# Document Citation

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|---|---|
| Title | **Festivals 73** |
| Author(s) | Jan Dawson |
| Source | *Sight and Sound* |
| Date | Autumn 1973 |
| Type | article |
| Language | |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 3 |
| Subjects | Thome, Karin (1943), Germany<br>Rivette, Jacques (1928), Rouen, France<br>Ray, Satyajit (1921-1992), Calcutta, West Bengal, India<br>Lommel, Ulli<br>Oshima, Nagisa (1932-2013), Kyoto, Japan<br>Shebib, Donald (1938), Toronto, Ontario, Canada<br>Tanner, Alain (1929), Geneva, Switzerland |
| Film Subjects | Nihon no yoru to kiri (Night and fog in Japan), Oshima, Nagisa, 1960<br>Overnight, Thome, Karin, 1973<br>Le retour d'Afrique (Return from Africa), Tanner, Alain, 1973<br>Ashani sanket (Distant thunder), Ray, Satyajit, 1973 |

Zärtlichkeit der wölfe, Lommel, Ulli, 1973

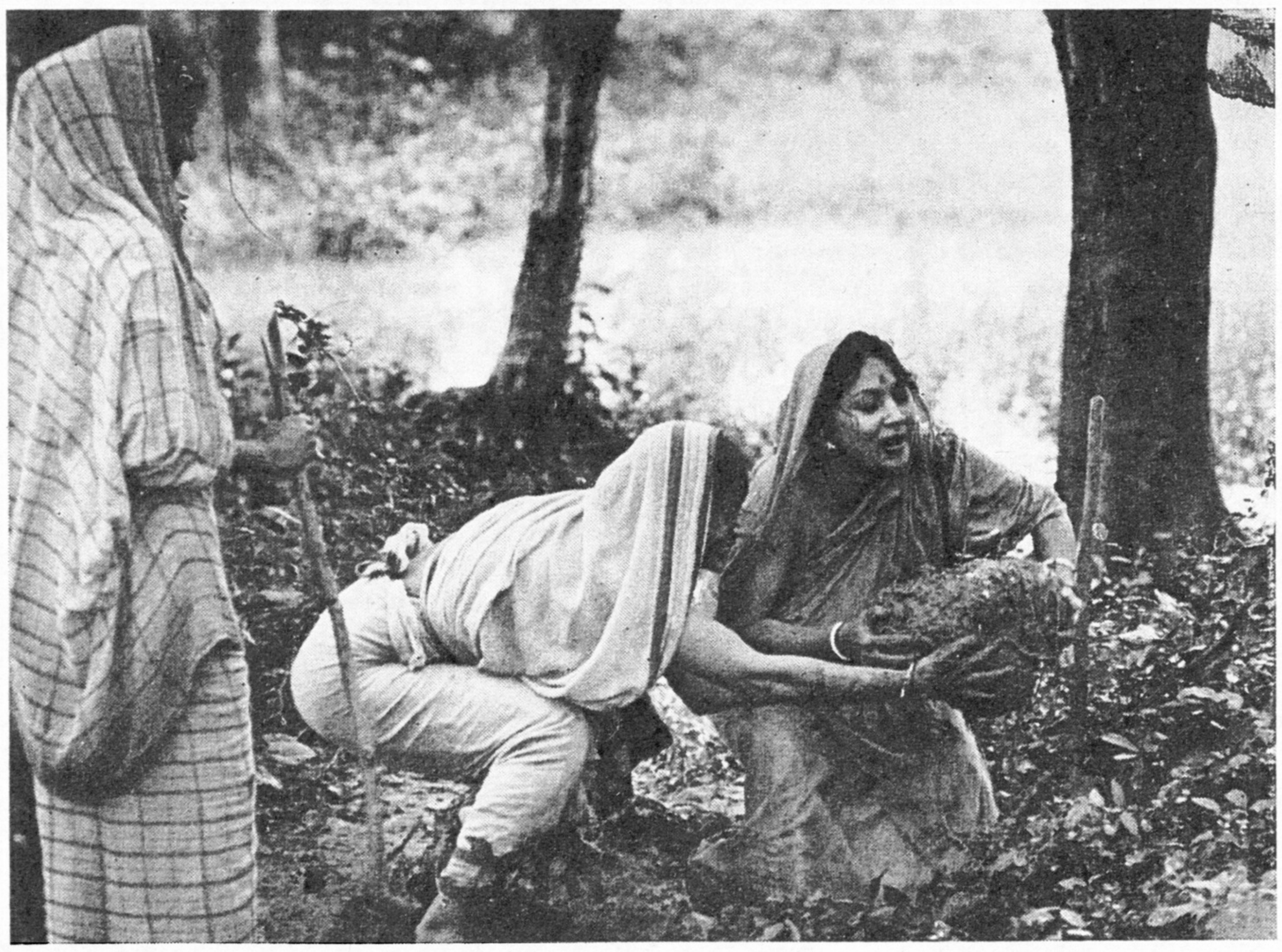
Get back, Shebib, Donald, 1973

Out 1: noli me tangere, Rivette, Jacques, 1970

'Out One Spectre'

Sight & Sound Autumn 1973

# FESTIVALS 73



'Distant Thunder': village women digging for wild potatoes

Out One Spectre

## BERLIN

The difference between art and mart was strikingly in evidence at Berlin this year, with the main Festival provoking a minimum of excitement and the Young Film Forum proving the centre of interest and activity. It is not simply that the competitive Festival with its strictly disciplined Jury plays down all but PR-oriented discussions, while the Forum regards exchanges between film-makers, critics and the lay public as a vital part of festival activity—a distinction generally true of Cannes, and of Venice when it happened. But whereas the Cannes selectors this year had clearly bent over backwards to cater to the changing audience, to the extent of including *La Maman et la Putain* in the main event, the programme for the Festival proper in Berlin was depressingly conservative. At the same time, the Forum, that other 'alternative event' subsidised by the Establishment, has preserved its radical idealism intact. The consistent quality of its 1973 selections was in strong contrast with the general run of high-gloss dross in the main showcase, and the economically impractical suggestion that the latter should be abolished altogether was frequently heard in *post mortem* discussions.

There was, at least, no doubt about where the Grand Prix belonged, and it was gratifying for once to see it get there. Indeed, with newspaper headlines outside the cinema daily proclaiming the growing strength of the D-mark, Satyajit Ray's **Distant Thunder,** though set in 1942, had an inescapable relevance to the problems of the West and the present. Like the film (which is based on a book by the author of *Pather Panchali*), the title functions on several levels, at once literal and metaphorical. The subject is the impact on a Bengali village trying to consolidate its shaky steps towards security of the distant realities of World War II; and the opening credits (reminiscent of those of *Pather Panchali* but enhanced by Soumendu Roy's exquisitely graded colour photography) suggest the serenity of a Monet lily-pond ruffled by tropical storm conditions. Weather is one obstacle in the villagers' struggle, but so too are the less visible threats of cholera and famine, two dangers brought closer by the seemingly unrelated 'flying ships' whose buzzing increasingly interrupts the summer calm.

As the isolated and complacent community is affected by forces beyond its comprehension or control, its traditional values are eroded by hunger and despair. The Brahmin husband (Soumitra Chatterji), who has assumed leadership of the village as his birthright and given it in return the benefit of his religious, medical and pedagogic wisdom, is reduced to selling his services, first to buy a new sari for his beautiful young wife (Babita), then to obtain the few grains of rice necessary for their survival. The wife herself is reduced to digging for wild potatoes, scraping the bottom of the once idyllic river-bed for snails, and finally to selling her favours to obtain food for a starving friend who proves too weak to eat it.

As her innocence turns to tragic experience, the grain merchant grows fatter, and the scarred stranger—living like a leper on the edge of the community—grows more human. Even as he buys with rice from the humbled women the 'love' for which he has so long craved, he becomes less monstrous in their eyes and in ours. His sufferings portend theirs, and his disfigured face (ironically damaged by a firework) makes him the first, premature casualty of the fate which is to scar them all. In his most accomplished, tender and outspoken film to date, Ray shows his tiny group of characters to be victims of an international class system which they themselves once sought to exploit ('The peasants do all the work and we live off them. That's what's wrong'). Meanwhile, a familiar montage of newspaper headlines in unfamiliar characters builds to the crisis, and a closing title announces as a coda that 'In 1943, 3 million people died of hunger in Bengali Province.'

Apart from *Distant Thunder*, the Festival offered more occasional curiosities than solid achievements. The most flamboyant of these was Ulli Lommel's **Tenderness of Wolves,** produced by Fassbinder and featuring that same porcine *enfant terrible* as pimp and fence. Its subject is Haarmann, the child murderer who inspired Fritz Lang's *M* but who is here presented as a paedophiliac homosexual vampire. A small-time crook and informer, he philanthropically offers lodging to child runaways, bites them in the jugular vein and sodomises

*Karin Thome's 'Overnight'* Sight & Sound Autumn 1973

their corpses before chopping them up to sell as meat on the black market. The murders are presented in a series of striking and incomplete tableaux, and the tension between pity and terror is sufficiently maintained for the killer (brilliantly incarnated by a hairless Kurt Raab) to appear increasingly vulnerable as the extent and nature of his crimes is revealed. Yet though its minor characters and economic pressures still belong to the Depression, the story has been inconsistently transposed to the 1940s ('because it was easier to get the costumes'). It is also only fair to admit—the intentional fallacy notwithstanding—that my original enthusiasm for what looked like an expressionist revival has been dampened by the director's statement that his film (denounced, incidentally, by the German Homosexual Law Reform group) is a wish-fulfilment fantasy designed to enamour the audience of its psychopath hero.

With less pretensions, and therefore, regrettably, less critical attention, Canada's Donald Shebib proved himself to be a major international director in **Get Back.** Photographed by Richard Leiterman in appropriately muted colours, the narrative concerns the disastrous attempt by some misfit criminals—two of them superannuated surfers nostalgic for their California heyday—to escape from Toronto's drab poverty belt by means of a big-time pay-roll heist. The operation is marred by rivalries within the group, by their own incompetence, and by the inclemencies of the climate. There are several superlative performances (most notably from Bonnie Bedelia as the desperately decent second generation criminal who provokes the quarrel among thieves); Shebib and his scriptwriter (Claude Harz) further flesh out the crime-doesn't-pay formula by allowing their small-time hoods to function *only* as individuals, and by treating their quirks and foibles with a rare degree of unsentimental humanism; and the images of the snowbound robbery transcend even the ending of Losey's *The Criminal* in their bleak, suggestive power.

Only Rivette's **Out One Spectre** (shown in the Forum) equalled Ray's film in its dazzling mastery of the medium, also revealing the possibility of achieving a fluent transposition to the cinema of what has in the past been by comparison a hesitant and still essentially literary reworking of the Borgesian form. For its first half-hour—a series of apparently unrelated flash shots and brief, seemingly directionless scenes with an aggravating bleeper punctuating and even overlaying the dialogue—the film promises to be an unendurable experience. Then, miraculously, pieces of the gigantic jigsaw puzzle (possibly the world's most complex and expensive board game) begin to fit together, images and faces to recur and relate. Gradually, five separate threads emerge: a deaf-mute (J.-P. Léaud), who plays the harmonica like a Pan-pipe and calls himself the messenger of destiny, is handed cryptic documents whose sense he wishes to decipher; Juliet Bertho, a con-woman specialising in married men, decides to try her hand at robbery and blackmail; two theatre groups, one a collective and one directed by Michel Lonsdale, are respectively rehearsing *Seven Against Thebes* and *Prometheus*; and a boutique owner (Bulle Ogier) is trying to launch a radical newspaper.

But things are not what they seem in this world of perpetual motion. The deaf-mute starts shouting; the characters endlessly contradict statements they've made previously or in flashes forward; and the separate threads are seen to be intertwined once Léaud and Bertho (still apart, like a modern Hermes and Iris) discover clues to the existence of a secret society closely modelled on Balzac's *Groupe des treize.* The film's three organisations start to overlap, and prove in all to contain eleven members of the society, many of them connected by legal or emotional ties. Yet while two outsiders seek to penetrate the mysteries of the thirteen, two key figures remain obstinately absent: Pierre, allegedly the group's leader; and Igor, a member whom we and his wife (Ogier) suspect is sequestered in a locked room which he appears just to have left when the camera finally gets inside it after nearly four hours of suspense.

Rivette consistently litters his non-narrative with internal and external cross-references and with clues which he denies have any essential meaning. He is not, he says, particularly keen on Balzac (who was contributed, like most of the ingredients, by one of the cast in what he insists is an essentially collaborative experiment); he can't play chess, though he likes watching other people play; and he's never got past the first pages of Proust. As with his characters, one has no way of telling whether he always, or ever, tells the truth. But whatever that is, the cryptogram scene (in which Léaud gets on the Balzac trail via *The Hunting of the Snark*) is a multi-dimensional improvement on the 'title' sequence from *Blow-Up*. And his film's final effect (provisional, of course) is of Balzac taken through the looking glass by Cortazar. Eight hours more—in the film's original, unseen 13-hour version—would not have been a moment too much.

Three other Forum films are specially worthy of mention. **Overnight,** a first feature made by Germany's Karin Thome for around £6,000, is a paradoxical film, a genuine original whose director/star vigorously declares that she believes, not in originality, but in individualism and in the need to distinguish between quotations and remakes. An ideologically rigid audience nearly lynched her for the individualism in her wryly observed portrait of life in the middle class drop-out belt, but apparently missed the quotations. These range as far afield as *Broken Blossoms,* though her odyssey of a promiscuous drop-out is most obviously a tour of Godard's career: from the amateurish car thefts of *Breathless,* through the abortive escapism of *Pierrot le Fou* and the auto-destruction of *Weekend,* and on to the Third World, where the heroine is finally lost in a spinning mirage.

Like his *Salamander,* Alain Tanner's **Return from Africa** wittily pinpoints just what it is that makes neutral Switzerland so different from its European neighbours. A childless couple, obliged to change plans after celebrating their departure for Africa, decide to save face by pretending to have left town, but soon lose their appetite for sex and takeaway food and discover the disadvantages of isolationism. Though the final message—that Third World problems can be found in your own back yard—is hammered home rather heavily, the film generally combines surface charm with political perception.

Finally, Oshima's **Night and Fog Over Japan,** made in 1960 and proving that he was already capable of making *The Ceremony* ten years before his public was ready for it. Also about isolationism, it explores—through a series of flashbacks radiating from the traditional wedding of a former student radical, and through ghosts conjured up by troubled consciences—the phenomenon of guilt by dissociation, and subtly denounces the family as a repressive political force. A witness at the wedding is a once actively militant professor, now satisfied with his administrative status. Shots of the 'present' ceremony dissolve into similarly arranged tableaux of the professor's own marriage at the end of the student demonstrations ten years earlier;

and the ghost who insists on testifying is that of the bride's former boyfriend, mysteriously missing since the radical group to which he and the professor both belonged released the innocent workman whom they had kidnapped as a Government spy. The message, spelled out rather clumsily in the subtitles, is that 'the past is the common heritage of those who are fighting for the future.' More happily, the visuals establish with haunting force the impossibility of denying the deterministic nature of the march of time.

JAN DAWSON