

DOX reviews

Dinner with Murakami

Netherlands, 2007, 53 min.

Director: Yan Ting Yuen

Production: seriousFilm/ VPRO TV

World sales: seriousFilm

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Haruki Murakami is probably the best known contemporary Japanese writer. His highly idiosyncratic novels and short stories appeal to the side of the Japanese character that is in rebellion against conformity and regimentation. For this reason he has a particular following among the young – not only in Japan but internationally. His works (perhaps the best known of which is *Norwegian Wood*) have been translated into numerous languages.

It is difficult to make films about writers – particularly writers as reclusive as Murakami is. How do you film the written word? The young Dutch film-maker Yan Ting Yuen (of Hong Kong origin) wasn't even sure when she started her film whether she could secure the writer's co-operation. And this uncertainty continued right up until the last moment. So the finished documentary – despite its title – is largely structured round Murakami's enigmatic absence.

Accepting the Zen challenge that “less is more”, Yan Ting has sought instead to dramatise the impact that Murakami has made upon his reading-public. Thus a number of interviews with terrifically articulate talking heads (university professors and so on) alternate with more surreal and imaginative sequences where the director takes her camera out into the hinterland to determine what is “Murakamian” in the Japanese landscape. The resulting film has a beautiful sense of discovery about it, of going where it will and sharing its surprises with us; and at the same time (what makes it a superior example of the genre) this openness and curiosity on the film-maker's part is shown to be not incompatible with a vigorous sense of form and poetic structure.

Roughly up to the middle of the 90s, Murakami was content with his persona as a non-political cosmopolitan internationalist. But after the sarin gas attacks on the Tokyo subway in the summer of 1995 he began to take more interest in Japanese politics and social affairs. In a moving section in the film we meet a pair of survivors of this terrorist outrage – a brother and sister who were befriended by Murakami and made the subject of one of his books. The evident love and respect that they show towards him is eloquent of the sweetness of Murakami's moral character.

Yan Ting Yuen is evidently on something of a roll. Her previous film *Yang Ban Xi – The 8 Model Works* won a Grand Jury prize at Sundance and a number of important international awards. *Dinner with Murakami* confirms her talent as a film-maker. One can be sure one will hear a lot more of her.

Mark Le Fanu

Description of a Memory

Israel, 2006, 80 min.

Director: Dan Geva

Production: Habayit Hakaton/Dan and Noit Geva/ Wim Van Leer & Sofea France

World Sales: JMT Films Distribution

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Towards the end of the 1950s Chris Marker was in Israel. The film he made there, *Description d'un combat* (1960), won important prizes on its release but since then it has been very little seen. One of its secret admirers is the young Israeli director Dan Geva who together with his wife Noit has now made a film based on the earlier documentary that is in every way worthy of the original – a rich, passionate meditation on history, change and identity.

Marker, a leftist and an outsider, had many sharp things to say about the nascent Israeli state, particularly about its treatment of minorities; but his film on the whole was friendly towards Israel and hopeful about its moral aspirations. Nearly 50 years on, and in the aftermath of three further wars, a sometimes brutal occupation, and the intifadas that rose out of these events,

the canvas is inevitably murkier. Geva, born and bred in Israel, is a fiercer critic of his country than Marker ever was; yet the two films still nonetheless belong to each other - perhaps because they are about people not politics.

The Gevas start their film where Marker ended his, on a specific image: that of a 12 year girl beside an easel in a painting class. We don't see what she's drawing so intently, oblivious of the gaze of Marker's well-positioned camera. Her fierce concentration, and youthful, long-necked beauty are somehow remarkable. She seems to be a symbol of something; perhaps, indeed, she is a symbol of young Israel?

Working back from the speculations arising from this sequence, Geva re-spools Marker's film, pausing at some of the other characters the French director met and singled out on his journey: a young Arab delivery boy, relieved of his burden, scooting down the road behind his empty bicycle cart, imagining he's winning a race in the Olympics; a market trader of exceptional personality and vibrancy ; and so on. Who are they in their ordinary lives?, he wonders. Are they still living? And if so have their dreams in some way been realized?

A documentarist necessarily sets out on such investigations not really knowing where they will lead to, indeed whether they will lead anywhere at all. Even if the quarry is located, further acquaintance may prove an anti-climax. But the Gevas have the courage of their hunches: these subjects do indeed have something truly special about them. In unearthing their sometimes tragic stories, the Gevas accomplish a dazzling feat of investigation that takes us on a journey into the heart of their divided, troubled country.

Mark Le Fanu

Marriage

Russia, 2007, 39 min.

Director. Vladimir Nepevnyi

Production: Studio FF

World Sales: Studio FF

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Marriage is the latest film of the St Petersburg-based documentarist Vladimir Nepevnyi, who specializes in films about 20th century Russian culture. In the recent past he has looked at the work of Dziga Vertov and his brothers, and at the efforts of the pioneering émigré animator Alexandre Alexeyev. More recently still, *Ilya and Marusya* (2006) explored the private life of Ilya Ilf, one half of the pair of Russian satirists Ilf and Petrov.

Marriage concerns itself with another important Soviet satirist, Mikhail Zoshchenko, who enjoyed a huge personal following in the 1920s, surviving the terror of the 1930s only to come unstuck immediately after the war – a victim of the renewed campaign against writers initiated by the notorious communist bureaucrat Zhdanov.

Following a line he has taken in all his films, Nepevnyi chooses to go behind the public persona of the artist to see how he lived his private life, specifically, here, the 41 year relationship he enjoyed with his wife Vera, a former actress. The marriage was rather a stormy one: she was extravagant and beautiful, he morose and melancholic; there were frequent separations, and each party from time to time took lovers. Yet a basic bond of faithfulness emerges, unspoken.

As he was with *Ilya and Marusya*, Nepevnyi has been aided here by the survival of photographs of husband and wife of exceptionally high quality – they are, indeed, really beautiful portraits – against which he deploys well-chosen extracts from their letters and diaries, along with evocative waltzes and tangos from the period. However, what really elevates *Marriage* above the usual level of documentaries of this kind is the use the director makes of material from the archives – not just period documentary footage (though this is indeed extremely rich), but extracts from contemporary feature films, imaginatively interpolated. Exceptionally brilliant is Nepevnyi's use of extracts from Buster Keaton's comedies to suggest Zoshchenko's elegance, shyness and diffidence. At the same time, more sombre passages of Samuel Beckett's famous portrait of Keaton (*Film*, 1965) invoke the bitter paranoia that Zoshchenko suffered from during large parts of his adult life.

A portrait of private life in the Soviet epoch has a particular historical poignancy, just because in many ways the state denied its citizens the right to *have* a private life. Nepevnyi's anti-political focus on leisure – scenes of restaurants, parties, trips to the beach etc. – takes on a political shading if we understand leisure to mean precisely that part of a citizen's life that evades

the control of the authorities. In contrast to its tragic overtones, there is a kind of lighthearted gaiety about *Marriage* which is a large part of the charm of the movie.

Mark Le Fanu

SHORTER REVIEWS

Un Soleil à Kaboul...ou plutot deux

France, Afghanistan, 2006, 75 min.

Directors: Philippe Chevallier, Sergio Canto Sabido, Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini

Production: Bel Air Media/Theatre du Soleil/ Bell-Canto-Lai/Voltaire Production

World Sales: emilie.symphorien@bel-air-media.com
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The film follows legendary French theatre producer Ariane Mnouchkine of Theatre du Soleil to Kabul where she sets up a workshop with 50 locals. She and her small crew will teach them the basics of *commedia del arte* in the hope that they will found their own company, using similar mask techniques, after she has gone. Mnouchkine anchors this fine film with her wonderful warm presence, and the teaching scenes are really inspiring: all the actors are so nervous and eager! One can only imagine what the irruption of this “force of nature” has meant in the lives of these brave would-be thespians, who doubtless have had to overcome many cultural barriers (and perhaps outright opposition) to follow their dreams. Climax of the film: on the opening night of their production of *Romeo and Juliet* Mnouchkine sends them an email from Paris wishing them luck; everyone (including the audience) bursts into tears.

Le Blues de l'Orient

France/Canada, 2006, 85 min.

Director: Florence Strauss

Production: Les Films d'Ici/Amythos Films/ The National Film Board of Canada/Bel Air Media

World Sales: The National Film Board of Canada

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www.nfb.ca

Fatih Akin's fine documentary *Crossing the Bridge: the Sound of Istanbul* (2005) has given many of us a taste for classical Turkish music. Here is a film that broadens out the exploration of this tradition towards the whole of the middle east. Florence Strauss has traveled to Cairo, Alexandria, Tel Aviv, Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo and Palmyra in her search for the best native singers and musicians, interviewing them informally and recording their passionate performances. The director (a Canadian citizen) is of mixed Jewish and Arabic background, and one of the purposes of the film is to show the cosmopolitanism of a musical tradition that transcends man-imposed political boundaries. The musicians she encounters are all exceptionally talented; their old-world courtesy shines through a sometimes reticent self-presentation, lending the film an extraordinary charm.

