

FILMS OF THE YEAR, 2009

JAMES NAREMORE MAKES HIS SELECTION OF THE YEAR'S BEST U.S. RELEASES

1. *POLICE, ADJECTIVE*

Corneliu Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective*, the story of a law officer who has a guilty conscience about one of his investigations, could be described as an anti-police procedural containing a great deal of grey humor. Even so, many elements of the *policier* are on display. The detective protagonist, Christi (Dragos Buçur), doggedly shadows a suspect, writes daily reports in a battered squad room, gathers evidence from the scene of a crime, stakes out the suspect's house, interviews an informant, searches automotive and criminal records, and so forth. We also see moments of "human interest" typical of police films, showing the detective's domestic life and quotidian activity in the squad room. (One of Christi's colleagues wants to lose weight by joining a group that plays "foot tennis." Like me, you probably don't know what that is, but we later see Christi playing it during off-hours.) The film is more significant for what is missing. No chase scene, no sex, no violence. The setting is Vaslui, a drab Romanian city (Porumboiu's home town) where the streets are half deserted and winter is coming on; the justice system is populated by a feckless, irritable staff and their pompous supervisors; the home life of the newly married detective is troubled; his hard work is completely ignored by the city prosecutor and police chief; and the unseen arrest of the culprit—a teenager with no previous record who will likely spend three years in jail for smoking hash—is little more than a reflexive exercise in bureaucratic authority.

Police, Adjective is also a film about language. The characters discuss the meaning of words and the camera lingers over Christi's handwritten reports of his activity. ("The suspect did not meet anyone, did not use his mobile phone, and smoked a single cigarette, which I checked and which is not relevant to this case.") In the powerful climactic scene we are given a dictionary definition of the title: the adjectival form of "police," we are told, can be used to describe a police officer,

NAREMORE'S FILMS OF 2009

1. *Police, Adjective* (Corneliu Porumboiu)
2. *Shirin* (Abbas Kiarostami)
3. *Tulpan* (Sergey Dvortsevov)
4. *Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno* (Serge Bromberg and Ruxandra Medrea)
5. *35 Shots of Rum* (Claire Denis)
6. *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow)
7. *Sita Sings the Blues* (Nina Paley)
8. *Me and Orson Welles* (Richard Linklater)
9. *Summer Hours* (Olivier Assayas)
10. *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl* (Manoel de Oliveira)

Honorable mention (alphabetical by director): *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (Wes Anderson), *Goodbye Solo* (Ramin Bahrani), *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp), *Sugar* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), *Bright Star* (Jane Campion), *Ne change rien* (Pedro Costa), *Lorna's Silence* (Jean-Pierre Dardenne and Luc Dardenne), *Loren Cass* (Chris Fuller), *Where the Wild Things Are* (Spike Jonze), *The Headless Woman* (Lucrecia Martel), *Seraphine* (Martin Provost), *An Education* (Lone Sherfig), *The Maid* (Sebastian Silva), *The Informant!//The Girlfriend Experience* (Steven Soderbergh), *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino), *The Beaches of Agnes* (Agnès Varda).

cer, a police novel or film involving "mysterious happenings that are resolved in the end by the ingenuity of a police officer or detective," and "police states or regimes which are supported by the police and which exercise control through repressive methods." ("Ridiculous!" the detective's boss declares when he hears the last example. "All states depend upon the police!") Three other terms are defined: "law," "moral" (one meaning of which is "conclusion contained in a text, especially in a fable"), and "conscience."

Porumboiu has said that in the long scenes of Christi's stakeout, which contain the only POV shots of the film, he was thinking of Antonioni's *Blowup* (1966). We watch ordi-



Vaslui gumshoe

Police, Adjective. Photo: Marius Panduru. Courtesy of IFC Films.

nary comings and goings, their details too far away to become fetishized, until the virtually empty street and its ambient sounds (the bark of a dog, the squeak of a bicycle, a car engine, the wind, the chirping of birds) take on a blank quality. This is a world in which meaning is imposed upon nothing by the raw authority of the state. At dinner one evening, Christi's wife (Irina Saulescu), a high-school language teacher, patronizingly tells him that he made a spelling mistake in one of the reports he left lying about the house: as of two years ago, the Romanian Academy has decided that "not any" is a "negative pronominal adjective" and should be written as one word. His boss later informs him in the tones of a self-righteous intellectual that "conscience" is an outdated concept; once backed by the authority of the Bible, it now has various interpretations. Today, he points out, what is good or bad is determined by "law," which is written by civil officials. The police have a duty to enforce law, not to follow the vagaries of individual conscience.

The entire film is rendered "objectively," in sequence shots or long takes viewed from a distance and filled with dead time. This style has become a hallmark of contemporary art movies, particularly those of the Romanian new wave, but too little has been written about the different rhythms and moods it can sustain. In the case of *Police, Adjective*, the undramatic, dialogue-less sequences—in which Christi follows suspects on foot, walks down hallways, eats

three complete meals, and waits to be admitted to his boss's office—eventually create a wry, humorous effect that Porumboiu has called "absurd time," while also eliciting our admiration for Christi's literal-minded professionalism, simple integrity, and graceful movement. Dragos Buçur, whose performance has no close-ups and only the subtlest changes of posture and expression, usually enters slightly after a scene begins, opening a door or emerging from around a corner, his head slightly bowed, his dark eyes peering ahead like a hunter. His movements were modeled to some extent on Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), but Buçur also contributes a sad, patient face. He is as important to this film as Delphine Seyrig is to Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), which uses dead time in more painterly fashion and with more disturbing results.

One of the most elaborate and slyly amusing scenes in the film, an eleven-minute sequence shot during which we hear an entire song maddeningly repeated three times, is played almost deadpan. It shows Christi returning home after a long day and engaging in a discussion of language with his wife. The camera is positioned in the foyer of a small apartment, panning occasionally to look into the open doorways of different rooms. The wife, who resents Christi's absences, sits at a computer, making restless movements in a swivel chair and watching a YouTube clip of a Euro-trashy pop tune, its volume turned up full blast: "I won't leave you, love,



Language games

Police, Adjective. Photos: Marius Panduru. Courtesy of IFC Films.

for a moment of illusion. I won't leave your side if you will be with me. What would the sea be without the sun? What would the field be without the flower? What would today be without tomorrow? What would life be without you?" She barely acknowledges Christi, telling him that dinner is in the kitchen. He goes into the tiny kitchen and through the door-frame we watch him solemnly eat the meal. The song comes to an end, starts up again, ends, and starts again. "This food is good," Christi shouts, turning in his chair to take a beer from the refrigerator. He finishes his meal, goes into the living room, slouches on a couch near his wife, toys with a TV remote, and puts his beer atop the computer tower. The wife moves the beer to her desk and continues to watch the screen. "This song doesn't make any sense," Christi says. The wife says she hasn't thought much about the lyrics, which are "like images." She explicates: "I won't leave you love.' So it's an anaphora, a rhetorical device . . . It tries to define this ideal love by associating it with symbols." "Are they images or symbols?" Christi asks, playing dumb. The wife points out that he has been drinking too much, shuts down the computer, and prepares for bed. Christi goes into the bathroom to brush his teeth. "It's like, 'what would toothpaste be without a toothbrush,'" he says innocently. His wife smirks and shakes her head.

A more important and affectively complex sequence occurs near the end, when Christi and his colleague, a big-bellied, slow-witted fellow with a stone face, are summoned to meet with their chief (Vlad Ivanov, who played the abortionist in Christian Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* from 2007). They wait interminably in an outer office where a secretary types documents into a computer. The colleague tries to find a newspaper to read: "I've read *The Times*, I've read *The Journal*; let's see what *The Truth* has to say." Eventually admitted to the chief, the two men sit facing one another at either side of the screen, like schoolchildren meeting with the principal, while their boss sits between them in

a slightly elevated position behind his desk. The camera angle barely changes but the mood shifts from comic to sinister. The chief glowers at Christi, tells him he's made a spelling mistake in one of his reports, and quietly orders him to mount a sting operation and arrest the kid he has been following. Christi argues that the boy is a harmless hash-smoker whose so-called friend has "squealed" on him. "Denounced," the chief corrects, and repeats his order. Christi refuses: "I don't want to have that kid on my conscience." The chief asks him to define "conscience" and begins to conduct an elaborate, increasingly humiliating school lesson. First he orders the fat colleague to write Christi's definition on a blackboard ("Conscience is something within me that stops me from doing something bad that afterwards I'd regret") and then has the secretary find a Romanian dictionary. He leans back in pleasure: "Lads, you know what we're doing here? Dialectics!" When at last the dictionary arrives, he orders Christi to look up words and read the definitions aloud (an insert shows the printed pages). "You no longer know what you are," he concludes, and explains that Christi must decide "if you're going to be a police officer and enforce the law or if you're going to follow this moral law of yours and leave the police."

Porumboiu depicts a society barely emerged from autocratic rule—a still Kafkaesque state that subordinates fear of doing harm to others (the dictates of conscience and morality) to fear of transgression and punishment (the dictates of law). But *Police, Adjective* also raises philosophical and ethical issues about modernity in general. Christi, like all of us, is hemmed in by the politics of language, the rule of law, and the government filing system. He suffers from what in English during the Middle Ages was aptly called the "agenbite of inwit" (the modernized spelling is by James Joyce), which might be defined as "the repeated biting of inner knowledge." He must repress this biting if he wishes to remain a dutiful instrument of near-universal bureaucracy.

2. SHIRIN

Abbas Kiarostami's films are usually situated on the boundary between fiction and documentary, but his latest, *Shirin*, belongs in a zone somewhere between fiction and museum installation. It consists entirely of close-ups of women sitting in a movie theater as they watch an Iranian popular film. The women are played by 112 of Iran's professional actresses, plus Juliette Binoche, who happened to be working with Kiarostami on another project and was nearby. The film they supposedly watch is a fanciful, sentimental melodrama entitled *Shirin*, based on Nezami Ganjavi's *Khosrow and Shirin*, a celebrated epic poem of the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. But in fact, this film doesn't exist. Kiarostami constructed a "theater" in his living room, directing his actors to react to a spot on the wall behind the camera. Afterward, he

invented an off-screen soundtrack made up of formalized dialogue, horses galloping, water splashing, swords clashing, and stirring music by four contemporary Iranian composers. The result is a metafilm of considerable richness, giving us the opportunity to "see" a movie in our minds as we watch the play of emotion across women's faces and become conscious of our own role as cinematic spectators.

For critical insight and useful cultural background on *Shirin*, I recommend a conversation between Jonathan Rosenbaum and Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, published on Rosenbaum's website, jonathanrosenbaum.com. (I also strongly recommend Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum's 2003 book, *Abbas Kiarostami*, published by University of Illinois Press.) My own remarks will be concerned mainly with close-ups and film acting. As we know, Lev Kuleshov theorized that the meaning of facial expressions in close-ups is determined in



Fascinating faces

Shirin. Directed and produced by Abbas Kiarostami 2008. DVD: BFI (U.K.).

the last instance by editing, and his colleague Vsevolod Pudovkin praised actors who could simply think for the camera in “gestureless moments.” Kiarostami’s film partly confirms such notions: we read the women’s faces in relation to the sounds we hear from off-screen; there are no reverse angles, but the post-synchronized soundtrack sutures the close-ups into an imaginary world and motivates the women’s reactions. This account, however, is inadequate, in part because the actors perform essential work. Kiarostami surely told them what kind of movie they were watching and directed them to react to its different moods. Significantly, his previous films have made considerable use of nonprofessional actors, whereas here all the players are professional. I very much doubt that *Shirin* could achieve its effects without their ability to convey meaning with minimal resources. To appreciate what they contribute, we might do better to recall Béla Balász’s rhapsodic praise of the unique power of silent film close-ups to turn faces into windows to the inner life; the isolated face in movies, he writes, can “radiate a tender human attitude in the contemplation of hidden things,” reveal to us “what is really happening under the surface of appearances,” and speak to us in “silent soliloquy.”

The women of *Shirin* are viewed in standard-sized close-ups that bring their shoulders into view and allow them to use their hands as expressive instruments; they appear to be seated at different places in the auditorium, gazing at the screen from slightly different angles, and are cleverly lit, ostensibly by the soft, flickering light of the screen but also by a subtle backlighting. Each covers her hair and frames her face with a scarf. Some are old and some are young, and they appear to represent slightly different social classes. Some are in a black limbo, others in a position that enables us to see men and women behind them. All have lovely, lived-in faces; indeed one of the pleasures of the film is a growing appreciation of the variety of faces and the empathy that comes from looking at them—a phenomenon that needs a philosopher such as Emmanuel Levinas to fully explore.

One might also enlist the help of the social scientists, ranging from Charles Darwin to Paul Ekman, who have tried to codify facial expressions. The women actors in *Shirin* produce a variety of tiny but eloquent expressive signs keyed to the changing moods of the film they watch. We inevitably assign meanings to some of these signs: pensive concentration, casual relaxation, rapt engagement, tearful identification, concern, fear, and so forth. Occasionally we see a slight smile, a frown, a slow chewing of gum, a surprised widening of the eyes. One woman attentively “reads” the film, her eyes moving back and forth across an imaginary screen. During a violent scene, a woman flinches and looks away and another

closes her eyes, lowering her head in a kind of grief. Hands are as important as faces—adjusting a scarf, biting a nail, posing thoughtfully with a finger touching a chin, staving off sobs by covering the mouth with a hand. But these modern performance signs resist neat codification; they belong to the idiolect of performers who suggest “inner” meanings beyond the reach of full articulation. One of the remarkable qualities of the women in *Shirin* is their ability to create the impression of fully embodied persons with emotional lives beyond the movie theater—lives we can sense but never know. The overwhelming emotion they generate is one of sadness over both the film and the world.

Given that *Shirin* is a film about women watching a melodrama, Kiarostami runs the risk of falling into sexist clichés; but it’s difficult to watch the film without thinking about the situation of women in Iran. Merhrnaz Saeed-Vafa has pointed out that because all the women wear scarves, they can’t be disassociated with the present political and social moment in their country: “When you see these women crying, you can’t help but think of martyrdom. At the beginning, we even hear Shirin addressing other women, ‘Listen to me, my sisters,’ . . . and then at the end, she says to them, ‘I’m so tired, my sad sisters,’ asking them whether they’re crying for her or for their own, inner Shirins.” It should also be noted that *Shirin* prevents us from being completely detached observers. As David Bordwell notes on his blog, *Observations on Film Art* (www.davidbordwell.net/blog), this is a film that watches us. *Shirin* makes us aware of our own faces, and in the process enlists us in a human community.

3. TULPAN

Sergey Dvortsevov has surpassed himself in the sweetly comic *Tulpan* (*Tulip*), his first effort at fiction, which bears traces of his work as a fine director of observational and ethnographic documentary. The film centers on Asa (Askhat Kuchinchirekov), a young Kazakh sailor home from the sea who dreams of becoming a shepherd on the oceanic, utterly flat landscape of the Hunger Steppe. Asa lives temporarily in a crowded yurt belonging to his pretty and loving sister Samal (Samal Yeslyamova), her grouchy older husband Ondas (Ondasyn Besikbasov), and her three children. The husband resents Asa and treats him as a callow youth; even if he somehow learns to be a shepherd, he must find a wife before the state will give him a herd of his own, and this seems highly unlikely.

Near the beginning of the film, Asa, Ondas, and Asa’s gold-toothed pal Boni (Tulepbergen Baisakalov) attempt to negotiate a marriage between Asa and Tulpan, the daughter



A story of the steppe

Tulpan. © 2008 Pandora Film, Cobra Film, Eurasia Film, Film Company Slovo, CTB Filmproduction, Filmcontract Ltd, Pallas Film, ZDF, Schweizer Fernsehen. DVD: Zeitgeist Films (U.K.).

of a nearby family and the only single woman in the area. The girl's dark eyes peek out from behind a curtain while her parents and their visitors sit around the floor of her yurt, the dour mother swishing flies away from food. Resplendent but weirdly out of place in his navy uniform, Asa tries to impress everyone by telling fantastic, wide-eyed stories of his life as a sailor. He has seen many strange creatures, ranging from the tiny seahorse to the giant octopus, which has a head like "a big hunk of meat, slimy like a brain" and "long tentacles, like hoses." When this beast grabs you, "you've got to bite it right between the eyes—if you're off by just a hair, you're dinner." Soon afterward, we learn that Tulip has rejected Asa, ostensibly because his ears are too big. Boni, who

drives a battered delivery truck decorated with porno-magazine photos of big-breasted women and outfitted with a sound system that blasts out "Rivers of Babylon," tries to intervene by showing the prospective bride's parents a picture of Britain's Princess Diana and Prince Charles, who also has wing-like ears. This gesture has no effect. We never see Tulpan's face, only the back of her head and her beautifully lustrous black hair, but we indirectly discover that she wants to move to the city and attend college. (Her entire family feels superior to Asa's.) Meanwhile, Asa's brother-in-law has encountered problems of his own, threatening his livelihood: the pregnant sheep in his herd are underfed and giving birth to stillborn lambs.

John Ford once told Peter Bogdanovich that the best things in movies, such as the thunderstorm in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), are purely accidental. Orson Welles agreed, describing a movie director as “someone who presides over accidents.” *Tulpan* provides plenty of supporting evidence; its most impressive moments are contingencies or acts of God that Dvortsevov, aided by Polish photographer Jola Dylewska, anticipated and skillfully integrated into the plot and mise-en-scène. Shot in widescreen color with heavy 35mm equipment, the film is filled with sublime vistas: we see limitless horizons dotted with dry grass, tornados of dust with columns reaching up to the sky, and in one beautiful composition we tilt down from dark blue storm clouds to a white puppy sitting on the ground and chewing a bone as lightning forks angrily in the distance. But the style also involves long takes and a good deal of restless, seize-the-opportunity reframing at close quarters. One of the most amusing performers is Nurzhigit Zhapabayev, the chubby, rambunctious three-year-old who plays Nuka, Asa’s youngest nephew; virtually undirectable, this character is photographed on the fly as he rides his stick horse across the steppe or zooms around the yurt tormenting his older brother and converting his pet turtle into a toy motorcar.

Equally undirectable are the animals—not only the sheep but also the chickens, dogs, cows, donkeys, horses, and camels that interact with humans and arrange themselves in configurations no choreographer could have invented. In one shot, a large herd of sheep and goats, crowded head to rump and obscured by clouds of dust, is driven away from the camera, followed by three barking dogs, two braying donkeys, a mule, a puppy, and Nuka on his stick horse. The sheep move off-screen, and on the horizon the male mule tries to mount a female donkey; Nuka stops, transfixed, staring at the two animals as his mother’s off-screen voice calls and tries to distract him. In another fascinating and funny long take, a veterinarian arrives at the yurt on a motorbike with a sidecar holding a bandaged baby camel. The vet, who resembles an aging jockey, examines one of Ondas’s dead lambs, nervously rolling a Russian cigarette from one corner of his mouth to another while in the background a mother camel watches and mournfully cries. The vet advises everyone to pretend the mother isn’t there; she’s been following him all day to protect her child, and she has a fierce bite. When he drives off, given a push-start by Ondas’s family, the camel chases after him toward the horizon, bellowing all the way. (Interviewed by Adam Nayman in *Cinema Scope*, Dvortsevov explained that just before he started shooting this scene, he noticed the mother camel crying in fear that her baby would be harmed, and decided on the spur of the moment to include her in the shot.)

For all its comedy, *Tulpan* is no idyllic pastoral. Its beauty is suffused with a poignant sense of the fragility of life on the steppe, and the harsh labor and cramped living conditions of the shepherd family: the mother makes cheese by hand in a heavy vessel, the father tries to wrestle an enormous pregnant sheep onto the back of a recalcitrant horse, a child pees into a wide bowl at the center of the crowded yurt, and another child pops open the blackheads on his father’s back. Yet none of this seems depressing and the characters retain lively individuality. The mother cherishes the brightly wrapped hard candy delivered from town; the daughter loudly sings folk songs, much to the annoyance of her father; and the oldest son listens to a portable radio, memorizing the news broadcasts and repeating them verbatim to the family every evening. (“Hold your head high, independent country! . . . Breaking news! A strong earthquake occurred yesterday in Japan.”) Asa believes in the pastoral ideal and returns home with a drawing of his most cherished dream on the back of his sailor’s collar: a yurt and two camels under the sky. At one point he goes to a shed next to Tulpan’s yurt and whispers to her through a closed door, promising “a little corner of paradise under the starry skies of the Kazakh steppe.” (He doesn’t realize that he’s actually speaking to a goat.) When his dream begins to disintegrate, he seems fated to move to the city. “There are tons of babes there,” Boni declares, but the film suggests that for the shepherds of the Betpak-Dala, the city actually offers nothing but drugs and wretched jobs.

A kind of resolution is achieved in a seven-and-a-half-minute take in which Asa comes across a sheep on the verge of giving birth. Alone and desperate, he turns the swollen, woolly animal on her side, examines her vulva, and begins pulling at the feet of a lamb stuck in her uterus. She emits low, hoarse moans until finally, after a long struggle, her lamb breaks free and spills onto the ground. Asa wipes away bits of placenta, clears dirt from the lamb’s mouth, and administers mouth-to-mouth resuscitation until it jerks into life. The technically difficult shot is handheld, panning to capture details; squarely in the tradition of Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), it respects the spatial and temporal unity of the event and powerfully documents a miraculous collaboration between animal and human. At the fictional level, it functions as a rite of passage for Asa. At the film’s close, his family has been told by the state supervisor (“Comrade Boss”) to move their yurt to more fertile ground. As they pull down their home and prepare for the journey, Asa rides off with Boni in the opposite direction, toward the city. Suddenly he jumps from the truck and returns to join the family. His future is uncertain, but he has added a large red tulip to the drawing on his naval collar.

4. HENRI-GEORGES CLOUZOT'S INFERNO

In 1964, after a four-year period during which he suffered depression as a result of his wife's death and made no films, Henri-Georges Clouzot recovered his health, remarried, and embarked on a new project entitled *L'enfer* (*Inferno*), which was to tell the story of a provincial hotel-keeper in his mid-forties who marries a pretty young woman and becomes pathologically jealous, vividly imagining her sexual affairs and losing his grip on reality. At the beginning of the screenplay (which in 1994 Claude Chabrol adapted for a film of his own with the same title), the wife lies on a bed as the husband stands over her with a razor in his hand. We don't know if she's alive or dead, and the husband has no knowledge of how he came to be in the room. After an extensive tour through the corridors of the husband's memories and fantasies, we return to the opening scene, and the madman has no more sense of his bearings than he did at the start.

Clouzot had been impressed by Fellini's *8½* (1963) and wanted to create a modernist film that could stand comparison with any achievement of the new European art cinema. (The French New Wave had treated him as an old-fashioned type who indulged in too much fussy preparation—something they never said of Hitchcock.) To this end he tried to develop a special imagery of subjectivity and madness appropriate to the masochistic eroticism, anxiety, and violence prompted by jealousy. He prepared a 300-page shooting script (co-written with José-André Lacour and Jean Ferry), a color-coded chart that tracked his protagonist's emotions, and storyboards that were true to the perspective and focal length of individual shots. In the role of the wife, he cast Romy Schneider, a European star with a sunny but vixen-like face. For the husband he chose Serge Reggiani, a spindly-legged, almost comic-looking actor who had appeared in one of Clouzot's earlier films. In supporting roles were Jean-Claude Bercq, a near parody of movie virility, and Dany Carrel, a saucy brunette with a provocative body. When Columbia Pictures in Hollywood saw the tests shots of the actors and visual effects, they gave Clouzot an open-ended budget, enabling him to hire the best technical staff in France and conduct further visual and sound experiments in complete freedom at a studio in Boulogne.

Location shooting began in July at a hotel situated on a lake in the south of France. Because of an impending hydroelectric project, the lake was scheduled to be drained by the end of August, but Clouzot brought along several camera crews to speed production. Several weeks into the shooting, however, he got bogged down, filming scenes over and over with no clear object in mind while the extra units stood idle. His fabled perfectionism—it had taken him three years to

make *The Wages of Fear* (1952)—seemed irrational, and his chronic insomnia put extra burdens on the actors and crew. Exhausted and humiliated, Reggiani walked off the set and never returned. A few weeks later, while filming a sex scene between Schneider and Dany Carrel, Clouzot suffered a heart attack. Although he eventually recovered, *Inferno* was never completed.

What survived were 185 cans of film (thirteen hours), thirty minutes of experimental sound, the screenplay, the storyboards, and various paper records. We are fortunate that producer Serge Bromberg, one of the world's best talents at film restoration, was able to secure rights to this material from Clouzot's widow. He and Ruxandra Medrea have directed a documentary history of *Inferno*, consisting of interviews with some of the original participants (including Costa-Gavras, who was one of the assistant directors), a few stylized reenactments of scenes from the screenplay, an eerie music score by Bruno Alexiu, and a rich sampling of the surviving footage. The result is rather like a river of disturbingly sexual dreams bounded by a rational discourse. Most of Clouzot's images are fragmentary and experimental, drifting somewhat free from their narrative context and allowing us to construct our own scenarios; they constitute the very essence of romantic or surreal aesthetics (in other words, of fetishism). There is no way of knowing exactly how or even if Clouzot would have used many of them, but a completed *Inferno* could scarcely have been more fascinating to watch.

The film was shot in both black-and-white and color. One of the participants interviewed by Bromberg says that black-and-white was supposed to represent moments of ordinary reality, but the images don't support that claim—for example, a low-level, black-and-white close-up of Romy Schneider's nude torso strapped to a railroad track as a massive steam engine rushes toward her and stops just next to her face. Clouzot was interested in pre-digital tricks of perspective and visual logic in a variety of formats, and he commissioned specialists to build "impossible" objects. The mid-1960s were the heyday of Op Art, kinetic art, and electro-acoustical sound, which he eagerly appropriated. His staff photographed geometric patterns in black-and-white and color, which he seems to have regarded as "optical coitus." His protagonist's psychic breaks and fits of jealousy motivated images of deformed vision and imagination, often to the point of disgust—men with unnaturally large heads, a fly's-eye view of a nose multiplied a hundred times, faces that bend and stretch into demonic shapes, mutilated hands, magnified facial hair and flesh, and so forth. At one point a face becomes half husband and half rival, then half rival and half wife. Lab technician Claude Leon and makeup artist



Jealousy, distortion, mania

Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Inferno*. © 2009 Lobster Films, France 2 Cinéma. DVD: Park Circus (U.K.)

Michel Deruelle specialized in bizarre color effects—unnaturally white skin with black or purple lips, a face covered in glittering sequins, a water-skiing scene in which a lake suddenly turns blood red and flesh turns blue. Meanwhile sound engineer Jean-Louis Decarme recorded moments of insane internal babbling that changed its speed, multiplied, and became fugal: “Your wound’s opened again. What did you expect? Your wound’s opened. Look . . . That excite you? We play bitch mama. Bang bang dickory dock. You bitch! Let him feel her up. Stick in things lying around.”

The chief object of the camera’s gaze was Romy Schneider, photographed with optical tricks and in a multitude of costumes and hair and makeup styles. She’s at first a

chaste bride and happy young mother, but soon she morphs into a fantastically eroticized creature who wears short shorts or bikinis, fondles her nude body, laughs as she drinks an inexhaustible glass of champagne, languidly exhales plumes of cigarette smoke, plays suggestively with a Slinky toy, and smiles and twitches her pelvis as she water-skis. She and her lover cavort on a lake in skimpy swimsuits, briefly disappearing behind a hill for a bout of sex, and she engages in slow, teasing foreplay with a young woman. In most cases she looks back at us with taunting eyes. Woven alongside her image and sometimes blending with it are several visual motifs: the water of the lake and the curtain of flowing water that Schneider occasionally penetrates with her face or tongue; a

train that crosses a railroad suspension bridge and seems to set off episodes of madness; and lengthy tracking shots of different fully clothed men running on more or less empty roads. In the last category we see a middle-aged man jogging down a city street with his arms stiffly at his sides, a young man running at full speed past a group of cyclists who seem to move in slow motion, and Serge Reggiani wearing a business suit and running a great distance on a mountain highway. (It's a wonder Reggiani didn't also have a heart attack.)

The running men are unintentionally emblematic of the director. *Henri-Georges Clouzot's Inferno* documents the adventure of an important artist who was given free rein to make his most technically and formally ambitious project—the film of his dreams, in more senses than one—and who, like his fictional protagonist, became lost in his own obsessive visions and terrible drives. For all the power and variety of the imagery Clouzot produced, his footage takes on the quality of a morbid symptom—a crazy loop, a repetition compulsion, a desire that by definition can't be satisfied and ends in death. To watch the shards and fragments of the incomplete film and to learn the history of their production is to experience a kind of cinematic mania, frenzied and spellbinding even though it goes nowhere.

5. 35 SHOTS OF RUM

2009 saw an unusual number of films directed by women—a phenomenon that might be cause for celebration, except that, as Manohla Dargis has pointed out in *The New York Times*, women accounted for only about ten percent of the productions that were distributed and reviewed in 2009. In any case, several of them were among the year's best.

My own favorite is Claire Denis's *35 Shots of Rum*, about which I'll say little because it was discussed at length in two fine essays (by Yvette Bairo and James S. Williams) in the winter 2009–10 *Film Quarterly*. It has several things in common with Denis's previous work: a collaboration with co-screenwriter Jean-Pol Fargeau and photographer Agnès Godard; an interest in the multiracial society of postcolonial Europe; a focus on characters of African descent (often portrayed by Alex Descas, whom Denis once described as her “muse”); and, most of all, an oblique narrative technique that Judith Mayne in *Claire Denis* (University of Illinois Press, 2005) has described as “a sense of displacement, of choosing to move around an object or a theme or a person, instead of moving in directly.”

35 Shots of Rum was inspired by Ozu's *Late Spring* (1949), a movie with which it shares a mellow tone, a subtle registration of emotional detail, and a touching, unsentimental treatment of everyday domesticity; but as we might expect



Mellow celebration
35 Shots of Rum. Courtesy of The Cinema Guild.

with Denis, it has a more indirect narrative form than the Ozu picture and a more working-class milieu. At the beginning, we don't know the exact relationship between Lionel (Descas), who works for the commuter rail system in Paris, and Joséphine (Mati Diop), a young woman who lives with him in a small but pleasant high-rise apartment on the outskirts of the city. Given their attractiveness and intimate household routine, they might be lovers. It takes a while to realize that Lionel is a widower and that Joséphine, his daughter, is contemplating marriage, perhaps to Noé (Grégoire Colin), a broodingly romantic fellow who lives with his cat in a large apartment on the top floor of the building. Another neighbor, Gabrielle (Nicole Dogué), a warm-hearted, cigarette-smoking taxi driver who may have been Lionel's lover in the past, tries to get close to him, but to no avail. Without any overt signposting by actors or dialog, we gradually sense that Joséphine is concerned about her father's apparently lonely future after she leaves.

The film situates its characters in relation to European history and politics (at her university, Joséphine reads Franz Fanon and Joseph Stiglitz but declines to march in a student protest), yet these matters have no direct bearing on the domestic issues. The characters are at first enigmatic, rather like strangers in real life, and Denis surprises us when, late in the film, Lionel drives his daughter to Germany for a visit to her white mother's grave and her white grandmother's home; the racial and class differences between the two sides of the family are striking but are registered without any preparation, dramatic tension, or editorializing. Denis takes a different approach when her four main characters are caught in a rainstorm and enter the warm glow of an African Caribbean restaurant. This scene, involving little more than nicely edited glances, dance movements, and subtle gestures, is a turning point in the narrative—a moment when the father and the daughter take up sexual partners and when, as James S. Williams observes, “relationships are reconfigured and desire safely channeled.” With its orange candlelight and use of “Nightshift” by the Commodores, it creates a wonderfully sensual and sexy atmosphere and goes straight to the heart of the story.

6. THE HURT LOCKER

One of the most critically successful films of 2009, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* is usually described by reviewers as "apolitical" or "non-political." I'm baffled by this description, because no representation of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq can fail to have political implications or to provoke political discussion.

Perhaps we need to be reminded of a few facts. *The Hurt Locker* is told from the point of view of a three-man team of U.S. soldiers whose job is to find and dispose of improvised bombs in the streets of Baghdad during the blistering hot summer of 2004. The soldier responsible for actually defusing the bombs (Jeremy Renner) is a war lover—cocky, resourceful, courageous, but so dangerous to his own men that at one point they consider fragging him. The Baghdad streets are littered with garbage because all public services are shut down, and explosive devices capable of obliterating everything in a 300-yard radius are hidden everywhere. The soldiers are observed by Iraqi citizens who go about their business or stand watching from rooftops, occasionally taking pictures or talking on mobile phones. Kids chase after the soldiers, some of them smiling and waving, others throwing rocks. Nobody in the three-man team can speak Arabic, hence they have no idea when the locals are cursing them (neither do we, because the film doesn't give us subtitles). The soldier who defuses bombs tries to reach out to an English-speaking Iraqi teenager, but ends up making a horrible blunder that causes him to shut down emotionally and refuse to recognize the kid. Iraqi civilians are blown up more often than the military, and no justification for the war is given. The western armies seem to be composed mainly of volunteer soldiers from poor backgrounds and "independent contractors" looking for bounty. When the war-loving soldier ends his tour of duty, his hometown Walmart looks more surreal than Baghdad. He can hardly wait to return to Camp Victory. When we last see him, he is back at the front, walking toward death in heavy protective armor.

How anybody could call this an apolitical movie is beyond me. Maybe critics choose to ignore everything but the fact that *The Hurt Locker* is also an exciting, highly suspenseful action picture that makes us partly identify with the bomb squad and admire their grace under pressure. I've become impatient with contemporary thrillers that use multiple cameras, long lenses, and frenetic editing, but Kathryn Bigelow manipulates the technique with great intelligence and stomach-tightening intensity. The film was shot in handheld 16mm to give it a slightly grainy, documentary look; for the large set pieces involving bombs and a firefight in the desert, cinematographer Barry Ackroyd employed a team of eight or nine



War addict

The Hurt Locker. © 2008 Hurt Locker LLC. DVD: Lionsgate (U.K.).

cameras running simultaneously, along with a high-speed camera that enables us to see an explosion lifting gravel from the ground and rust from the top of a car. Editors Bob Murawski and Chris Innis sifted through a mountain of film to construct these sequences, cutting very effectively from the tense U.S. soldiers to the watching Iraqis and from wide shots of the entire battle area to close-ups of intimate detail. Paul N. J. Ottoson's sound design helps considerably, making suspense and surprise not just from explosions but also from the sounds of a buzzing fly and a squeaking windshield wiper.

U.S. Army veterans have complained of the film's inaccuracies: the uniforms are wrong for 2004, U.S. soldiers in Iraq can't get drunk in their quarters, and we shouldn't see an isolated unit patrolling the desert. I'd add that screenplay by

Mark Boal, who also worked on *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), is a bit too schematic in its characterizations, the theme of war as an addiction doesn't need such heavy emphasis, and there ought to be more black actors. But these problems are far outweighed by the film's action sequences and ability to render the cruelty and futility of the Iraq war. A low-budget production financed outside the U.S., *The Hurt Locker* has no stars apart from a few cameo appearances; hence it doesn't overtly solicit our identification with the fine lead players. It was shot entirely on location in Jordan, only a few miles from the Iraq border, where no Hollywood studio would have gone. The temperature averaged 114 degrees Fahrenheit, and the effect of the heat and dust on the actors is palpable; they have the weary, stressed look of soldiers who have reduced another culture to rubble, who can't distinguish friend from foe, and whose attempt to dispose of bombs seems only to prolong destruction.

7. SITA SINGS THE BLUES

Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues*, a 2D animated feature that puts a modern woman's amusing spin on the ancient Indian *Ramayana* of Valmiki, is an almost-do-it-yourself film on behalf of almost-free culture. Written, produced, directed, designed, and animated by Paley (with a little help from the Guggenheim Foundation, the music of Todd Michaelson

and Redresh Manhanthappa, the sound design of Greg Sexto, and several voiceover actors), the film looks gorgeous on the big screen, but had very limited theatrical release and a DVD printing of only 4,999 copies. Its scarcity is due to the fact that Paley uses 1920s recordings of Annette Hanshaw singing Tin Pan Alley tunes—an act which, in the context of an animated movie, is regarded as a copyright infringement. Rather than pay huge royalties, Paley's response has been to distribute the film under a "Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License," giving it away free on the web and asking viewers to make a monetary contribution to her if they like. "From the shared culture it came," she says on her website (www.sitasingingtheblues.com), "and back to the shared culture it goes." The credits begin with "Your Name Here Presents, in association with Your Money, a Funded by You Production."

Sita Sings the Blues came about when Paley's husband unceremoniously broke up with her by email after taking a high-tech job in India. Grieving and alone, she found solace with her cat and the study of the *Ramayana*. In the film she weaves together her personal story with a condensed retelling of the ancient Indian text, which she humorously reconfigures as the tale of a sympathetic woman treated badly by an insensitive, disloyal man. I won't try to summarize the complicated narrative, except to say that parts of it concern



Several styles of heartbreak

Sita Sings the Blues. © 2008 Nina Paley Productions LLC. DVD: FilmKaravan.

an Indian prince named Rama whose loyal wife, Sita, undergoes incredible tribulations and ends her life by being swallowed up by the earth. In the film, her story is told by three Indian shadow puppets voiced by Aseem Chhabra, Bhavana Nagulapally, and Manish Acharya, whose very funny, unscripted exchange is full of vague recollections and uncertain details. They aren't sure if the *Ramayana* is true, but decide that it's probably just as true as the Bible. They don't know exactly when it was written ("It's definitely BC"), and they sometimes disagree about events. ("Didn't he die?" "I think he died." "He died eventually.")

Like many ancient myths, *Sita Sings the Blues* has a repetitive, somewhat redundant quality and different local versions. (This is not a negative criticism.) The story of Paley's broken marriage repeats or parallels the adventures of Sita, which are represented first as narrated or "acted" events with dialogue, then as musical numbers in which Sita sings about her sad love life ("Daddy Won't You Please Come Home," "Mean to Me," "Am I Blue"). This embellishment of the story motivates a variety of animation styles: the modern episodes involving Paley are drawn in a sketchy, "Squigglevision" technique; many of the episodes from the *Ramayana* are depicted in the *Rajput* style of eighteenth-century Indian manuscript illustration; Sita's musical numbers make use of vector-graphic animation in which cartoon characters move like paper dolls; and at one point Paley rotoscopes an Indian dance. When we shift from one style to another, Rama and Sita change their appearance: sometimes he's a figure from an old illuminated tapestry and sometimes a cartoon muscle man; sometimes she's a veiled princess from a fairy tale and sometimes a cross between Betty Boop and Mae West.

According to Paley, all this playful manipulation of the *Ramayana* has offended people from both ends of the political spectrum. Conservative Hindus apparently think of her film as blasphemy, and some left-wing types have accused it of neocolonialism. These people obviously have no sense of humor. Paley's respect for Indian culture is everywhere evident and she seems to have a genuine interest in the *Ramayana*. (Hers is one of the few movies I've seen with a scholarly bibliography in the end credits.) Most of the joking and wit is quite gentle or at Paley's own expense. Meanwhile the film gives us a kaleidoscopic explosion of colorful animated images, backed by captivating music. It uses low-budget digital animation, but it brims with imagination and can stand artistic comparison with anything by Pixar.

8. ME AND ORSON WELLES

Richard Linklater's new film, based on a young-adult novel by Robert Kaplow, imagines a week in 1937 when, through a combination of boyish self-confidence and amazing good luck, a teenage acting hopeful finds himself momentarily swept up into the whirlwind staging of Orson Welles's *Julius Caesar*, only to be tossed back onto the street. Linklater captures something of what Wordsworth was describing in his reminiscences of France at the time of the revolution: "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very Heaven!" He also gives us a sense of how an idealistic, energetic theatrical company can become an ambitious young man's family of choice, but a family with the same rivalries and disillusionments as any other.

Fictional movies about Orson Welles usually take relish in portraying him as an egoist who stole credit from his associates. *Me and Orson Welles* adds several other character flaws, one of which, womanizing, was no doubt true. Kaplow's novel makes an even uglier charge: after an argument with technician Samuel Leve, who wants credit as a scenic designer on the show's playbill, Welles is overheard muttering, "Credit-stealing, son-of-a-bitch Jew!" The film retains this argument—during which Welles thunderously declares that *Julius Caesar* is "my vision"—but thankfully drops the anti-Semitic remark. In Welles's defense, I can only say that his quite lengthy and courageous fight against racial prejudice is a matter of public record. Where Leve's contribution to *Julius Caesar* is concerned, I refer readers to John Houseman's *Run-Through: A Memoir* (Simon and Schuster, 1972), pages



In the limelight

Me and Orson Welles. © 2009 CinemaNX Films One Ltd.
DVD: CinemaNX (U.K.).

296–98, where we are told that the design of the show was entirely Welles’s own, and that Leve’s job, under the direction of Jean Rosenthal, was to convert Welles’s design sketches into blueprints.

Me and Orson Welles benefits from the device of seeing everything from the dazzled viewpoint of seventeen-year-old Richard Samuels (Zac Efron), who finds himself cast in the small role of Brutus’s page (the song he sings in the play, “Orpheus with His Lute,” was originally set to music by Marc Blitzstein, whom the film never mentions). As historical reenactment, however, it provides virtually no sense of the politics of the Mercury Theater and too little evidence of why *Julius Caesar* made such a powerful impression on those who saw it. The Mercury actors, most of whom came from the WPA, worked for scale and were never under contract; most of the seats in the theater were sold to students and working people; and *Julius Caesar* was staged in modern dress (an innovation at the time) because it had Brechtian overtones, commenting directly on the rise of fascism. In the film, all this is subordinated to behind-the-scenes sexual shenanigans and Welles’s will to power. When we see snippets of the show on opening night, the staging is reasonably accurate but lacks the disturbing patterns of light and darkness and the aura of violence that stunned the original audience.

The film nevertheless has redeeming qualities, some of which I’ve already suggested. As its title indicates, it depicts not just Welles but nearly everybody in the Mercury Theater as amusingly ambitious and narcissistic; even Efron, star of Disney’s *High School Musical* franchise and heartthrob for millions of teenage girls, skillfully reveals the calculation lurking behind innocence. But the chief delight of *Me and Orson Welles* is Christian McKay, who gives a superb impersonation of Welles. Talented movie stars who mimic real-life celebrities—Clint Eastwood as John Huston, for example, or Meryl Streep as Julia Child—normally rely on one or two key features of voice and body, creating a sort of overlap or interaction between star persona and role; in contrast, McKay, a British stage actor who has performed successfully in a one-man show about Welles, knows his man’s smallest mannerisms. He’s a bit old for the role (Welles was twenty-two at the time), but he merges with the character to a greater degree than a well-known movie actor could have done. To hear him read a key passage out of Booth Tarkington’s *The Magnificent Ambersons* is a delight; he takes obvious pleasure in the part, enabling us to see that Welles was not simply a flamboyant personality but an actor and director of seriousness and importance who could bring audiences to their feet.

9. SUMMER HOURS

Olivier Assayas’s *Summer Hours* belongs to a series of recent French films made with the support of the Musée d’Orsay. (Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Flight of the Red Balloon*, discussed in last summer’s “Films of the Year,” belongs to the same series.) The story of a mother who bequeaths a house and its art objects to her three children, it subtly dramatizes the relationship between the bourgeois domestic interior and such things as history, personal memory, commodities, and art. In many respects, Walter Benjamin’s comments on the invention of the domestic interior in “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century” could serve as its epigraph: “The private individual, who in the office has to deal with realities, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. This necessity is all the more pressing since he has no intention of



Tax-deductible beauty

Summer Hours. © MK2 SA, France 3 Cinéma. DVD: Artificial Eye (U.K.)

grafting onto his business interests a clear perception of his social function. In the arrangement of his private surroundings, he suppresses both of these concerns. From this derive the phantasmagorias of the interior . . . The interior is the asylum where art takes refuge. The collector proves to be the true resident of the interior . . . To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them.”

Here “the asylum where art takes refuge” is the small country home of H el ene Berthier (Edith Scob, the still beautiful star of Franju’s *Les Yeux sans visage* [1959]), which is filled with her former lover’s well-chosen collection of paintings, pottery, and furniture. When she dies, the problem of disposing of the property falls to her three successful children — a Parisian economist (Charles Berling), a corporate executive who is about to move to China (J er mie Renier), and a designer of luxury kitchenware who has settled in New York (Juliette Binoche). The global economy has scattered the siblings to faraway places and the mother’s house no longer has use value; many of its art objects have beauty and deep sentimental importance to the family, but to avoid estate taxes the more valuable items are donated to the Mus e d’Orsay.

Among the visual pleasures of the film are *plein air* scenes of two large gatherings at the country house and a family dinner party in a Paris apartment. Everything is tasteful and casually civilized, but quietly suggestive of the Americanization of French culture, the links between art and commodities, and the similarities and differences between the home and the museum. The style and the general atmosphere of humane intelligence are in some ways reminiscent of Renoir, especially when Assayas and photographer Eric Gautier stage scenes with five or six characters moving in and out of rooms. There is also a poignant moment that reminded me of Virginia Woolf, when the mother’s loyal servant revisits the grounds of the closed and emptied house. Like some of Woolf’s fiction, *Summer Hours* is as light as a butterfly’s wings, but its structure is as strong as steel.

10. ECCENTRICITIES OF A BLONDE-HAIRED GIRL

At age 100, Manoel de Oliveira just keeps going. His latest is a 64-minute adaptation of a short story by Jos e Maria de E a de Queir s, Portugal’s most admired nineteenth-century author. Oliveira moves the story forward to the present day, but retains its codes of behavior. The effect is rather like Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), minus the overt eroticism — a sort of palimpsest that retains the essential features of an earlier culture. In the case of *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl*, the feeling of modern-dress reenactment is heightened by the old-world conservatism of E a’s characters



Dejection

Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl. Courtesy of Pyramide International.

and by Oliveira’s severe formal restraint and clever use of Lisbon settings. He shows time passing with repeated shots of the sun rising or setting over the oldest part of the city; he stages a scene in a gentleman’s club where mementos of E a are on display; and his characters visit a salon in an old mansion where they gamble while listening to a harp concerto and the recitation of a poem by Fernando Pessoa.

The narrative has a flashback structure, framed by a train journey during which Mac ario (Richard Trep a) impulsively tells a stranger in the seat next to him (Leonor Silveira, who has worked with Oliveira on many occasions) the story of a broken love affair. While working as an accounting clerk in his uncle’s fabric shop, he was smitten by the sight of a beautiful blond-haired woman with an ornate fan (Catarina Wallenstein) in a window across the street. His uncle disowned him when he expressed his desire to marry this woman, but as the result of some rather shady business dealings in Cape Verde he became wealthy and obsessively sought her out. Just as they became engaged, however, he discovered one of her unsettling “peculiarities,” which caused him to break off the relationship. The last shot shows the dejected young woman sitting alone in her room, and comes as a shock. One of the most arresting images of 2009, it has the surreal quality of a painting by Balthus and is a splendid example of the way Oliveira, somewhat like Carl Theodor Dreyer, can disrupt a placid surface with uncanny force.

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ABSTRACT This article presents reviews of the author’s selection of the best films released in the U.S. in 2009: *Police, Adjective*; *Shirin*; *Tulpan*; *Henri-Georges Clouzot’s Inferno*; *35 Shots of Rum*; *The Hurt Locker*; *Sita Sings the Blues*; *Me and Orson Welles*; *Summer Hours*; *Eccentricities of a Blonde-Haired Girl*.

KEYWORDS Corneliu Porumboiu, Abbas Kiarostami, Sergey Dvortsevov, Serge Bromberg, Claire Denis