

Festivals

A thoroughly vital old boy

Jan Lumholdt among auteurs and rock stars in an as always stable Berlin landscape

Keywords: Neill Young, Patti Smith, The Rolling Stones, *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008), Doris Dörrie, *Jesus Christus Erlöser* (2008)

There were 384 films screened at this year's Berlinale – a slight decrease from last year's 396 (some were, and are, shorts). What came as a bit of a shock, however, was the information that more than four thousand films had been submitted for consideration (including, I guess, some shorts). Harrowing statistics. I will thus never again cry, 'Cut down! Cut down!' as I have in the past, because they certainly do. Some two or three... hundred darlings must be killed in the process. That's steep. So, no further bantering on the subject, promise!

Berlin is a rewarding festival. Good weather (if you compare it to Stockholm), friendly, yet dynamic. The city goes about its normal business regardless – no massive mark-ups of prices and such, as is done at other festival sites. The festival even helps out with hotel discounts for accred-

ited visitors. The Berlinale website is by far the best I've seen from any festival: downloadable press conference sound files, superb stills sections, detailed programme search plus the full catalogue in PDF format. Definitely worth it, in other words.

'Let's rock!' and 'Rock on!' were catchphrases often seen around the festival premises this year, and people such as Neil Young, Patti Smith and The Rolling Stones were all seen walking the red carpet at one time or another. There were also documentaries on the virtual cult band Gorillaz and the current state of heavy metal rock in Iraq, called, suitably, *Heavy Metal in Baghdad*. A mixed bag, no doubt, followed by great media interest.

Neil Young brought CSNY *Déjà vu*, a rough video diary of a very anti-Bush reunion and subsequent tour of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. Young, who feared that many younger viewers first might think that CSNY was a new television crime show, also directed the film under the moniker of Bernard Shakey. It offers an interesting perspective on American youth culture now compared to the 1960s, the boy's first time around, 'when anti-Vietnam songs like songs like "For What It's Worth" were actual pop hits'.

For Patti Smith: *Dream of Life*, Smith has been interacting with the considerably talented artistic photographer, Steven Sebring, for a period of twelve years. She is seen with her parents, her children, in her cosily disorganized New York apart-



ment (among 'bare necessities' such as Bo, her Gibson guitar, a present from Sam Shepard, her Mickey Spillane and William Blake books, her pictures of and/or with Robert Mapplethorpe). Her voice is heard narrating, often almost in poetry. She tells her life story and speaks of those most important to her: Mapplethorpe, Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, her late husband Fred 'Sonic' Smith and many others. It's candid, beautiful and tremendously well done. And I don't even particularly like her music (in the late 1970s, I was more into Weather Report, Joni Mitchell, Steely Dan and such 'slick' stuff). Even so, it's probably one of the top ten of 2008.

That Martin Scorsese and music are a very good match is probably no surprise to any of you. *The Last Waltz* (1978) is a true classic, his series on blues music is justly lauded, most of his soundtracks are small masterpieces of putting together the right sound for the right image. There's *No Direction Home* (2005), the Bob Dylan documentary, and there's *Shine a Light*, this year's Berlin opener, starring The Rolling Stones. It's Scorsese's documentation of two nights at the Beacon Theatre in Manhattan, New York in late 2006.



And then they took Berlin. To describe the experience of these five senior citizens doing so will take too much space (I'll save it for some book project). Again, they are not up my personal alley, at all. But there is something so familiar about them, something nice and safe and stable. Helen Mirren comes to mind, when she says that although the queen of England was never a popular figure in her anti-royalist home, there is still that something. To many of us, Jagger and Richards, even Charlie Watts, convey this exact sentiment. One feels it when watching the film, and we felt it seeing them in Berlin. Thus, they are even greater British symbols than the royal family. Mind-boggling, really.

As for the film, many will probably wonder why there's yet another Stones concert film. It's a bit too safe. Case in point 1: a duet between Jagger and Christina Aguilera. Clinical. Case in point 2: the whole thing introduced by Bill Clinton. To show how loose he is tonight, he... loosens his tie. Comical. Much more provocative is Richards, who ... smokes a cigarette. Sympathy for the devil.

A look at the main section presented a group of old stalwarts and stout yeomen, firmly rooted in the auteur landscape: Mike Leigh, Amos Kollek, Johnny To, Robert Guédiguian, Doris Dörrie and Errol Morris; a couple



of late 1990s wonder kids: Paul Thomas Anderson and Erick Zonca; some dark horses: Petri Kotwica (Finland), José Padilha (Brazil) and Lance Hammer (United States). Out of competition personalities included Martin Scorsese, Andrzej Wajda and Michel Gondry. Which certainly kept us both busy and, more often than not, entertained.

Mike Leigh certainly entertained. He usually does. *Happy-Go-Lucky*, one of his most cheerful and optimistic films, is almost Leigh's own version of *Bridget Jones*. We follow the main character, a bubbly pre-school teacher called (what else?) Poppy, as she smiles her way through her day. She does have her crosses to bear – a stolen bike, a psychotic driving-school instructor, a boy in her class with domestic problems – but her glass is never less than half full. There's even a prospective boyfriend in the making.

I often think of what Ingmar Bergman wrote in *Images: My Life in Film*, when a French critic had referred to *Autumn Sonata* (1978) as 'Bergman does Bergman'. Bergman was not amused. 'Witty but unfortunate. For me, that is.' He discusses some colleagues: Fellini and Buñuel almost always does Buñuel. Kurosawa never does Kurosawa.

I sometimes play this game with current directors. Green-

away always does Greenaway. Roy Anderson always does Roy Anderson. The Dardenne brothers always do the Dardenne brothers. And Mike Leigh most probably always does Mike Leigh. In some cases, it's not that unfortunate. When enjoying *Happy-Go-Lucky*, one is reminded of other Leigh films like *All or Nothing* (2002) or *Vera Drake* (2004), not as copies but rather, 'companion pieces'. An old line comes to mind: there are eight million stories in the naked city; this has been one of them. While Mike Leigh hasn't quite yet covered all the fates of London, he is not doing badly.

Paul Thomas Anderson never does Paul Thomas Anderson. We all sank our teeth into his *There Will Be Blood* (2007) as did we Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure*; the former managed to hold all the top positions on the critics' lists for the duration of the festival; the latter certainly set discussions ablaze, both on documentary ethics and, of course, another round of current US foreign politics. We savoured the wackiness of Gondry and fully suspended all our disbeliefs when partaking in *Be Kind Rewind*, an eccentric tale with echoes of Capra and De Sica, where the noble art of 'sweding' – recreating well-known films on a shoestring budget – was introduced. Among the new acquaintances, Lance Hammer's *Ballast* offered an American take on a mood usually associated with Europeans such as Bruno Dumont. Very refreshing. The Finnish entry, *Musta jää* (*Black Ice*), by Petri Kotwica, was a rather Hitchcockian thriller with a *ménage à trois* storyline and a very wrathful woman scorned. Again refreshing, not least for non-Finns



wanting to know what else is up there, except for Kaurismäki.

I very much like the German entry by Doris Dörrie, who had an international hit with *Men... (Männer...)* (1985) and subsequently had a quick American career with the Griffin Dunne-starring *Me and Him* (1988, a film about a talking penis). Her output has been a bit erratic (2002's *Naked/Nackt* was not a happy vehicle), but this time around she hit it just right. *Cherry Blossoms (Kirschblüten-Hanami)*, a moving and delightful homage of sorts to Yasujiro Ozu, is a story of Trudi and Rudi, a Bavarian couple in the twilight of life, with an oft-postponed trip to Japan playing an important part. Fate plays an evil trick, and just one of them, initially the most unenthusiastic one, is left to take the journey. It's up there with *About Schmidt* (2002) and *Lost in Translation* (2003), and one hopes an international audience will find this solid gem.

Some critics have dubbed Berlin a bit of an 'old boy',



compared, quite often, since it happens shortly before Berlin, to the more youthful Sundance festival. While the latter provides independent cinema from young creators, Berlin is said to support the more established side of things, returning to the veterans on a regular basis, thus being accused of being 'safe rather than daring'. Whether there is sufficient truth to this or not – journalists love to, and have to, look for trends and tendencies – Berlin offers a solid, vital, varied selection (with quite a few titles from Sundance, one might add). As one of the three major European festivals, and as the first big one of the year, they should have plenty to choose from (four thousand films). And they do.

Finally, this year's absolute must-see: *Jesus Christus Erlöser*, Peter Geyer's documentation of Klaus Kinski's controversial 1971 monologue on the life of Jesus Christ. Snippets can be seen in Werner Herzog's Kinski-documentary, *My Best Fiend (Mein liebster Feind – Klaus Kinski)* (1999) but this is the big Kahuna. And alone worth going to Berlin for. *Crucial. Sympathy for the saviour.* •

Contributor details

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La Vie en Richmond – VCU French Film Festival, 28–30 March 2008

A report by Liza Palmer
and Tim Palmer

Keywords: Richmond VA, contemporary French film, *La Fémis*, *On dirait que...* (2007), Jean Becker

Travelling through the Carytown area of Richmond, Virginia, the weekend of 28–30 March 2008, one would not suspect that recent relations between the United States and France had been anything but rosy. Lamp-posts were festooned with French flags. Local bistros and bakeries promised delectable French delicacies, from quiches to croissants. Bookstores featured displays of French cinema volumes – some hard to find, some easy to forget, but few usually in stock on typical US bookstore shelves. And, surprisingly, at 8 a.m. on that Saturday morning, a series of short French films was playing to a packed house at the historic Byrd Theatre, a restored picture palace in the heart of Richmond and sole venue for the sixteenth annual VCU French Film Festival.

The VCU French Film Festival is a major effort of Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) to: '(1) promote French language cinema and culture in the United States and (2) create a tradition of Franco-American corporate and cultural partnerships' (VCU French Film Festival



2008). The brainchild of Peter and Françoise Kirkpatrick, professors of French literature and culture at VCU (whose influence on the proceedings is hard to deny or ignore, given that they introduced every film, with Peter also serving as on-demand translator for featured guests), the festival has been running successfully since 1993. Its mandate is not only to screen the most notable of contemporary French output, but also to host up-and-coming, as well as more established, actors and artisans working in France today. Indeed, the overall strength of this annual event is its ability to get attendees engaged with French cinema as a whole: seeing films, reading source material and interacting both casually and formally with film practitioners.

Across three very full days, the festival crammed in 11 features and 14 shorts, with many of the films supplemented by varyingly intense question-and-answer periods. Alongside these were one-off events, including a master class with director Sam Karmann, author Stephen McCauley and actress Catherine Olson; an official reception, which invited all festival pass holders to mingle with the 'French delegation' of guests; and a gala dinner for 'VIP Plus' pass holders. Every screening played to an enthusiastic

crowd – the Byrd Theatre was frequently packed to its 1,350 capacity – with some attendees reportedly coming from all corners of the country. This is a real achievement for a festival located in a southern East Coast city with an estimated population of less than 200,000 people. And with sponsors such as TV5Monde, UniFrance and *Cahiers du cinéma*, it is clear that the VCU French Film Festival is an occasion of some standing and esteem, both in the United States and France, and rivals other similar series such as the Boston French Film Festival.

New this year – and something that will help define the VCU French Film Festival amongst its competitors – was a more formal partnership with the French film school, La Fémis. This very prestigious academy – whose distinguished alumnae include Francois Ozon, Marina de Van, Noémie Lvovsky and Emmanuelle Bercot – is located in the old Pathé studios in Paris, near where Jacques Tati once had his base of operations. Six May 2007 La Fémis graduates of the Image section screened their thesis films at the festival, starting at 8 a.m. on the Sunday (which, again, resulted in yet another well-attended event, given the time, day and the fact that they were essentially student films). Impressively, all the

films were shot in 35mm and covered an inspiring range of topics, proof that MFA students can produce innovative and compelling films on shoestring budgets, providing they are challenged by a rigorous curriculum. The collaboration between VCU and La Fémis has been eight years in the making – a labour of love for Peter and Françoise, as well as director Pierre-William Glenn, a professor at La Fémis and president of Commission Supérieure de l'Image et du Son. An exciting prospect, this will not only result in all-important screening opportunities for La Fémis graduates but will also enable the VCUarts Cinema undergraduate students to shoot on 35mm (a format that they usually do not work with before their senior year) four scenarios, in conjunction with the La Fémis guests, which they had all developed via e-mail prior to the festival. Furthermore, all the brand-new, pristine, subtitled prints of the La Fémis shorts screened at the festival will become part of the VCU archives, in addition to translations of the written theses that La Fémis students are required to write before they can begin production on their films. Having such privileged access to these French shorts, via these new archives, is extremely valuable. As one short-film-maker noted

in response to a question from the audience, it is hard to see such films except via festivals or on late-night French television, unless the film-makers make them available on the Internet.

A highlight and delight of this year's festival was Françoise Marie's documentary feature debut, *On dirait que....* The result of over 60 hours of footage, the film is a charming yet incisive realization of French children improvising the jobs at which their parents work: schoolteachers, farmers, restaurateurs and so on. Marie, in her question-and-answer period, indicated that she purposely focused on jobs that we, as viewers, would all know and understand, the better to appreciate the subtleties and nuances that are revealed through the children's pretend play. Also, the children had to live near their parents' workplace, so that they would be able to draw on their own direct observations during their improvisations. The sensitive and respectful treatment of the children and their ideas is endearing and illuminating, and functions almost as a nature documentary; but instead of watching lion cubs, we see human young at play, making sense of and ultimately preparing for the adult world. Marie's film is not only interesting in its own right as a text, but also has intriguing implications for documentary practice as a whole. (Forthcoming in *Film International* 6.4 is an exclusive interview with director Françoise Marie).

Jean Becker's *Dialogue avec mon jardinier* (2007) was another strong contribution, featuring the leading talents of Daniel Auteuil and Jean-Pierre Darroussin. Based on a book by Henri Cuoco, the film explores male

friendship rekindled, when a professionally renowned but burned-out painter (Auteuil) returns to renovate his childhood home with the help of a gardener and old school chum (Darroussin). As their friendship deepens, the two men each gain in compassion and perspective, the painter reconnecting with the simple joys of pastoral routines, and the gardener softening his outlook on life. As Becker (son of legendary classical director Jacques Becker) shared with the audience following the film, 'He [the painter] becomes a better person through his relationship with the gardener.' While acknowledging that his sympathies are more closely aligned with the gardener, Becker admitted: 'For me, the character played by Daniel Auteuil is a very touching one. I'm not simple but sometimes I'd like to be.' All told, the film is accomplished and satisfying, but most interesting, perhaps, for its editing, which is particularly notable towards the beginning. As the painter and gardener slowly fall back into friendship, all their early scenes are cut back to back with few or no cues about the passing of time, save costume changes. This device gives the impression that there is no other world for them at the moment outside of their, at times, awkward bonding. It is a shame, actually, that the film loses this almost breathless quality in its more ponderous final third, especially during an inert subplot about Auteuil losing touch with his adult daughter. But the film coasts confidently on the skills of its performers, notably Darroussin, whose elegantly irascible mannerisms recall Orson Welles's ability to embody the infirmities and introspections of advancing age.



Equally illuminated by star performances was one of the best-received films of the festival, Thomas Gilou's *Michou d'Auber* (2007). Set during France's turbulent year of 1960, the film depicts the childhood of an adopted Algerian boy whose racial identity is concealed by his new foster mother (Nathalie Baye) from her initially conservative husband (Gérard Depardieu), who leaps to his feet to salute de Gaulle every time he appears on television. In its promotion, the film leads us to expect an earnest treatment of social upheaval during the Franco-Algerian war, another example of recent French cinema's efforts to negotiate the country's chequered colonialist past, as in Philippe Faucon's *La Trahison* (2005). But Gilou's film manifests instead – effectively but not without evasions – as a very warm and often funny sketch of the relationship between mismatched father and son, as their differences and preconceptions dissolve. *Michou d'Auber* also showcases Depardieu, recently given to more supporting roles, who here takes centre stage to mesmerizing effect, like a fine-tuned instrument capable of deft emotional range with seemingly minimal effort. One wonderful shot, a low angle from the boy's perspective (hidden under a table as he awaits his new father's return home) sums up both role and film, as Depardieu enters screen left to eye

up his new charge with a mix of inadvertent curiosity, masculine braggadocio and over-confident posturing, all tinged nonetheless with a lingering undertone of sympathy. The film may occasionally overreach in its sheer optimism about the period's prospects for social inclusion and forgiveness – and Mathieu Amalric is wasted in an under-written role as a supportive local schoolteacher – but Depardieu and Baye compensate for an occasionally schematic script.

Two of the festival's most high-profile attractions were saved for the final pair of screenings: Claude Miller's *Un Secret* (2007), followed by the closing film, Claude Berri's *Ensemble, c'est tout* (2006). Miller, an industry mainstay with nearly forty years of work to his name, enjoyed an unexpected comeback with *Un Secret*, which received mixed critical notices in Europe but strong box office and eleven César nominations. His film, an adaptation of Philippe Grimbert's autobiographical novel, recounts a young boy's discovery of his parents' (Patrick Bruel and Cécile de France) dark past, including events during the Occupation, its aftermath, and book-ending sequences set in contemporary France. A relative exception among the fiction features screened during the festival, *Un Secret* benefits from a more narratively and formally complex design. The film oscillates from (ironically) lushly photographed scenes in the 1930s and 1940s to monochrome moments in the dreary present, as the family belatedly makes peace with repressed wartime traumas. Cécile de France's turn as the enigmatic mother anchors much of the film, but Ludivine Sagnier is a

quiet revelation as the father's lost first wife, whose uncharacteristically muted performance gives pathos and uncertainty to her character's pivotal decision – wanton suicide? noble self-sacrifice? – to abandon herself and her son to the Nazis.

Another commercial hit (with over two million paid admissions in France) based on another best-seller (by the consistently impressive Anna Gavalda), *Ensemble, c'est tout* also benefits from a terrific cast: Audrey Tautou as a nocturnal office cleaner and artist in drastic physical decline, rising star Guillaume Canet as a misanthropic trainee chef, Laurent Stocker as a drop-out ex-artist and Françoise Bertin as Canet's lonely grandmother. Like *Un Secret* beforehand, *Ensemble, c'est tout* reflects on the uneven and impromptu nature of family, as this unlikely quartet is thrown together in a vast, crumbling Paris apartment. Gavalda's droll dialogue and affecting characterizations are imported from the novel, as is the story's balance between melancholy and wry hopefulness; the resulting film, undeniably entertaining, was bizarrely not picked up for distribution in America. But Berri, another forty-year trade veteran, was, frankly, a strange choice to bring such a bittersweet and youthful text to the screen, and much is lost in translation: the forlorn and crucial art school backstory of Tautou's character,

the initially far more deadpan and candid sexual relationship between her and Canet, and the overarching tone of social dysfunction that keeps novel, more than film, grounded and less prone to flights of preciousness or unearned whimsy. Gavalda's witty narrative ellipses, her fierce sense of the female characters' compromised agency and an unsentimental approach to the human need for companionship – all of these are rather bludgeoned into truncated shape in a film that is flatly shot, marinated in music, hastily plotted, and conventionally assembled.

Contrasting sharply with the grandiose production values and high budgets of such star vehicles was the La Fémis screening panel, which gave a rich sampling of the emerging careers of six recent graduates: Karine Arlot, Thomas Favel, Sébastien Hestin, Noémie Gillet, Macha Kassian and Yoann de Montgrand. If nothing else, the maturity and rigour of the shorts showed once again the strengths of La Fémis and the French film school system. While many critics approach French cinema in broad terms – its commercial qualities, its artistic merits, its political commitments – few dwell on a far more proximate and salient cause for France's cinematic momentum: the skilled training and advanced ciné-literacy instilled in the classrooms of institutions like La Fémis. All of the shorts



on offer here, matched by the articulate responses offered by their directors in the discussion panel afterwards, revealed a talent for the craft of creating compelling images and evoking engagement, and at times surprising emotions, by an audience. A particular highlight of these very rewarding screenings was Kassian's *L'Heure blanc*, an almost dialogue-free yet vivid evocation of a young boy left alone in a public square, alive to yet uneasily aware of the adult world around him. Elsewhere, demonstrations of precise composition and forceful cinematography were given in Favel's *Les Quarante voleurs*, which juxtaposed a group of men at first calm, resolute and attentive to their mountain hunt, then raucously celebrating its aftermath, and Hestin's *Le Grand bal*, which used black-and-white photography to link a boxing match (in high contrast shots that almost look rotoscoped) with a World War II battlefield, in a murky forest landscape that recalls *Ivan's Childhood* (1962).

In general terms, the VCU French Film Festival is a manifestation of the fascination and allure that French film culture continues to hold for Americans, despite what politics and politicians may assert to the contrary. The weekend, however, was not without its faults. It must be said that the overall selection of films does a disservice to the diversity of French cinema, especially its more stylistically edgy and artistically invigorating films; the festival programmers tend towards more tame, rather generic, crowd-pleasing fare. The buoyancy of French film in the twenty-first century is the right note to strike, clearly, but it's a shame for this to come

without more representation for established women directors (who make up nearly a third of the film-making population in France today), or film-makers keen to experiment and challenge, in approach and content. Comedies and costume dramas are the stuff of French box office but are, unfortunately, often also fraught with cliché and conventionality. Technical issues were apparent, too, with film-makers during the question-and-answer periods forced to stand uncomfortably at the front of the Byrd Theatre, glaring spotlights blinding them and microphone feedback at times overwhelming their responses. The choice of venue, while lovely and historic (and certainly, with its central location within the city, a boon to the revitalization that Richmond is obviously experiencing), often hindered a smooth transition between programmes. Most annoying: attendees noisily pouring out or in while guest artists were trying to answer questions, while also indiscriminately saving seats. Indeed, the team of volunteer interns is to be commended for their take-charge attitude, ensuring that everyone found a seat eventually and with minimal hassle. All that having been said, however, these few negatives point to an overarching positive: the VCU French Film Festival is a victim of its own success and has plainly outgrown its format. The festival could easily sustain expansion by adding additional venues and/or programme days, so that planners could build breaks into the schedule to facilitate transitions, and also a greater breadth of programming choices. Despite these problems, though, goodwill and conviviality were present that week-

end, along with eager crowds of viewers. As Pierre Vimont, French ambassador to the United States, suggested during his opening remarks before the La Fémis shorts: 'The American audience is very much open to the world ... there is room in this country for foreign films and, among those, French film.' For one weekend every year, Richmond is defined by a palette of blue, white and red – colours that are clearly here to stay.

For more information about the VCU French Film Festival, please visit their website: <http://www.frenchfilm.vcu.edu/>. •

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Brooklyn Arts Council Gallery: screening of shorts by Brooklyn-based film-makers as part of 'The Lack of Desire' – 17 January to 11 April 2008

A report by Liz Stephens

Keywords: video art, experimental film, Brooklyn, DUMBO, Brooklyn Arts Council (BAC)

A screening of shorts by Brooklyn-based film-makers took place recently in the heart of the DUMBO arts district in Brooklyn, New York. The screening was part of a group exhibition curated by Scott Henstrand, entitled 'The Lack of Desire', involving both photography and film works. The exhibition explores the concept of desire and its relation to the human psyche. Each work examines perpetual longing and unobtainability. From the film-makers' aesthetics emerges a captivating dialogue about desire. The exhibition successfully explores light, movement, repetition and a perpetual desire for the unobtainable.

The exhibit, which began on 17 January, ran until 11 April. Photography works form only part of the exhibition that explores layers of desire. This portion of the show includes work from 23 photographers. From images of spaces lacking human presence to photographs



portraying the ability of sexual desire to become mundane, each piece contributes to a dialogue on desire. The exhibition also explores the potential of language and signs to lose all meaning. A curatorial discussion on 7 February included the artists, the curator and Janet Thormann, a Lacanian theorist and editor. The film/video portion of the exhibition was screened only on 6 March.

Henstrand organized the seven short films by five Brooklyn-based film-makers and gave a lecture on Lacanian ideas before the screening. Referencing Lacanian thought, Henstrand said that the experimental shorts are 'glimpses of the Real'. He urged the audience to be attentive to the sounds and senses of time in the works. Although intended to prepare the audience for the programme, Henstrand's remarks were unnecessarily verbose and became more of a lecture. A briefer introduction that let the films speak more for themselves would have been more effective. The small room of the BAC was packed with an appreciative audience of about fifty viewers.

The programme began with a film by Edward Schexnayder

entitled *Video Pieces*, consisting of light passing through various surfaces. The video, shot in the lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans in 2006, meditates on the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, and his own home in particular. The sounds off-camera indicate a human presence, but the human body is never seen in full view. The void of human presence is just one aspect of Schexnayder's piece, which he describes as an aesthetic depiction of the 'profound emptiness' he felt upon seeing his home in New Orleans destroyed.

The beginning of Leigh Davis's *Ensemble* provides an interesting transition from Schexnayder's film. Davis's film starts with an exploration of several concrete spaces devoid of human presence. The spaces, from the Olympic Stadium Park in Montreal, evoke a modernist aesthetic. Wordless voices enter the soundscape, which resonate in the images of ominous cement-scapes. These shots are juxtaposed with the scene of a choir performing a song about peace. The singers' facial expressions and body movements make them comical. Although the artist intended to create absurdity

through juxtaposition, the two sections of the video are diverse enough that they could also be two separate films. If divided, the first section of the film could still explore empty concrete environments. The second might be turned into a study of the choir's stylization. Regardless, the latter half of the film is a captivating study of faces and performance, and becomes comedic through its absurdity.

Joy Whelan describes her next three films, entitled *Types of Houses We Live In*, *Lost Territory Considerations* and *Begin with Clenched Fist*, as a 'consideration of heartbreaking human action in attempting to define ourselves within "Place"'. In *Begin with Clenched Fist*, the film-maker explores the painstaking process and struggle of moving flour across the floor using only her mouth. Whelan said the piece stemmed from her interest in domestic substances and a 'repetition of form'. The camera remains static throughout the film, capturing Whelan's crawling movement as she moves the flour fists and coughs them up to make a pile. She said the film is a commentary on violence, as it depicts the agonizing ingestion of flour fists.

Thirty, by Angela Deane, captures the film-maker in clown costume and make-up at her birthday celebration. A blown-out image of her portrait emerges as she counts to thirty. Deane describes *Thirty* as a 'marking of time' and an observance of 'rules that put on an extreme emphasis of your life'. At the screening, Deane said that she believes her film 'seems to ask the question if a birthday means more if celebrated by oneself'. She describes her film as having her

own 'weird celebration'. While *Thirty* explores the possibility of how a birthday becomes devoid of meaning, the piece would have been enhanced by manipulating another element of the piece such as the audio. Music or another voice track of Deane counting, perhaps backwards, could have been mixed in to improve the work. In addition to the last film in the programme was the strongest. Elizabeth Smolarz's *Freund Hein* is a captivating video that ponders death. Smolarz constructed the film by asking performers of various ages and backgrounds to perform 'the last minute of their lives'. The result is nine screens of performers, each portraying his own dramatized death. The film aligns well with the notion of 'the Real' Henstrand describes. The audience is left contemplating the conflict between the depiction of death and the 'Reality' of the end of human life.

Henstrand carries great artistic sensitivity and his Lacanian ideas are appropriate for the programme on the lack of desire. His most recent exhibition, titled 'The Ambiguity of the Social Hysterical Revelation', was at Duke University from 10 December 2007 through to 13 January 2008. Henstrand said that he considered himself to be 'just another artist producing more artifacts, filling Place in attempt to glad under the "defective matrix".'

The BAC is a not-for-profit art services organization started in 1966. The organization serves as a core for various cultural groups and Brooklyn-based artists working in the visual, performing, media and literary fields. The non-profit organiza-



tion plays an active part in the artists' creations and presentations of their work. All BAC events are free of charge, making them accessible to borough dwellers. The BAC is funded by the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Council and its Brooklyn Delegation.

For more information about the BAC, please visit <http://www.brooklynartscouncil.org/>. For additional information about the curator, please visit <http://scotthenstrand.com/>. •

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