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Waiting for 'Apocalypse'

By Molly Haskell

CANNES. For some, the overriding experience of the 32nd annual Cannes Film Festival, as of all the other 31, will be the discovery of some obscure masterpiece on a back street early in the morning. For others, all that Cannes offers this year can be encapsulated in the image of Lauren Bacall dancing on the beach in the wee hours with her motley entourage, a vision of La Dolce Vita persisting into the '80s. Appropriately, this happened at the opening-night party following *Hair*, whose director, Milos Forman, had been accommodating the paparazzi on the beach earlier in the day. Unlike certain fragile wines and people, the Czech director travelled well. The French critics loved the film—though it is Woody Allen who has been dubbed "Le Moliere de Manhattan"—and seem to feel that Forman's nose for satire hasn't been blunted by the sweet smell of success, Hollywood style.

Be that as it may (and *Hair* is not the test case), these associations remind me of Forman's description, back at a dinner party in 1972, of the Munich Olympics, from which he had just returned. The festivities opened, of course, in a spirit of universal high hopes and brotherhood. By the second day, the winnowing process had begun, and a few gloomy faces dotted the still sunny horizon. By the third or fourth day, as the ranks of losers swelled, the camaraderie wanned. And, by the seventh day, when many more people had lost than won, despondency prevailed, with no one even making a passing gesture at sportsmanlike behavior.

That's what Cannes is like, sort of. We begin with high hopes. The festival always looks promising on paper, particularly this year, with films by Werner Herzog, Francesco Rosi, Federico Fellini, Woody Allen, Tomas Alea, Andre Delvaux, Miklos Jancso, James Ivory, Andrzej Wajda, and John Huston in the festival proper and a so-called "work-in-progress" by Francis Coppola; and, outside the festival, no less than three Fassbinders sprinkled here and there.

Each passing day, the disappointments inevitably accumulate, and the mood turns slightly sour. The big difference is that in movies, unlike sports events, there are no clear winners and losers. One man's disappointment, we discover, is another's revelation, as we clash critical swords on the Croisette. Francesco Rosi's *Christ Stopped at Eboli* from Carlo Levi's autobiography is proclaimed a masterpiece by some, a bore by others, and already we are awash in a sea of ambiguity. Our judgments are provisional. Time and distance will certify or contradict them, without resolving the winner-or-loser question, that is, without rescuing most films from the in-between category where the majority live.

Last year, Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* was recognized instantly and almost unanimously as a masterpiece. The jury awarded it the Grand Prize, an instance of serious discovery and recognition in which the festival redeems itself many times over from the jokes about wheelers and dealers on the Carlton Terrace. But the Golden Palm carries very little critical or box-office weight in the U.S., which is why Coppola's decision to go for the prize with *Apocalypse Now* remains the hotly debated, unsolved mystery of the festival. The first noise to pass everyone's lips after the obligatory Gallic-alternate-side-of-the-cheek kiss (now automatic with well traveled Yankees) is "Why?" Despite the concentration of movie doctors that Cannes can provide, no one has yet come up with an answer. But the real mystery is why we should persist in expecting one, since commercial logic and common sense evidently have formed no part of Coppola's thinking for some time now. There's something grandiosely foolish about entering a "work in progress" in competition, as if Cannes were a Joseph Papp playwright's workshop or a backer's audition—now there's a thought—hop-

ing the masses will rise up and acclaim the film as a masterpiece. Of the rumors floating around, my favorite is that Jean-Luc Godard, a current Coppola guru, whose *Bugsy Siegal* Coppola is producing, warned the director that if he went ahead with his plans the French critics would "total" the film. At this point, no one knows which version of the film will be collision-bound (the recutting of films into four or more versions has become the running joke of the festival), and perhaps a new version will arise from the "totalled" opus.

Each festival develops its distinct personality. The metaphor of this one—if I may be permitted to project on the basis of the early returns—is to be found in the Hungarian film, *Dear Neighbor*, by Zsolt Kezdi-Kovacs. In the opening scene, a tour guide, played by Laslo Kovacs, is giving his spiel in the front of a bus, extolling in English, French, and Hungarian the intellectual and aesthetic glories of Budapest. Moments later, he disappears into a dank and dreary apartment building where the rest of the film takes place. The residents fight for each inch of cramped space, hastening the old to their graves, tearing down walls before the last breath has been drawn in order to annex the vacated quarters. This sort of absurdist leap between two "worlds" has become a beaten path, not just within movies, but to festival-goers.

One moment, we loll sybaritically on the beaches, surrounded by the emporia and appurtenances of wealth—St. Laurent, Ted Lapidus, Chanel, the couturiers, all in a row beneath wedding-cake condominiums—and then we enter the cinema to be plunged into the punishing grind of proletarian misery. The contrast can misfire. Rosi's startlingly beautiful images of the Campanian countryside convey not the benighted backwater abandoned even by Christ, but rather a rustic retreat, invitingly ascetic, where one might happily flee the crowds to meditate in peace. Such are the ideological overlappings in these decadent times, that any attempt to dignify the noble third-worlder in intellectual terms is apt to dignify him right into peasant chic.

Running true to the pattern of the past several years, the Eastern European filmmakers are dealing, in a realistic manner, with the problems of contemporary men and women from a humanist bias that favors the individual, while the Western Europeans are still experimenting with new forms of non-narrative, antibourgeois cinema. As an example of the former, I particularly liked Andrzej Wajda's *Without Anesthesia*, the chronicle of an eminent journalist's fall from marital and professional grace. His wife leaves him for a no-talent upstart, and, after he talks a little too freely on a television show, his colleagues begin to freeze him out. Zbigniew Zapasiewicz, who resembles a Morley Safer with weltschmerz, conveys a rumpled urbanity as a creature bedeviled by the contradictions of modern life, a character who obviously expresses many of the feelings of the director.

Meanwhile, back in the Western camp, there seems to have been a return to established works of literature, with new initiatives in narrative. These are hardly the illustrated classics that Hollywood used to turn out by the yard, but projects that bespeak a more sophisticated affinity between auteur and author. We await the impending screenings to report on what Volker Schlöndorff does with Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Werner Herzog with Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, James Ivory with Henry James's *The Europeans*, John Huston with Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, and, of course, Coppola. Will *Apocalypse Now* be about *Heart of Darkness* or will it be Coppola's own *Heart of Darkness*, a journey into the dark continent of big-budget moviemaking, as soul-destroying an ambition as Kurtz's imperial dream?