. Like Antonioni, he seems more interested in dissecting space as an objective correlative for character, an overarching emptiness in which solitary gestures and vacant expressions become all the more poignant. The stylishly deluxe duplex, with its alluring architecture of balconies, tiled bathrooms, picture windows, and the play of light over bare walls, is lovingly photographed. Ogled by the camera, the apartment itself takes on the seductiveness of character, suggesting a displaced, fetishized eroticism that underscores the impossibility of real human connection. Reminiscent of *L'Avventura* or *Red Desert* in its equation of blank space with the void of solitude, *Vive L'Amour* ends with an extended shot that, if you buy it, ups the emotional ante to the breaking point.

Rounding out the Chinese menu at ND/NF are two

very different takes on family. Already an established screenwriter in Taiwan, Wu Nien-jen makes an auspicious directorial debut with *A Borrowed Life*, nearly three hours long and based on the experiences of father in a small mining town from the 1950s to the present. Lyrically enchanting, heartfelt and intimately observed, this autobiographical drama foregrounds a generational gap not familiar to most Westerners: a father devoted to the language and culture of Japan, which occupied Taiwan (then called Formosa) for a half century prior to the end of WWII, versus a son schooled in Chinese ways.

Veteran Hong Kong director Yim Ho's *The Day The Sun Turned Cold* is also a family melodrama, but comes disguised within the taut confines of a murder mystery. Set amid the windswept, snowy wastes of rural Manchuria, a son who suspects his mother of having fatally poisoned his father ten years earlier initiates a police investigation. Told mostly in flashback, the film evokes a marvellous sense of place, the frigid climate a fitting backdrop for a dysfunctional family where love can be colder than death, but death will also have its day. Huddling over their steaming bowls of tofu, the family seems the very nucleus of togetherness, which makes the specter of murder at the dinner table even more horrific. Yim focuses on the love/hate relationship between mother and son, and the son's conflicting loyalties to the living and the dead, which, if not exactly *Hamlet*, certainly gives the film a more universal context.

Several American entries at ND/NF are also worthy of note. Tom DiCillo's *Living in Oblivion* is a trenchant, hilarious exposé of the pitfalls, frustrations and ego trips endemic to low budget filmmaking. A denizen of New York's downtown scene as actor, cinematographer on Jim Jarmusch's early films, and director of *Johnny Suede*, DiCillo knows whereof he speaks. If it can go wrong it does go wrong for his hapless band of wannabe artistes. His script is dead on and marvellously observed: the jockeying for position, petty bickering, preening and posing, technical mishaps, and miscommunications are all layered on with a sure hand. In this film about the making of a film, the standout performances include Steve Buscemi as the beleaguered director, Dermot Mulroney as the self absorbed cameraman with eye patch (in the land of the blind, the one eyed man is king), Catherine Keener as the insecure lead actress, and James Le Gros as the blond, none too bright Hollywood actor struggling in indie-land (a role clearly modelled on DiCillo's experiences with Brad Pitt on *Suede*). Closer in tone to Truffaut's *Day For Night* than Fassbinder's *Beware a Holy Whore*, *Oblivion* is halfway between an extended in-joke and a deft comedy of manners,



Art for Teachers of Children by Jennifer Montgomery.

admittedly lightweight, but that is part of its low rent charm. It is, without doubt, the most fun I had at this year's ND/NF.

Nick Gomez's sophomore effort, *New Jersey Drive*, does not pay off on the promise of his gritty, ultra low budget debut, *Laws of Gravity*. Located in the carjacking subculture of black Newark, *Drive* does have well edited action sequences that capture the excitement of the rip-off, the ride, and the cat-and-mouse game with the police, including a hold-onto-your-seats chase over city streets and sidewalks. As in *Gravity*, the thieves are presented neither as heroes nor as victims : their criminality is a given, like the weather. To his credit, Gomez does not succumb to liberal pieties about crime in the streets. His gaze is hard edged and unflinching, and he manages to coax strong performances from his two leads, Sharron Corley and Gabriel Casseus. The latter, in particular, has true screen charisma, and is destined for bigger things.

But we have seen enough boys in the hood films by now not to hope for something better or more original than what Gomez delivers in *Drive*. The film's lack of narrative momentum, its limp episodic structure, unconvincing character development, absence of continuity, and the frequent, intrusive fades to black (which worked as a thematic device in *Gravity*, but here just seem a disguise for sloppy storytelling) - all demote *Drive* to movie-of-the-week status. Most irritating is Saul Stein's one note portrayal - king leer with a billy club - of a psycho,rogue cop who terrorises the homies. This gross caricature of goombah sadism serves little to convince anyone that police brutality is, in fact, a daily fact of life in the ghetto. Gomez obviously had higher ambitions for *Drive*, but has only managed to craft a generic, youth cult flick.

Jennifer Montgomery's *Art For Teachers of Children* doesn't really work. But it has a great title (do I get course credit for watching ?) and is interesting - at last to talk about. The issue at hand in this autobiographical film is underage sex. Montgomery returns us to the days when she was a 14 year old preppie who decided to shack up with her dorm counsellor/photo instructor, the scion of a rich Newport family who was already notorious for photographing his nubile young charges in nude. Despite her parent's objections, they have an affair. Years later, the affair is long over, but the FBI is investigating her former lover on charges of kiddie porn, and is seeking Montgomery's testimony.

Such is the barebones story. It could make for a pretty good film, but not, unfortunately, this film, which suffers from a case of terminal affectlessness and enervation. To be fair to Montgomery, perhaps she was trying to downplay

the risqué subject matter with a purposeful lack of artifice, and just went a little too far. This might explain the bored, tired drawls and deadpan line readings of some of her actors; many adolescents, especially boarding school brats, do affect world weariness in just this manner. But it does not explain the lackluster cinematography. Some shots are so blurry and ill composed, we have reason to wonder if anyone was behind the viewfinder. Which is really a shame, because *Art* is intelligently conceived, is based on a true story, does dis the FBI, contains some very good writing, and makes a couple of memorable casting choices, notably Duncan Hannah, a painter who has previously acted in New York underground films, as the feckless photographer. As is sometimes the case with first features selected for ND/NF, I would prefer to think of the film as a work in progress and see what Montgomery does next.

From France comes a very different treatment of the games that kids play as they reach towards maturity. Cédric Kahn's *Trop de Bonheur*, commissioned for the series "Boys and Girls in Their Time", is a teen dating film that examines the impact of racism on sex. Kamel is young, bright, well mannered and infatuated with his blonde, busty classmate, Valérie. He is also an Algerian immigrant. A more likely candidate for assimilation into polite French society than his older brother and his yahoo friends - who, with their muscle car and brash ways, fulfil the racist stereotypes about noisy, pushy, "dirty Arabs" - Kamel is still dumped by Valérie at the first opportunity in favor of his friend Didier, who is as blond and blue eyed as she. Heartbroken, Kamel secretly watches them make love, and realizes that this is a world he will never enter.

Still, *Trop de Bonheur* is not just a cautionary text on race. Set in a sunny small town in Southwest France during the early 80s, it captures the fragility and awkwardness of adolescence, the bittersweet aimlessness and frustration, the magic moment of first love when all things seem possible, as well as the rampant insecurity, disappointment and rejection. It is a film of nervous, tentative gestures and quick, appraising glances that beg the question : does he/she really like me, or am I making a fool of myself ? The kids hang out, party, flirt and do drugs to the music of Aerosmith and Jimmy Cliff, but the soundtrack I kept hearing in my head was the group par excellence of adolescent angst, The Smiths. Which is a testimony of sorts to the emotional candor that Kahn was able to derive from his young cast.

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