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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: May 14, 2009 04:45 PM



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Cannes 2009 Day Two: Precious, Vampires, Genocide and Despair!



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I could be seeing Francis Ford Coppola's new movie *Tetro*, but instead I'm talking to you. That's often the dilemma at the Cannes Film Festival, where there are so many movies playing on so many different screens that it's impossible to see them all and invariably the film you skip becomes the one everyone is talking about. So you have to choose: should you sleep past 7:30 or catch the new movie by UK director Andrea Arnold? Grab a bite or see Korean vampires bite each other? Take a nap in your apartment or take a nap during a documentary on Rwanda's post-genocide society? (Tacky, but I've seen worse happen.) Usually, with me, the movies win.

The economy has definitely impacted the fest. There's a notable lack of hoopla: very few parties, very few big Hollywood blockbusters hoping to stir up buzz, very few announcements of new projects. But I don't like hoopla so that suits me well. Some people come to Cannes and do nothing but go to parties. Some people come to Cannes and never see the sun. That's me. So here are my first reactions to the four movies I saw today.

FISH TANK*** (out of four) -- This British film is set in the "fuck you!" world of lower class England. It's a rundown setting where indifference is the closest anyone gets to affection. Our young heroine head-butts another local girl in the first few minutes, curses out her hapless mother, gets cursed out by her foul-mouthed little sister and generally stomps about. If you've seen a number of these kitchen sink movies in recent years (or perhaps tenement sink-hole would be more accurate), then this milieu feels awfully familiar. Director Andrea Arnold showed promise with her first film, "Red Road," a technically assured film with strong performances that was emotionally distant and went off the rails plot-wise. She improves here with a story that's far more involving and still marvelously subtle. When the mum's new boyfriend tucks our girl in for the night, it's a quiet surprise that he doesn't fondle her in some way -- in other words, you're

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constantly kept on edge and well aware of all the emotions churning away unspoken. Everyone dances in this movie -- the girl, her mom, their friends, the people on TV and it even seems like a way out: our hero is staking it all on an audition for a local club, too clueless to realize they're looking for exotic dancers. Clueless isn't quite fair. She's so far out of the loop that clues simply aren't on the agenda, much less hope or succor. There's a very unnerving twist later in the film that is suspenseful and completely earned: unlike *Red Road*, mysteries aren't withheld from the audience to create false tension. Real tension arises because we are so invested in the characters that we can believe they'd do almost anything, even if they are basically just confused and angry, rather than bad. It's not a triumph, but *Fish Tank* proves the Cannes programmers are right to have faith in Arnold.

MY NEIGHBOR, MY KILLER *** -- This absorbing documentary is about the gacaca trials in Rwanda. These unprecedented attempts at justice gathered people in local villages to let the relatives or victims of genocide confront the people who slaughtered their families. As Philip Gourevitch has written, it's probably unprecedented in history for the surviving victims of genocide to be expected to live side by side with the people who did it. But that's the almost surreal situation in Rwanda, where filmmaker Anne Aghion interviews mostly women who describe the horrors they saw and then strolls a few huts away where the men who did them blithely or self-consciously deny it. In fact, it's surprising that anyone was killed at all in 1994 since virtually every single person Aghion speaks to maybe saw the slaughter or helped in a minor way but denies completely actually murdering anyone. I'm speaking to the director on Sunday and will have more on this film later. I will say something about the half-empty screening: everyone says "never again" but even at a film festival devoted to high art, so many people would rather see anything BUT a movie that tackles such a terrible deed head on.

THIRST ** -- It's a vampire flick and anyone who has seen the Swedish vampire movie *Let The Right One In* will find it hard to enjoy this or any other similar film for a while. *Let The Right One In* just set the bar too high. Still, it's a modest step in the right direction for Korean director Park Chan-wook, who had a success with the oddball thriller *Old Joy* and then delivered two flops. This isn't much better, but at least it feels more like a real film. In it, a priest volunteers for a medical experiment and accidentally gets vampire blood. As if feeding on flesh wasn't bad enough (he tries to stick to people in comas and other "easy blood" sources), he falls for a girl and breaks that vow too. Not that priests take a vow to avoid becoming vampires, but you know what I mean. Concurrently, he becomes a source of veneration by Christians who find out he was the only one of 500 to survive that experiment. That already makes *Thirst* sound more interesting than it deserves: it's sort of funny, sort of creepy, sort of religious, sort of gothic, sort of hip but not REALLY any of these things. Just unsatisfying.

PRECIOUS ** 1/2 -- This film by director Lee Daniels received a ton of acclaim at Sundance, so I'm in the minority for not being blown away by it. However, I do think this story of a large teenage girl pregnant with her second child (both fathered by her biological dad) and finding a ray of hope in an alternative school is a serious leap forward by Daniels. It captures the pugnacious, dreaming, hopeful tone of the book by Sapphire very well and contains a clutch of good performances, including the lead (Gabourey Sidibe), Mariah Carey (!) and especially Mo'Nique as Precious's hateful mother. She's so good it's possible she'll even get an Oscar nomination. I can't wait to see the next film by Daniels. It's called *Tennessee* and it stars Carey. So there.

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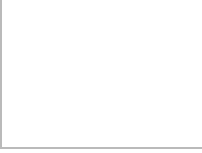
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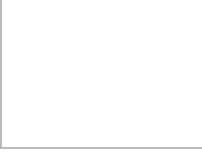
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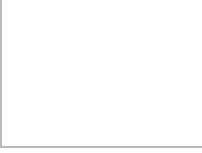
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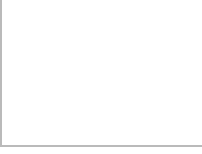
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i actually saw "precious "earlier this year...absolutely AMAZING. monique and mariah should at least be nominated for oscars (i truly believe they deserve to win)

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Park Chan Wook directed OldBoy, not Old Joy. He then followed it up with Sympathy for Lady Vengeance, which was huge in Korea and internationally, not a flop.

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