

Rebellion and Resistance

Festival Report by Alan Foale (Leeds), member of the Ecumenical Jury

The 28th Festival International de Film de Fribourg took place from 29th March – 6th April 2014. This year feature films in the International Competition Section were a mixture of fiction and documentary and were dominated by the inter-related themes of rebellion and resistance, personal dilemma and social context. The Ecumenical Jury and the International Jury both awarded their main prizes for Best Feature Film to *Han Gong-Ju* (South Korea, 2013) by Lee Sujin and the Ecumenical Jury also gave a Commendation to *Constructors* (Kazakhstan, 2012) by Adilkhan Yerzhanov.

The awards of the Ecumenical Jury

Han Gong-Ju follows the fate of a high-school student, a victim of gang rape attempting to re-establish her life in the context of parental neglect and a sexist, authoritarian society which undermines the victim and perpetuates abuse in a variety of ways. The film subtly intercuts past and present to create tension and express the trauma of the original assault whilst avoiding sensationalism. Its treatment of the heroine's journey combines the literal and the metaphorical to show Han Gong-Ju's personal development and moral strength when forced to ask who can understand her dilemma and whom she can trust to act in her best interests.

With echoes of the myth of Sisyphus, *Constructors* adopts a highly original approach to its story of three siblings attempting to assert their legal right to build a house and their moral right to establish a home. The use of black-and-white, the play of sound, light and shadow and the dedramatisation of the action all combine to express the precarious situation of the main protagonists. Above all the commitment of the elder brother to the family group is maintained to the point of self-sacrifice despite personal, material and legal obstacles.

Personal moral responsibility

The place of personal moral responsibility in a failing society is pursued in *To Kill A Man* (Chile, 2013) by Alejandro Fernandez Almendras. At first sight a well made but conventional piece about the individual who takes the law into his own hands, it deploys a number of the clichés of the revenge-genre – the family under threat, the failure of the law to protect the innocent, the father driven to extremes by circumstances. However, the act of killing is shown to be more difficult than movie history suggests and the 'hero' has to come to terms with guilt and the shared humanity of his victim, however unpleasant. The failure of social institutions to support the honest citizen is also a key element in Richie Mehta's *Siddarth* (Canada/India, 2013), which treats the widespread problem of disappearing children in India

with admirable restraint. Whilst the film lays bare institutional failures, it shows sympathy for apparently indifferent officials overwhelmed by the scale of the problem and for individuals who freely make gestures of support towards the family affected. In a journey of discovery about India the father's search for his lost son is set against a background of complex social change, and the film's conclusion asks how best one can come to terms with a seemingly impossible task.

Human relations

The intimist study of paternity and human relations is the substance of Natalia Smirnoff's *Lock Charmer* (Argentina, 2014). The director juggles three metaphors – fog, jammed locks and music-making – to explore the difficulty of communication and the truths which humans keep from each other and from themselves. Displaying a quite exceptional photographic quality and sense of physical texture, this work traces the process by which one man comes to shed inhibition, find his voice and express true emotion and feeling for another human. A similar interest in the minutiae of human relations is evident in *Au revoir l'été* (Japan, 2013) by Koji Fukada, who has clearly found inspiration in the work of Eric Rohmer. Romantic entanglements, past and present, unfold in the meandering course of one summer holiday. However, behind the apparent lightness are more serious themes suggested by enigmatic references to Fukushima, by more overt satire of the exploitative sexual relations of the love-hotel and by the way in which the younger characters gradually call into question the ways of the older generations.

Question of identity

Question of identity, which are hinted at in the last two films, assume much greater proportions in two other films. The first, *Pelo Malo* (Venezuela, 2013) by Mariana Rondón, dramatises the impact of 'bad hair' (the curly hair which marks out and marks down the mixed-race citizen in Venezuela) on a 9-year old boy from a poor background. Mother and grandmother embody two conflicting views of beauty, sexual identity and the boy's future in a society where traditional beauty contests and aggressive machismo are powerful influences. However, within the mother's own behaviour there are inherent contradictions which the little boy must negotiate as he learns the role of compromise. The second of these films, Eduardo W. Roy Jr's *Quick Change* (Philippines, 2013), mixes elements of drama and documentary. He introduces the spectator to the world of transvestite beauty competitions, a realm unfamiliar to most Filipinos let alone foreigners, and the illegal cosmetic surgery trade which accompanies it. Filmed using members of this very closed community where transvestism, transsexuality and homosexuality seem to merge, first impressions are of a rather ludicrous if gruesome activity. But this quickly gives way to a sympathetic recognition that we are dealing with flesh-and-blood humans who are struggling to come to terms with themselves and their poverty. However, the final

impression is one of self-delusion and tragedy, in which individuals accept considerable risk in the hope of escaping from their material circumstances.

Denunciation of the society

The implied element of denunciation which these two films include becomes completely explicit in other works. Wang Bing's documentary *'Til Madness Do Us Part* (Hong Kong/France/Japan, 2013) places the viewer in the role of participant observer in a psychiatric hospital, apparently typical of many in China, which is in practice a prison and dumping-ground for a variety of individuals deemed undesirable or inconvenient for medical, social, political or other reasons. The film records a regime of systematic neglect in a deeply dehumanising environment, despite which some traces of genuine human feeling remain. An overwhelming sense of isolation and disorientation is rapidly established and, perhaps more disturbingly, there is no sense that the outside world is a more sympathetic place to live. *Manuscripts Don't Burn* (Iran, 2013) by Mohammad Rasoulof paints the blackest of pictures of a totalitarian society in which the state employs professional assassins to hunt down dissenters and destroy evidence of its own wrongdoing. Freedom of thought is systematically repressed and human dignity under constant and brutal attack. Made with great technical skill and relentless narrative drive, this film denounces the moral emptiness and hypocrisy of the regime and highlights the paradox of a way of life in which the assassins show moral awareness in their private lives but set human feeling and responsibility aside in their professional activities.

Personal works

The other features completing the International Competition were both highly personal works. In *Fish and Cat* (Iran, 2013) Shahram Mokri applies the ideas behind Escher's spatial conundrums to the realm of time, filming another story of the innocent under threat in one continuous take of 134 minutes. Ingenious and artistically daring (and winner of the FIPRESCI prize), he uses conventions of the slasher genre to set up false expectations in the viewers, who find themselves revisiting the same events time and again, or perhaps visiting slightly different versions of the same events. The constant sense of menace (in which an Iranian audience would find reference to its own history) is intensified by the total absence of on-screen violence, and the central image of kites contains a rich if elusive power of suggestion. The documentary *The Square* (Egypt/United States, 2013) by Jehane Noujaim, winner of the Audience Prize, follows the development of the Egyptian revolution from the fall of Mubarak onwards through the eyes of three participants, combining music and art, archive footage, found footage and reconstruction, to offer a readily comprehensible account of the complex relations between revolutionaries, Muslim Brotherhood and military powers. Dramatically it uses Tahrir Square as the embodiment of the Egyptian people and their struggle but it acknowledges that the apparent unity of the square masks deep divisions and conflicts of interest. As disillusionment starts to set in for some, it asks if the

right to protest against injustice is the same as the ability to shape a better future. It reveals the sacrifices which individuals are willing to make in matters of conviction and the extreme difficulty of reconciling different but equally powerful convictions to create a better, more tolerant society.

The expressive power of film is used in imaginative and highly accomplished ways throughout the works in the International Section. The intensity of the film-makers' sense of purpose is repeatedly apparent, whether the emphasis is primarily on large-scale social/political issues or on the personal, on denunciation, reconciliation or simply exploration. There is a consistent desire to provide serious insights into different societies and cultures and to raise understanding of the dilemmas which humans face and the responses which they can make.