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BY J. HOBERMAN

The Horse Thief. With the ascendance of East Asian cinema, one of this decade's more evident trends, the revitalized Chinese film industry and the young directors of its so-called "fifth generation" are the talk of the international festival circuit. *The Horse Thief*, a laconic, sumptuously pictorial, and almost plotless feature by Tian Zhuangzhuang, goes further than any contemporary Chinese film I've seen in establishing what the decadent West would consider a personal style.

If *The Horse Thief* lacks the overt political boldness of Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*, it may be that making a feature in Tibet is statement enough—let alone one that takes a fascinatingly neutral view of the more exotic local customs. Ten minutes into *The Horse Thief* you suspect you've already seen more Buddhist ritual than appeared in all previous Chinese films combined. Like Tian's earlier *On the Hunting Ground*, shot among the herdsmen of Inner Mongolia, *The Horse Thief* celebrates one of China's non-Han minorities. Generically, the film resembles the sort of lyrical ethnography Czech filmmakers practised in the backward Carpathians during the '30s. But Tian's visionary insistence equally suggests such anthropological aesthetes as Serge Paradjanov, Robert Gardner, and Werner Herzog—he told one interviewer his films were intended for the 21st century.

There are customarily 100 prints struck of each Chinese feature (and sometimes up to 300); 11 were made of *The Horse Thief*. Still, the only changes ordered by the film ministry were the elision of the corpses from three "sky burials" (like Jains and Parsis, Tibetan Buddhists expose human remains to carrion birds) and the addition of the establishing title "1923." The film's Rotterdam screenings were its first outside China. Made for Xi'an Studio, the hotbed of China's new wave, *The Horse Thief* was requested by the Museum of Modern Art for its upcoming China show. MOMA



Bulle Ogier in *Mon Cas*

was turned down; perhaps the New York Film Festival will have better luck.

Mon Cas. Cinema, Manoel de Oliveira likes to insist, is merely a technology for preserving theater, and here again the venerable Portuguese modernist has taken a theater piece as the pretext for a film. In this case, the original is already self-reflexive—a one-act play by José Régio (author of de Oliveira's 1975 breakthrough film *Benilde or the Virgin Mother*) in which a tormented member of the audience disrupts a performance by bursting on stage to air his own complaints.

Opening as sub-Pirandellian slapstick, *Mon Cas* (*My Case*) grows increasingly convoluted, with de Oliveira—who appears amid a camera crew in the fifth row of the empty auditorium—repeating the initial action, varying the tempo, incorporating dialogue from Samuel Beckett, and finally staging the event as an episode from the Book of Job. (Bulle Ogier, who plays the interrupted actress, is transformed from a vociferous flapper into the silently mugging wife of an outrageously festering leper.) The film, which is ultimately about the sublimation of suffering into art, is your basic tough sell. In the absence of a miracle, *Doomed Love* seems likely to remain the one de Oliveira to receive anything like a New York run.

Memoire des apparences. Rotterdam is Raul Ruiz country. In 1986, the 46-year-old filmmaker was awarded the festival's first lifetime-achievement award. (Nosing out de Oliveira and Chantal Akerman, this year's winner was the even younger Werner Schroeter.) Although, according



Ruiz (right) links Resnais and Bu  el in his new film.

to Ruiz, the already legendary version of *Treasure Island* he directed for Cannon was still a few weeks from completion, the madly prolific director managed to show up with two new films.

Drawing on Calderon's *La Vida Es Sue  o*, *Memoire des apparences* initially concerns a Chilean revolutionary who uses a particular film as the key for remembering secret data; it takes place mainly in a movie theater where, the protagonist dozing off, performers shuttle from one plane of reality to another. The various movies-within-the-movie (and the reveries they inspire) suggest amalgams of *Casablanca*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Flash Gordon*, and *The Arabian Nights*. (Besides these visions, the movie theater is also the site for model railroad lines, flocks of birds, and bloody shoot-outs.) Pointing out that this was his first film in 10 years to be set in his native Chile, Ruiz called *Memoire* "a connection between Resnais and Bu  el," by which he meant memory and dream.

I had to decipher the film through French dialogue and Dutch titles (the reverse would have been preferable); nevertheless, *Memoire* seems even more assured than Ruiz's two NYFF entries, *The Three Crowns of the Sailor* and *City of Pirates*. Who else would rack-focus from the reflection on a metal ashtray to a smoldering cigarette butt or use a musical production number featuring a gigantic fishbowl as a three-second throwaway? Still, it's less the Ruiz flourishes that delight the eye than the garish plasticity of his hard-won bread-and-butter technique—the clash of colored filters and melodramatic music, the taste for shock reaction shots and escalating closeups, the near-constant narrative voiceover that gives coherence to his baroquely fragmented montage.

Watching *Memoire*, one is repeatedly assailed by the suspicion that, on a formal level, Ruiz is currently the most inventive filmmaker working anywhere. Raul Who? Some courageous American distributor should give him a whirl. ■