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Festivals

The 51st New York Film Festival

Lloyd Michaels

Introduction: Being There



The New York Film Festival took place between September 27 and October 13, 2013, offering 36 features in its "Main Slate" program in addition to a dozen revivals, a comprehensive Jean-Luc Godard retrospective, an "Emerging Artists" series on Joanna Hogg

(UK) and Fernando Eimbcke (Mexico), a rich selection of avant-garde films, a "Convergence" of screenings and panels focused on technology and storytelling, plus numerous press conferences and public dialogues with directors, actors, and other movie luminaries.

Unlike the European festivals in Cannes and Berlin that take place in Spring, the NYFF does not award prizes; moreover, many of the selections in the Main Slate have been scheduled for immediate US release, including several prestige studio pictures that will contend for Academy Award nominations. As I write, the buzz over Steve McQueen's 12 Years a Slave*—and, to a lesser extent, Alexander Payne's* Nebraska *and J.C. Chandor's* All Is Lost*—virtually assures these films and their leading actors will contend for Oscars by the time this article will be published. With the resultant reader's fatigue in mind, my report will expand upon my personal reflections on the experience and some of the less promoted festival entries.*

This was my very first major film festival, having annually dispatched with a mixture of envy and gratitude Karin Badt and Gerd Gemünden to report from Cannes and Berlin respectively. Despite its relative proximity to western Pennsylvania, I have resisted going to the NYFF each year—or to the equally appealing and geographically closer Toronto Film Festival in early September—because of my teaching obligations at Allegheny. To be truthful, I have also worried that I might dislike the "scene," morphing into a country mouse in the big city and cringing at the sycophancy of professional journalists seeking private interviews and future press junkets. Thanks to a sabbatical leave that freed me from the academic calendar and a research grant that alleviated much of the personal expense, I planned a full week in the middle of the festival—a period with the maximum number of press conferences—and carefully plotted my daily schedule to incorporate nearly half of the Main Slate. As it turned out, rather than being turned off by my more festival-seasoned colleagues, I made many new friends and reveled in the access to filmmakers who proved to be more serious and articulate than I had anticipated.

When I was a young film scholar, I had decided the world was divided between those who loved Godard and those who loved Truffaut, those who favored intellectually charged modernist cinema with an ideological edge and those who preferred a more romantic style that encouraged emotional identification. Being firmly in the latter camp, I chose to ignore the well-attended Godard retrospective,

content to admire the superbly edited trailer that served to promote the many screenings of his work. And now that I am an old film scholar, I found myself too tired by the end of a day that typically included two or three features and at least one press conference to return to Lincoln Center from my Upper East Side lodgings to catch the late Emerging Artists or Avant Garde programs. Therefore, my base was the fifth Row of the Walter Reade Theater (pictured above), my focus almost totally on the Main Slate.

The first thrill of attending the festival was simply arriving more than an hour before the first press screening at 10 a.m. and joining a line that had already snaked around the building. No need for The Times in my hand or the Kindle in my jacket: I quickly joined lively conversations about the festival on either side of my place in line with lots to learn about the new director, Kent Jones, or the films shown earlier in the week. The waiting time passed quickly.

The Walter Reade has 268 seats, and I was astonished to see every one of them filled for the first screening I attended, James Gray's The Immigrant. *The theater was similarly at or near capacity for every one of the subsequent programs. A hallmark of my pedagogy, initially resisted by students, is to insist that my class attend a communal projection of each assigned film under optimal conditions: darkened auditorium with banked theater seats, large screen and new DVD projector, surround sound and silence in the audience. Students "get it" after the first occasion. I was reminded, however, of the importance of optimal viewing circumstances as I watched immaculate prints on the big screens in the crowded venues of the New York Film Festival. I was, in fact, transported back to 1969, standing in line in a pouring midtown rain to see* Midnight Cowboy, *only to discover upon reaching the box office that the theater was sold out. With my new friends in the line, I waited another two hours for the next show. Back in Manhattan four decades later, I felt that same rush, all the stronger for having spent the intervening years trying to transfer my enthusiasm and connoisseurship to the multiplex generation. How heartening, then, to see the queue outside Walter Reade filled with young journalists as well as mature movie lovers whom I thought I recognized from that line at the New Yorker in 1969.*

Tempering my enthusiasm throughout the week was a single, sobering thought: If you want to experience the New York Film Festival in all its magnitude and richness, you need to have a friend in

Manhattan with a spare couch. The hotels have become prohibitively expensive for long stays, and the commute from the outer boroughs or Newark, where some of my press partners live, can be as tiring as it is time-consuming. For a single week out of 17 days, however, this was as intense and stimulating a movie experience as I have had since I began editing Film Criticism.

U-S-A! U-S-A!: The Return of the American Hero

Although the Main Slate was marked by an unusual number of comedies from both here and abroad, I managed to see only two, *Gloria* (d. Sebastián Lelio) from Chile and Paramount's high- concept holiday movie, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (d. Ben Stiller). My enjoyment of the Stiller vehicle certainly calls into question my own critical judgment under the rapture of seeing *Walter Mitty* at the AMC Lincoln Square 13 on Broadway with a full house of about 400 spectators at an early afternoon public preview. After duly noting the shameless product placements, the uninspired performances by Stiller and his co-star Kristen Wiig, the contradictory attitude towards technology in a screenplay about the demise of print and analog photography that was shot with digital cameras and constructed of episodic CGI action sequences, I nonetheless concluded, despite the negative responses of my colleagues and the anticipated published reviews, that this was the kind of commercial movie that provided mild entertainment and some startling sights to bring a family joy during the Christmas season. There was, for example, a wonderful little digression when Walter imagines himself enduring "the Benjamin Button thing" or when the images evoke a nostalgia for physical objects in the face of the absurd ubiquity of technology. This new *Walter Mitty* has had a long and troubled history. No wonder its romance lacks chemistry, its message ("Always save your scraps") makes little sense. Unlike the protagonist of James Thurber's famous short story or Danny Kaye's memorable incarnation in the original movie, Stiller's Mitty transforms from an escapist into an American Hero—a champion for workers, environmentalists, skateboarders, and lovers—as he becomes not a different character, but his own true self. How could I stomach this pap? Well, it was only my second day in New York. . .

On the first day, I watched a press screening of James Gray's *The Immigrant*, starring Joaquin Phoenix, who, along with the director,

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appeared for the Q & A after the film. Despite his honorable intentions, writer/director Gray stumbled badly in his first foray into big-league filmmaking after his successful smaller works, *Little Odessa* (1994) and *Two Lovers* (2008, also starring Phoenix). His screenplay (with the late Ric Menello) suffers from a lack of focus: at first, *The Immigrant* seems to be a period piece, a heritage film; formally, it evokes the tradition of silent melodrama; eventually, the narrative centers on the protagonist's struggle to transcend self-hatred, its movement towards redemption culminating in two awkward religious scenes, the first in a Catholic confessional, the climax in Phoenix's over-the-top desire to be delivered from his own "Evil." Lest we miss the ideological point, the only character who directly addresses the topic of the American Dream (Jeremy Renner) is a professional magician. Unfortunately, these historical, religious, and political themes remain both obvious and distracting throughout the film's two hours, augmented by Christopher Spelman's intrusive film score. Joaquin Phoenix's self-flagellating performance (reprising some of his moves from *The Master*) and the movie's own self-conscious grandiloquence continually reminded me of a much better actor, Daniel Day-Lewis, in the second half of a similarly misguided American epic, *There Will Be Blood* (2007).

The story follows the progress of a resolute Polish beauty (Marion Cotillard), who is separated from her sister during processing at Ellis Island. The bond between Cotillard's character, Ewa, and the quarantined Belva is never established—Gray eschews depicting the ocean passage in favor of arrival in America—and her sister remains a MacGuffin for the entire film. Ewa persists despite a series of misfortunes with the single goal of reuniting with Belva. Initially cared for and then seduced by the mysterious Bruno Weisz (Phoenix), who first poses as an angel from Travelers Aide before revealing himself to be a burlesque impresario, Ewa becomes a self-described "lost lamb," sliding easily into type, the whore with a heart of gold. Renner plays the unhappy role of her star-crossed lover and Bruno's cousin Emil, aka Orlando the Magician. His rivalry with Bruno culminates in a truly ludicrous standoff, one man pointing a gun, the other a knife, Ewa cringing in the background. D.W Griffith and Lillian Gish did this sort of film a hundred years ago, and did it better. Sadly, *The Immigrant* is the kind of movie that restores to melodrama its once bad name.

At the press conference, Gray handled most of the questions forthrightly while his star slouched silently on stage, performing his

best Brando impression, the actor as indifferent genius. Gray spoke of his admiration for Elia Kazan's *America America* and detailed some anecdotes from his family's history that made their way into the film. Joaquin Phoenix, meanwhile, chewed his gum.

Robert Redford was much more enlightening and engaging as he talked about his new film, *All Is Lost*, along with the director/writer J.C. Chandor. Fresh off the success (at Sundance, among other festivals) of his first feature, *Margin Call* (2011), Chandor described how he pitched his screenplay to Redford and, after giving personal assurance that he wasn't "crazy," obtained the star's immediate commitment to the project. Similar to *Gravity* (not included in the NYFF but playing at an Imax theater two blocks from Lincoln Center), which also depicts an isolated American testing the limits of human ingenuity and endurance after an unforeseen accident involving random "debris," *All Is Lost* becomes a venture into "pure cinema": one actor, practically no spoken words—a brief voiceover at the beginning, an SOS after 25 minutes, a single profanity a half hour later—and the simplest of plots. Redford reported how the 33-page script was incredibly detailed, leaving him impressed by how Chandor had visualized exactly what he wanted. The film as delivered reflects both director's and actor's command of the material.

Like the protagonists of two great American short stories written more than a century ago that the film closely resembles, Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" (1897) and Jack London's "To Build a Fire" (1908), Chandor's hero is anonymous, listed in the credits simply as "Our Man." London's story, in particular, about a lost prospector struggling to survive alone in the Arctic cold, seems an unconscious source for *All is Lost*, whose shipwrecked sailor exhibits not only London's character's unrelenting focus on the mechanics of survival but also Ernest Hemingway's ideal of "grace under pressure" in the face of undeserved misfortune and certain doom. Chandor has managed to create a narrative that is simultaneously exciting and contemplative. Our Man, without back story (save for the wedding ring we occasionally glimpse and the letter he recites in the film's framing monologue) and a bare minimum of psychology (in one wonderful moment, Redford incongruously decides to shave, and we comprehend his need for routine and his commitment to the future), nevertheless elicits the audience's empathy, admiration, and respect.

Redford gives a great performance. Repeat: Redford gives

a great performance. In close-up, he progressively registers his character's competence, persistence, despair, hope, and resignation, but it is his *physical* performance, beautifully rendered by Chandor's athletic camera in long takes, that is most impressive. The 77-year old actor thrashes about the cabin and across the deck, climbs the mast, swims underwater for what seems a minute at a time, and after a while, the spectator stops looking for the edits, the stunt man, the CGI effects. *It's Redford*, Our Man, after all! If *The Immigrant* denigrates the melodrama, *All is Lost* restores the action movie to a state of grace. After the screening, Chandor testified that the actor himself appears in all but a single shot (I assume it is a spectacular low-angle view of Our Man at the top of the masthead). Redford spoke of his boyhood in Santa Monica when he became "comfortable in the water" and yet at the same time awed by the vastness of the horizon and, as an adult, the infinite depth of the ocean.

The Q & A provoked an interesting disagreement among the audience about the film's ending, which, again much as in *Gravity*, proved to be my sole disappointment. I was absolutely certain that Our Man, like Dr. Ryan Stone (Sandra Bullock), was miraculously saved in the end. A member of the press with a similar impression asked Chandor if he had considered an alternate ending in which Our Man's fate was death. Chandor seemed confused, believing it was clear his character had died but then warming to the idea that his fate remained ambiguous. Unfortunately, the discussion did not proceed to other opinions from the audience—all the "press conferences" were decidedly brief—although I continued to debate this point with my companions in the queue the next morning.

Our Man's ultimate hope for rescue rests with the same kind of international supertanker that serves as the vehicle for a different kind of American action movie, *Captain Phillips*, directed by the Englishman Paul Greengrass, who gave us two of the entries in the Bourne franchise (2004, 2007) along with *United 93* (2006), which his new film closely resembles. In *All is Lost,* Redford's sailboat is critically damaged by a float-away cargo container of cheap imported sneakers—an opportunity for Chandor to infuse his tale with some allegorical reverberations about capitalist consumerism (Our Man's richly appointed yacht providing counterpoint). In *Captain Phillips*, the material under Tom Hanks' command aboard the gigantic freighter—the same sort of commercial vessel by which Our Man

hopes to be rescued—is precious cargo indeed. Because the film is based on a recent real-life event, the capture of the Alabama Maersk by Somali pirates in 2009, *Captain Phillips* lacks the built-in suspense of Chandor's imagined adventure and, as played by Tom Hanks, the Maersk's captain lacks Our Man's fitness—technical, emotional, and physical—for the task. Put another way, Phillips is not Our Man, but Everyman. The film is similarly ordinary: its social commentary is clumsily expressed in the first few minutes of dialogue between the departing captain and his wife ("The world is moving so fast"); its ethos for survival proves no more eloquent ("Stick together, and we'll be all right," Phillips instructs the crew). Given the protagonist's mediocrity—and I give Hanks credit for not ascribing greater virtue or eloquence to his character—and the Somalis' two-dimensionality, despite the striking presence of their leader, Muse (Barkhad Abdi), the movie requires a strong screenplay or an original visual style to survive the spectator's impatience at its 126 minute duration. Neither writer Billy Ray nor director Greengrass is equal to the occasion. Reassuring the crew after capturing the ship, Muse can only paraphrase Phillips' message: "Don't worry," he tells them, "Everything going to be okay." In the desperate final hours, he resists the captain's advice to surrender with a similar platitude: "I came too far. I can't give up." Watching the Navy SEALS executing their rescue is a bit like enduring the last half hour of *Zero Dark Thirty* displaced from Afghanistan to the Somali Basin. *U-S-A! U-S-A!*

I was not present for the Q & A with Greengrass, Hanks, and Abdi, which was fine because I truly had no questions for the filmmakers. Instead, I would have liked to ask Kent Jones and the selection committee why they had chosen *Captain Phillips* to be part of the Main Slate—and not, for example, *Gravity*, much the better film.

Juxtaposed with *The Immigrant*, *All is Lost*, and *Captain Phillips*, Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* represents filmmaking on a more modest scale, the kind of low-budget movie, carefully shot in black-and-white with character actors mixed in with non-professionals, that once defined my conception of the art cinema as well as the film festival. As Karin Badt reported in the previous issue of *Film Criticism*, it was warmly received when it premiered at Cannes, earning Bruce Dern the Best Actor prize. *Nebraska* is a road movie—Payne noted that he read Bob Nelson's script around the same time he was making

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Sideways (2004), but did not want to repeat himself so quickly—about an eccentric old man's journey with his son from Billings to Lincoln to collect a bogus sweepstakes prize. The film begins and ends with a long shot of the ribbon of road extending to the horizon, beckoning, as it did Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, the spirit of the American vagabond. What the Coen brothers did for Minnesota (in *Fargo*), Payne does here for his home state, capturing in Cinemascope the sweep of the countryside in a series of slow pans across the flattened landscape while recording the laconic observations of the natives. "Doesn't look finished to me," Woody Grant (= Grant Wood—get it?) says when his son drives him to Mt. Rushmore. The tone subtly shifts from funny ("Know what I'd do with a million dollars?" Woody's long-suffering nag of a wife asks early on. "I'd put him in a home.") to poignant as the alcoholic, insensitive father ("Have a beer with your old man. Be something.") reveals hidden parts of himself to his sometimes resentful, sometimes bewildered son. Although Payne ultimately exposes the mercenary instincts that motivate many of these salt-of-the-earth midwesterners, as he had with the islanders in *The Descendants* (2011), *Nebraska* concludes with affirmation and reconciliation. The audience at the Walter Reade seemed to love it.

Although I was not quite as admiring as my companions, I left the theater convinced that if all movies were projected this way, as they once were, instead of on I-Pods and laptops, then more films would be shot in black-and-white. I felt the same way after seeing Noah Baumbach's wonderful *Frances Ha* earlier this summer. Kudos here to *Nebraska*'s cinematographer, Phedon Papamichael. Dern's character harkens back to the antiheroes he and Jack Nicholson played in Bob Rafelson's films forty years ago—I was particularly reminded of *Five Easy Pieces* (1970)—although the anger and disappointment that constitute Woody's integrity ("He just believes the stuff that people tell him.") has lost its edginess, a concession, perhaps, to the different expectations of today's movie audience.

The Internationals: Reprising the French Auteur

In addition to the Godard retrospective, the NYFF reinforced its reputation for francophilia by selecting no less than seven French features for the Main Slate, among them Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, which swept away audiences at Cannes, and Claude Lanzmann's *The Last of the Unjust*, a documentary about

Benjamin Murmelstein, the last Jewish elder of Theresienstadt. Unfortunately, my schedule allowed me time for only two French films, both of which proved underwhelming.

Claire Denis presented her newest work, *Bastards*, which can best be described as a modernist film noir that tests the audience's comprehension of the plot and tolerance for disturbing images. The fractured narrative (Denis spoke afterwards of constructing each scene "brick by brick," but my colleagues in the audience could not describe the resulting edifice) is framed by two arresting scenes: a young woman walking the streets completely naked save for her high-heeled shoes and the climactic moment, the revelation of a pornographic surveillance video accompanied by a powerful soundtrack from the U.K. rock band Tindersticks ("Bring your love inside me"), with whom Denis has often collaborated. Alas, these two cinephiliac moments could not compensate for the dreary ninety minutes that separated them, so that the general effect of *Bastards* was, for me, a sad case of out-of-sight, out-of mind.

Denis is a compelling figure in person, the auteur of several great films: *Chocolat* (1988), *Beau Travail* (1999), *35 Shots of Rum* (2008). The audience warmly greeted her at the press conference but seemed at a loss what to ask her after the screening, laughing nervously at her responses. "I am not witty," she admonished us. "I am very sinister." Apparently, *Bastards* was something of a confessional film for her, although it struck me as her most impersonal film to date. "Why did she make it?" I thought of asking. She mentioned wanting to shoot a movie using interiors almost exclusively, but she had recently done so in *35 Shots of Rum*; she also spoke of wanting to portray "fierce" women, but she had done exactly that in her last feature, *White Material* (2009). I left the film and the Q & A believing that Denis had found nothing resonant in the script, which she co-wrote with Jean-Pol Fargeau, but decided to make *Bastards* as a technical exercise and out of commitment to her collaborators. She did not confess to these motives, however.

Catherine Breillart's *Abuse of Weakness* certainly *was* a confessional film, a harrowing portrait of her debilitating stroke and subsequent destructive relationship with an international con man. The film had its North American premiere in Alice Tully Hall before a packed audience of a thousand spectators, followed by the appearance on stage of the director along with the star, Isabelle Huppert. Like its French-language predecessors, *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*

(2007) and *Amour* (2012), the first half of *Abuse of Weakness* is marked by the leading actor's formidable performance as a stroke victim. One can't help wondering, in fact, if Huppert drew upon the experience of co-starring with Emmanuelle Riva just a year ago. After painstaking rehabilitation, her character, named Maud Schoenberg, recovers sufficiently to undertake a new film project, whereupon she comes under the thrall of a convicted swindler, Vilko Piran (played by the French rapper Kool Shen), who proceeds to exploit her near-fatal attraction to him. Nothing about Vilko actually accounts for Maud's obsession over him ("He inspires me," Maud insists. "He's an amazing character."). In this second half, Huppert reincarnates her role as the compulsive, masochistic *maitresse* in Michael Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* (2002). As in that film, Maud engages in a power game in which her arrogance merely temporarily conceals a terrifying weakness. Only in the final scene when she gives legal testimony about Vilko's exploitation does she begin, in the face of physical and financial degradation, to reassert a small measure of control. Huppert conveys this defiance through a sustained "look back" at the camera, one that recalled for me her unforgettable expression at the end of *The Lacemaker* (d. Claude Goretta, 1977).

If Huppert impersonates Breillart's weakness on the screen, Breillart herself embodied it on the stage. It was indeed more shocking than anything in *Abuse of Weakness* to see this brave, iconoclastic director, her face almost entirely shielded by her black hair, limp to her seat with the assistance of a cane and struggle to respond to questions from the audience. We became gradually aware of her raised left arm with fingers grotesquely curled, exactly as Huppert, now at her side, had portrayed her in the film. Life imitating art imitating life.

After the depressing narratives of these two French entries, Sebastián Lelio's *Gloria*, from Chile, provided blessed relief. Gerd Gemünden reviewed this film in his report from the Berlinale, where Paulina Garcia won the Silver Bear for Best Actress, but I wanted to add a few words about her delightful, poignant performance. Garcia's face and body movements are remarkably pliant: at times in the movie she appears to be in her mid-fifties, elsewhere twenty years younger. (For the record, Garcia is 43.) Her character continually vacillates between acquiescence and assertion, hope and despair, anger and concern; ultimately, she stands for a resiliency that Lelio associates with the political evolution of Chile itself. (Gloria was produced by Pablo

Larraín, also the producer/director of the acclaimed political trilogy *Tony Manero*, *Post Mortem*, and *No*). During the press conference, the director spoke of how Gloria parallels the "collective consciousness" of his country after Pinochet, struggling to be seen and respected. The film hints at this connection in the glimpses of street protests that provide a political background for Gloria's amorous adventures with a retired military man, now the proprietor of a paintball park. Lelio also described how Gloria's oversized glasses, an homage to one of his favorite movies, *Tootsie* (1982), served as a symbol of the personal and national circumstances. Garcia added that the glasses were, for her, a kind of mask that she removes in the film's final scene when she resolutely joins the party dancing to the infectious music of Laura Branigan's "Gloria." At first, this ending reminded me of the happy feeling at the conclusion of *Mama Mia*, but something about Paulina Garcia's determined movements and fixed expression evoked a very different performance, Robert DeNiro's shadowboxing in front of the dressing room mirror ("You're the boss!"), the closing shot of *Raging Bull* (1980). I would have liked to ask Sebastián Lelio about that.

Gloria will be Chile's entry for Best Foreign Film in this year's Academy Awards. Agnieszka
Holland's monumental *Burning Bush* was ruled ineligible for an Oscar because it was first shown as a television miniseries in the Czech Republic. The four-hour film depicts the legal and political events that followed Jan Palach's public self-immolation in the aftermath of the Prague Spring. As a kind of sequel to Philip Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), Holland's narrative focuses on the despair that settled over the country following the Soviet invasion in 1968, against which Palach's suicide was meant to protest. Made for the small screen, the story is told chronologically, the mise-en-scène and editing remain conventional in service to the events of the seven months following Palach's death. The only noteworthy cinematic technique is Holland's incorporation of documentary footage from the period, including several of the identical images seen in Kaufman's film.



Three ideas stand out in Holland's detailed re-telling of history. First is the persistence of Palach's mother and brother in seeking justice after Jan's action is officially described as an accident by the Communist press and party leaders. Second is the dogged investigation by the Palachs' lawyer, Dagmar Buresová (Tatiana Pauhofová), who eventually uncovers proof of the calumny against Palach: the tape recording of a speech at a party assembly where the history student is re-cast as a pathetic dupe of anti-Communist conspirators. Despite this conclusive evidence of both the government's defamation of Palach's character and the cover-up that followed as well as the perjured testimony of key witnesses, the presiding judge delivers a verdict written for him by Soviet superiors. The Palachs lose the case, Mrs. Palach is ostracized by her neighbors who at first supported her; Jan's coffin is exhumed by party officials without the family's knowledge and privately burned ("Where is my son?" his mother asks, when she first visits the empty grave); and Buresová's and her husband's careers (he, like Tomas in Kundera's novel and Kaufman's film, is a doctor) are ruined. And thus the third theme of the film: the far-reaching corruption and unstinting malevolence of the Soviet Union's control over the eastern bloc countries. In its final three hours, *Burning Bush* feels less like Kaufman's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* than *The Lives of Others* (2007)—but without the faceless hero who resists the party line and intervenes on the side of justice.

History, however, provides the ultimate justice. In Holland's brief epilogue, it is January, 1989, twenty years after the death of Jan Palach: the Soviet Union collapses, a million Czechs gather in Wencesles Square to celebrate the event. Holland concludes her narrative with documentary footage of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the gathering in Prague. We witness young people circulating pictures of their martyred hero, Jan Palach. A title card announces the most satisfying result for an audience that has endured this long, frustrating political drama: Dagmar Buresová is appointed the new government's Minister of Justice.

Agnieszka Holland is herself a compelling witness to the events she depicts in *Burning Bush*. In an HBO "Directors Dialogues" at the Walter Reade Theater, she described being a film student in Prague in 1967-71 and being caught up in, first, the liberating spirit of the times and, soon after, the political activism that followed the Russian tanks. "The real initiation" into life, she called it. Milan Kundera was her teacher that first year in the national film school, and later, when both were expatriates living in Paris, she read the manuscript of Kundera's novel and worked on a screen adaptation with the author. It was a bitter disappointment when Hollywood came knocking with a much larger offer for the movie rights, and Kundera agreed to sell. I asked Holland what she thought of Kaufman's film and how it might have influenced her. She initially noted the romanticized aspects that she scrupulously tried to avoid in her own film. She also acknowledged her bitterness at the time that she was unable "to do the film I was born to make." But Holland then generously averred that she had recently re-watched *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and found it "very good." Moreover, Phil Kaufman had seen *her* film and warmly praised it, their friendship thereby reaffirmed. Sometimes, I thought, history does have a way of working out.

Because the events of Prague Spring so apparently mirror recent events in the Middle East, *Burning Bush* feels like a contemporary story. Not so Ralph Fiennes' *The Invisible Woman*, which, along with *The Immigrant*, were the only two period pieces included in the Main Slate. The British seem to be the Lords of the heritage film, and this mid-nineteenth century tale of Charles Dickens' secret affair with the minor actress Ellen Ternan (first uncovereded in the eponymous biography by Claire Tomalin published in 1990) will likely please admirers of *Downton Abbey* or the recent film adaptations of Jane Austen's novels.

Early on, before her husband becomes involved with the 18-year- old actress, Mrs. Dickens (Joanna Scanlan) attends Dickens' staging of his friend Wilkie Collins' play, *The Frozen Deep*, in which Ellen (Felicity Jones), her mother, and two older sisters perform. During the after-party, Catherine Dickens comments about the play, "'Tis a fiction designed to entertain," to which Ellen sweetly replies, "Surely it is more than that." This exchange, of course, speaks to the film's own ambition. Fiennes and his screenwriter, Abi Morgan, were drawn to both Charles Dickens' enormous personal energy and Ellen Ternan's predicament, first as the celebrated author's kept woman and, later, as a self-created lady with a solid marriage and children of her own.

Fiennes effortlessly conveys Dickens' charisma, his artistic genius, and his struggle to balance his moral commitments. Collins defends himself and Charles as "pioneers" when Ellen resists her mentor's intentions to begin a romantic relationship: "He is a good man, trying to be a good man. But he is a great man." Ellen replies that women are left behind in this moral revolution, anticipating the feminist concerns that underlie the subsequent narrative. The insensitivity that underlies his obsession with Ellen is brutally displayed in the film's best scene, in which Catherine, the mother of Dickens' ten children, is ordered by her husband to give to Ellen an expensive piece of jewelry Charles had purchased for her birthday that was mistakenly delivered to the family's home at Gad Hill. Joanna Scanlan, who has a role as thankless in light of Fiennes' bravura as Catherine's in the shadow of Charles' brilliance, is riveting in this moment, maintaining her dignity while forced to travel to her husband's mistress' fashionable flat and return the necklace to the woman he has deemed "its rightful recipient." After the screening, Scanlan spoke about how she played the scene, finding a counter to her character's humiliation in the natural curiosity about "the other woman," even the "strong bond" Catherine shared with Ellen in their love for Charles but also their knowledge of his human weaknesses.

The Invisible Woman displays a beautifully detailed production design and some interesting camera work (film, not digital), with the characters often shot from behind to suggest the mystery beneath their public lives. The feminist theme of the two central women's social predicament and Ellen's re-invention of herself after the interlude with Charles, however, never fully emerges, in part because of Fiennes' dominating presence. The other reason, alas, lies in Felicity

Jones' lackluster performance, which remains more suitable for Wilkie Collins' stage trifle than Ralph Fiennes' large screen production.

And the Winner is...



As mentioned at the outset, The New York Film Festival is not a competition. No Palmes d'Or or Silver Bears for anyone. But one doesn't watch a dozen movies in the space of a week without making comparative judgments. Acknowledging that I missed several films that truly interested me (*Like Father, Like Son*, *A Touch of Sin*, *Blue is the Warmest Color*, *Her*), the best feature I did see was, by a clear margin, Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*. Adapted from Solomon Northrup's first-hand account of being kidnapped and sold into slavery, published in 1851 and, until now, largely unfamiliar to all but specialists in the literary canon of American slave narratives, *12 Years a Slave* brings the meaning of slavery to life in a way I have never experienced in a movie theater. The sheer physical labor of cutting sugar cane or picking cotton, for example, conveys early on the brutality of this "peculiar institution," as Southerners described it, as much as the film's climactic scene of protracted, sadistic whipping—an image so revolting that I looked away from the screen. But McQueen is also interested in depicting the natural landscape, rendered beautiful and indifferent by the cinematographer Sean Bobbit, with whom the director collaborated on his previous films, *Hunger* (2008) and *Shame*

(2011). Mostly, the lush plantations around New Orleans remain in the background, but in one striking shot midway through the narrative, McQueen deploys a micro closeup of boll weevils devouring a cotton crop that recalls Terrence Malick's locust invasion in *Days of Heaven* (1979). Hans Zimmer's score adds to the epic tone of the narrative and balances the personal sorrow expressed in the slaves' work songs (particularly in the sustained singing of "Roll Jordan Roll"). The principal performers—Chiwetel Ejiofor, Michael Fassbender, Lupita Nyong'o—are all convincing and compelling; in contrast to *The Invisible Woman*, they never seem to be acting in a costume drama or declaiming their lines. You have read all these superlatives before, of course, in the unanimous laudatory reviews, so I will conclude with a note about the director, who appeared unaccompanied after the press screening.

The British director Steve McQueen is of West Indian descent and spoke about making this film "to embrace slavery, make it mine," and thereby escape the "shame" that had previously marked his own thoughts on the subject. After researching slavery and reading numerous nineteenth century slave narratives, he attached himself to Solomon Northrup's book because he sensed how everyone might be able to relate to this story of a free man with a family suddenly cast into slavery. McQueen is an outgoing man who seemed to relish the opportunity to talk about his film; indeed, he appeared disappointed when the Q & A was abruptly halted to keep on schedule, and I was able to engage him in conversation backstage about the adaptation process. Had I been better prepared, we might have proceeded to lunch together. His accessibility (he was interviewed by Charlie Rose a few nights later) will certainly help the film on the road to the Academy Awards.

Books

Film Criticism **values a lively discourse about the printed word on film and encourages potential book reviewers to contact the Book Review Editor, Harry Kloman, <kloman@pitt.edu>**

A Companion to Woody Allen
Edited by Peter J. Bailey and Sam B. Girgus
Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. 583 pp; cloth $195

Reviewed by Lloyd Michaels

At nearly 600 pages and almost two pounds, *A Companion to Woody Allen*, edited by Peter J. Bailey and Sam B. Girgus, is a "heavy" addition to the Wiley-Blackwell series on film directors in several senses beyond its physical heft. Most of the articles exhibit the gravitas that attends to film theory and philosophy; the majority of contributors are advanced scholars with significant publications and prestigious academic positions; the hardcover edition comes with a weighty price tag (the Kindle version costs $90). Unlike many uneven anthologies of lesser cost but also lesser value, the *Companion* brings together a collection of twenty-six essays plus the editors' introduction and afterword that are nearly all erudite, well-researched, carefully constructed, and wide ranging in their arguments. Editors Peter J. Bailey (St. Lawrence) and Sam B. Girgus (Vanderbilt) seem well suited to their task, having each published a significant book on Allen, and the majority of contributors, too, are senior scholars who have written major works on literature, culture, religion and philosophy. For serious followers of this prolific and controversial filmmaker, particularly those who have remained attentive to his 21st century output, the volume amounts to a comprehensive updating of critical thinking about Woody Allen.

After a "classic" period of extraordinary success from 1977 (*Annie Hall*) through 1989 (*Crimes and Misdemeanors*)—with movies like *Manhattan*, *Zelig*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, and *Radio Days* in between—Allen became a polarizing figure in both his professional and personal life following his scandalous breakup with Mia Farrow in 1992. For

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