

Steve's Film Festival Reviews 1986

[This is the first year of reviews. Dana Lee at Much Music ran a BBS called "Artworks", and I evolved into something of a house critic there. In those days, I typed in the text "live", the reviews were short, and careful editing more by accident than design.]

[The text here is cleaned up a bit and formatted, but otherwise the same as the original postings. Additional comments written in 2005 are in italics like this.]

September 7, 1986, 1:14 am

Er gang ... since this is supposed to be an "art" board, may I have the temerity to leave a message having to do with that general field? The F of F has been running for three days now, and in that time I have seen some excellent, some good, and some not so good stuff. Here follows my highly biased reactions for the benefit of anyone who might be waiting for commercial releases.

She's Gotta Have It, USA, mainly B&W, shot on a low low low budget. Opens next Friday. Very good black comedy (in both senses) about a woman with three lovers all of whom want her for their own. A male director makes a film from a woman's point of view. Those of you who are women will have to make up your minds on how well he succeeds.

[This was Spike Lee's first film, long before he became pretentious.]

Ménage, French, directed by Blier. Depardieu as the usual teddy bear except that for the first time he steals someone's husband rather than wife. Lots of fun for the first hour with all the role reversals, but it runs out of steam at the end.

Malcolm, Australian, a first feature by Nadia Tass, a woman who obviously knows something about making pictures. Stars Colin Friels as a socially retarded mechanic and inventor. The gimics (all made by the director and her boyfriend, I think) are inspired and put a lot of effects movies to shame. Made for \$1-million Australian and lots of hard work. It's all on the screen.

[I cleverly avoided mentioning the streetcars in Malcolm despite my well known love for them. It's shot in Melbourne, and without giving too much away, Malcolm has his own tram. The title character is loosely based on Nadia Tass' brother. This film vanished for many years when the distributor, Cannon, went out of business.]

Tampopo, Japanese, directed by Itami, who did last year's *The Funeral*. A comedy of manners about eating and the search for a perfect noodle restaurant. The opening scene alone will make any cinephile green with envy *[it is a small lecture about the importance of eating good, but quiet food in the cinema]*. Don't know if it is going to get N. American release.

[It did. Itami has a lot of fun with the westernization of Japanese culture in a film that has traces of "The Magnificent Seven" which is, itself, a western adaptation of "The Seven Samurai".]

Comic Magazine, Japanese, which is anything but its title in feel. A very bleak view of modern Japanese life, its love of scandal and lack of substance. Modern German angst travels east. The main problem with this flick is that it needs about 20-30 minutes taken out of it.

A Portuguese Farewell. A family shot in the present Lisbon in dreamy colour (it always seems to be sunset), and their now-deceased son in Angola during the end of the colonial era in the 70s. The 70s sequences in rich b&w. A very low key film, and most interesting for the contrast in reaction of a Portuguese filmmaker to his country's unpopular war to the sort of left or right wing flag waving one would expect from an American. Life goes on.

Defense of the Realm, British. Fairly standard spy/journalism story with more than a touch of post-Watergate cynicism. Nothing deep here, but very well made and acted.

Pouvoir Intime, Canadian. Another thriller. Brinks truck hijack goes badly awry leading to character study of all concerned. Too many loose ends, not the least of which is a very poorly set up motive for the whole hijack. This film suffered badly for me on account of seeing the much better written British film immediately before it. Technically good, but that doesn't always sell popcorn.

That's it for now gang. After a long absence, I am making up with quantity. Quality you'll have to judge. Anybody else have reactions to the festival, or are you all (like I should be) asleep?

September 14, 1986

Picking up where I left off, here are more reactions to films screened at the festival. Some will open commercially, so even if you were not at the fest, you can make use of my wonderful informative and highly prejudiced reviews.

My Sweet Little Village by Jiri Menzel (Czech). Amusing, not particularly deep. Small town farming life with meddling of distant Prague bureaucrats as distant subplot; humour supplied by village simpleton. A friend of mine described this as "a sweet little movie". Worth one viewing, preferably at low cost, to see what Menzel is up to these days.

The Smile of the Lamb (Israeli). Israel agonizes about its relationship with the Arabs and the Palestinians in particular, again. Well done, for a change, without undue melodrama except at the end. One of the many films this year in which people wring their hands a lot about war.

My Life As A Dog (Swedish). An excellent if ever so slightly long coming of age film with good acting work from the substantial child cast. How this one ever got past the censor I don't know – I mean to admit that children might have sexual urges – in Ontario??? This is not a film about sex at all, and fortunately note of the advance publicity suggested that so we didn't get an audience out to see the naughty bits. Definitely worth seeing.

The Pppeformer (Dutch) directed by Verbrugge and starring Freek de Jonge as a very serious (in the European tradition) clown. The film is mainly about a performer's loss of confidence and the onset of a debilitating stutter (hence the title). A little self-indulgent in the first and last reels, but nothing a bit of judicious trimming won't cure. (We saw the world premiere, so a possible re-edit might occur before general release.) de Jonge starred in *The Illusionist* for those unfamiliar with the name.

Devil in the Flesh (Italian) and *Betty Blue* (French). There has been a lot written lately comparing these two films (which screened on the same day). In Bellochio's *Devil* we have a lot of languorous sex between a rather spoiled, wealthy young woman and her teenage lover; in Beineix' *Betty Blue*, the sex is a little more visceral, and the lovers better matched. In the latter there is no question that they love each other, while in *Devil* they merely love being with each other.

Devil got a full house on the basis of the brief scene of oral sex which was sensitive, but not really necessary. In both films, the woman is on the edge of insanity, although in *Betty* she goes over the edge. I have listened to a lot of conversations, and many people felt that Beineix' film was empty, boring, etc, but they loved the photography of *Devil*. A triumph of form over content, in my opinion.

The real problem with *Betty Blue* is that it is a comedy for the first hour, and then becomes a tragedy. Audiences don't like to be led down the garden path like that.

Abel (Dutch). A man who is not the simpleton he seems spends most of his time living at home being mothered to death. When he does leave, he winds up with his father's mistress. Not the deepest film going, but amusing.

Alpine Fire (Swiss). More coming of age, but this time we're serious about it folks. This film is two hours long, but never seems to bog down in its length. The pacing does, however, convey the sense of isolation of life high in the Alps. Plot – farm boy coming of age falls in love with his sister. Yes, more incest, more sex. Everyone seems to be doing it this year. Either that or worrying about what they did in some war or other. This film is unlikely to be released, but was worth seeing anyhow.

Seize the Day was made both for PBS and for general release, and is based on the novel by Saul Bellow of the same name. Robin Williams stars in a character very unlike his usual comic roles. There are certain parallels to *Death of a Salesman* among others in this. A difficult film to sit through owing to the amount of time the characters spend talking without giving the audience a chance to catch its breath. Also, the screening I was at suffered from projection problems (16 mm) at the Varsity.

The Assault (Dutch) directed by Fons Rademakers. An excellent film. Begins during the last days of WW2 when a 12 year old boy's family is killed and his home torched as a reprisal by the Germans. For the rest of the film, we see him coming to terms with this and related events, interpolated with subtle criticism of the developing police control of anti-war protest. Wonderful photography on top of the fine script and acting. Highly recommended.

Shadey (UK). A would-be transsexual with the power to transfer images of distant places, people and events onto an unexposed film becomes the pet of a rather inept British secret service. An interesting premise, but the film bogs down in a few places.

El Amor Burjo. The latest from Antonio Gades and Carlos Suares. This was the biggest disappointment of the festival. After their *Blood Wedding* and *Carmen* – both must see dance films – this one never gets off the ground. Don't bother.

The More Things Change (Australian). Yuppies come to terms with life on a farm a few hours outside of Melbourne. Lovely scenery. Good acting. Even a more or less believable plot. Different problems there compared with Cabbagetown or Riverdale, and better scenery. Other than that, ho hum.

Blue Velvet directed by David Lynch (of *Eraserhead* among others.) You will either love it or hate it. This is a sendup of 50s teen love stories, psycho flicks, bad cop stories, with more than a soupçon of 80s exotic sex thorn in to tempt our bewildered hero. This film belongs on a Friday night double bill at the Roxy, and will probably find its way there in due course. Great stuff, but don't take it too seriously.

[Remember that at this point "Twin Peaks" had not been made, and Lynch was only starting to explore the dark underside of American culture. A very young Kyle McLaughlin stars along with Isabella Rossellini and Dennis Hopper.]

[Blue Velvet did wind up at the midnight shows, and it's amusing to remember that the screening I attended in what is now the Varsity 8 (then the 2) was a premiere. That was the only time I have seen it without someone singing along under the screen with a flashlight below their chin. Don't forget to wave to the firemen.]

Summer directed by Eric Rohmer. Another disappointment. Shot in grainy 16mm and blown up to 35mm and projected on the University's giant screen (my last show in this cinema – R.I.P.). A woman whose engagement fell apart two years ago spends a lot of time telling us and her friends why she can't do anything, why nobody loves her, why her life will never be better, etc etc with a lot of improv work by all concerned. She blows most of the summer finding herself and we blow it more than 90 minutes.

I went directly from *Summer* to *Qui Trop Embrasse* and felt I had just picked up where I left off. Lots of walk outs including me.

Steaming was Joseph Losey's last film, and it had a strong cast not the least of whom are Sarah Miles and Vanessa Redgrave. Shot in an about-to-be-demolished Turkish Bath in which many women sit around talking about men, themselves, sex, men, themselves, men, etc and oh yes we have to save the baths from those nasty politicians (men) who want to replace them with a carpark. Men never seem to use the baths at all. Good performances all around, just ignore the premise and you'll be all right. Lots of flesh, and most of it is not gratuitous. Interestingly, for a film with an all woman cast, it had an almost entirely male principal crew.

On Vaneltine's Day is the latest from Horton Foote who also wrote *Trip to Bountiful*. This film has the same leisurely pacing, but it is an ensemble piece rather than a bravura solo for one actress. Although it was adapted from his own play, the transition to film has removed any sense of stage constraints. Opens in Toronto in October, and deserves to do well. *[Alas, it did not.]*

As a general comment, I must say that the Censor Board is getting quite liberal in its old age, not that I would defend it for a moment. Maybe if Peterson *[David, then Premier of Ontario]* can get up the nerve to actually pass some legislation rather than awaiting a court ruling, we might see the board relegated to giving advisory info for films rather than banning them. I do not believe that sex-crazed film-goers were roaming Yonge & Bloor in search of anything other than food this week, although when you see 32 films in 10 days, you tend to run low on energy for much else.

[As I transcribe these reviews in October 2005, the Censor Board is still with us, although with reduced powers, despite court rulings that should have put it out of business.]