



Anxiety: New York Film Festival Report 2007 (Part One)

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In this year's offerings, anxiety runs high and affirmation is a wan beam of sunlight in a stormy landscape. At times, indeed, affirmation is more chilling than reassuring. In a range running from grey to still more grey, the New York Film Festival 2007 collection of films portrays dysfunctional societies and profoundly confused and confusing protagonists. At the same time, the films reveal a strong trend away from conventional cinematic narrative and aesthetics. Opinions were radically divided at the press screenings about the success of the risk taking on display. Boldly speaking out on topics such as Iraq and consumerism; shining their beams into the secret places of the human heart, this year's films did not yield anything like a critical consensus, and I shall report below, where appropriate, responses that differed radically from mine. The 2007 offerings suggest that international cinema may be on the cusp of an energizing breakout, or it may be imploding under the pressure of an increasing dehumanization of the political and social climate. In this part of my report from the festival, "Anxiety," I will comment on the outright expressions of morbid disquietude in six of the festival films. In the second part, I will address, under the title "Affirmation?," the generally questionable optimism of seven additional films, a few of which sported "cheerful" messages that made my blood run cold.

No Country For Old Men (USA)

Directed written and produced by
Joel and Ethan Coen; edited by Roderick Jaynes;
director of photography Roger Deakins;
music Carter Burwell; starring Tommy Lee Jones,
Javier Bardem, Josh Brolin; Kelly Macdonald

Redacted (USA)

Written and directed by Brian DePalma;
produced by Mark Cuban; Edited by Bill Pankow;
director of cinematography Jonathon Cliff; music Kevin Banks;
starring Rob Devaney, Izzy Diaz, Daniel Stewart Sherman,
Ty Jones

In the City of Sylvia (SPAIN/FRANCE)

Written and Directed by Jose Luis Guerin;
produced by Luis Minarro and Gaelle Jones,
edited by Nuria Esquerra, Director of Photography
Natasha Braier; starring Xavier Lafitte, Pilar Lopez de Ayala 84 mins.

Secret Sunshine (KOREA)

Written and directed by Lee Chang-Dong;
produced by Hanna Lee; edited by Kim Hyun;
director of cinematography Cho Yong Kyu;
music by Christian Basso, starring Jeon Do-yeon
and Song Kang-ho 142 mins

Margot at the Wedding (USA)

Directed and written by Noah Baumbach;
produced by Scott Rudin; edited by Carol Littleton;
director of cinematography Harris Savides;
music by George Drakoulias; starring Nicole Kidman,

Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jack Black, and Zane Pais 92 mins.

The Last Mistress (FRANCE)

Written and directed by Catherine Breillat;

produced by Jean-Francois Lepetit; edited by Pascale Chavance;

director of photography Yorgos Arvanitis; starring

Asia Argento, Fu'ad Ait Aattouk and Roxane Mesquida 114 mins.

Based on the novel of the same name by Cormac McCarthy, *No Country For Old Men*, the latest Coen Brothers film, is propelled forward by a human killing machine, Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem) who systematically hunts down and murders most of the key players in the plot—and anyone peripheral who annoys him. Chigurh may have started in the pages of McCarthy's book, but he strikes the same chord that has previously resonated in Coen brothers productions—for example Leonard Smalls (Randall 'Tex' Cobb) the hateful biker in *Raising Arizona* and Carl (Steve Buscemi) and Gaear (Peter Stormare), the two bizarrely cold kidnapers in *Fargo*. The Coens have made Chigurh theirs. Like Smalls, Carl, and Gaear, Chigurh has been transferred to the screen as the embodiment of the Coen's fear that the world cannot be made in the image of our most gleaming ideals, that intractable evil exists. But at the philosophical core of the Coens's earlier films the darkness that yields to neither law nor love was a disturbing continuous filament, woven into a tapestry of foolish but somehow enduring humanity. A perfect emblem of their previous representation of the relationship between love and hate is the image at the end of *Fargo*, in which pregnant sheriff Marge Gunderson (Frances McDormand), is driving her police car with the captive Gaear in the back seat expressing her astonishment that anyone could commit murder for money, while the protective grid that separates her from the perp symbolizes the irrevocable gulf between the assumptions of the modern legal establishment and the reality of a level of crime that defies all notions of rehabilitation or even punishment. It just IS, like God. But society can cope. Not so in the latest Coen brothers film.

In *No Country For Old Men*, the rule of law is the "Old Men" of the title, and it signals a woeful collapse of the law. Taken from a poem by William Butler Yeats, the title is an excerpt from the first line of "Byzantium": "*This is no country for old men.*" But it is an ironic inversion of its source. Where Yeats bemoans the loss of the exhilaration and passion of his youth, McCarthy's novel is stunned by the implacability of the death drive, an absurdity in the face of all the blessings

of life, but still untouchable by the logic of the law, even in its best form. That legal logic is embedded in the sheriff in this film, Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), a good man in the deepest sense of the word, who is weary and defeated from the start, never able to lay a glove on Chigurh. While no one, despite their best intentions, seems able to support Bell's quest for justice, Chigurh is aided and abetted at every turn by all of the qualities the human beings possess, both positive and negative, including selfishness, love, wisdom, naivete, stupidity, shrewdness, patience, and impulsiveness. It's pretty bleak. Played out against the large open vistas endemic to the western, *No Country*, inverts the morality play tradition of this genre, which has tended to affirm the inevitability of the triumph of goodness (white hats) and transforms the pristine western landscape into an endless barren expanse. In *No Country*, there is an unstoppable quality to triumph of death. Chigurh is a black hole devouring everything in his path.

When asked during their press conference if *No Country* was a western for the Dubya era, for reasons best known to them, the Coens and Tommy Lee Jones shuffled their spiritual feet and "aw-shucksed" their way through a disingenuous Gary Cooperish routine in which they allowed as how they didn't know what a western was. But the questioner was on point. This fine film translates to the screen in oblique disguise the current horrified recognition of the American liberal community that our Constitution may well not be able to check and balance the deep dyed human darkness that has found its way into the Oval Office, a human stain that neither responds to logic, nor can be blocked by shame, nor is open to love. Some critics complained to me that *No Country* was too reminiscent of *Fargo* and *Raising Arizona*; however, that ignores the way authentic artists build on their previous works, always rendering their latest creations both familiar and strange, as they continue to reflect on the world. Tracking the Coens from *Raising Arizona* to *No Country*, more's the pity, accurately charts how far we have fallen since the days when, as they saw it, Leonard Smalls would obligingly self-destruct for us.

Redacted, Brian De Palma's howl of pain at what the United States has become in the process of attacking Iraq, also evokes an America gone over to the dark side. The title, according to De Palma, refers to the blockage of the flow of information by the Current Occupant's administration; the film an attempt to open the floodgates. The plot that threads the film loosely is based on a news story that got De Palma's attention, along with that of all people of conscience in the United States, about the rape and murder of a 15 year old Iraqi girl and the murder of the rest of her family, by American soldiers. *Redacted* reports, but does not rejoice in, the eventual conviction of the sociopathological soldiers guilty of the crimes. Their punishment doesn't begin to address the problems in the situation. This is no *A Few Good Men* (Dir. Rob Reiner, 1992), which

basically lionizes American justice despite the “occasional glitch” in the military. Rather De Palma focuses on the reluctance of American authorities to make a real inquiry, the insane and anarchic realities that soldiers face every day in Iraq, and the lack of support among far too many Americans for the ideals that supposedly propelled us into combat in hapless Iraq in the first place.

Many of my fellow critics at the press screening didn't like *Redacted*, saying the acting was amateurish. Some seemed disturbed in some vague way that no one ever articulated clearly about the tone of De Palma's criticism of the American presence in Iraq. My own response is quite different. I'm proud of De Palma, a director whose work I have previously found superficial and showy, for the rawness of this film, which, to my mind, recreates through a starkly minimalist style of acting an American military overwhelmed and under-prepared. This is not to say that the film is at all sympathetic to the criminal behavior of the two rapist/murderers. Rather, De Palma is depicting psychologically deficient personnel loosed on an innocent Iraqi population by a military lacking in purpose, understanding, and motivation. The best of the soldiers, the moral center of the film, Lawyer McCoy (Rob Devaney) is called upon by the situation to exercise an impossible level of individual responsibility for a world spinning out of control. He finds a way to bring the crime to light. However, without the support of his country, his fellow soldiers, or even his father, he suffers inordinately the guilt that should be, but isn't, on the shoulders of the leaders who have sent him there as cannon fodder in the first place, without any plan more specific than to harvest billions for themselves and their friends. The loose narrative structure of the film echoes McCoy's feeling of isolation in failing to give him the central action arc typical of Hollywood. There **is** no central arc; rather a collection of soldiers of varying degrees of humanity flailing around in a maelstrom. In its deflation of the potential American film hero, *Redacted*, bears a certain similarity to *No Country for Old Men*. De Palma conveys the “sorrow and the pity” of the situation of everyone, Americans and Iraqis alike, though certainly the murderer-rapists are more horrifying than pathetic. He took my breath away.

But what I found, if possible, even more moving is the refusal of this former Hitchcock wannabe to privilege the brilliant cinematic techniques he understands so well. In *Redacted*, every nerve in De Palma's body seems to be contending with the all but impossible task of turning narrative film into a vehicle of stark truth. Toward this end, he uses a variety of screen media, most of which are aesthetically ugly—surveillance tapes, video diaries, Internet streaming video as well as film technology—in a convulsive effort to record what can be recorded of human motivation and behavior. Unlike many of the traditional narratives De Palma has served in his previous films, *Redacted* does not subordinate technology to the telling of the story. It is a far cry not only from

the polished movie grand guignol of *Carrie* (1976) but also from De Palma's very recent grotesque look at violence in America in the slickly sensational *The Black Dahlia* (2006). Rather, *Redacted* foregrounds the massive fallibility of technology, as well as its small reserve of effectiveness, in efforts at communication and discovery. In some respects, the crowning moment of the film is its post script. After the story is told, De Palma provides a montage of still photography taken from real events in Iraq, the faces of the figures in the images all redacted with black lozenges. According to De Palma, he was angry at being forced to redact the photos by what he sees as disingenuous legalistic thinking on the part of his producers, but some viewers may feel that the redaction drives his point home with maximum force.

In The City of Sylvia, a stunningly beautiful film, which follows a stunningly beautiful young man around Strassbourg, also tests the ability of film to tell the truth, recalling, in its assertions of freedom from controlled production conditions and conventional characterization, and narrative, the heady excitement of the first New Wave films from France in the 1950s and 1960s. But director Jose Luis Guerin's passages around the French city are a good deal more unsettling than Cleo's ramble around Paris from 5 to 7. We know very little, if anything, at the end of the film that we did not know at the beginning about the man at the center of our attention, who is called, El (Javier Lafitte). We first meet him in a darkened hotel room, filmed in beautiful desaturated color, writing thoughtfully in a notebook. El wanders around Strassbourg for three days, sketching people he sees around him, mostly women. His isolation would seem to indicate that he is a complete stranger to the city, but is he? Has he been here before? We soon begin to feel that he is searching for someone or something. But the ambiguity of his actions go beyond the disturbances they provoke in the audience simply because Guerin refuses to satisfy the demand for certainty typical of conventional entertainment. There is something sinister about El.

Or it may not. Artistic and supremely beautiful himself, El pushes all our empathy buttons. We want to identify with him as the protagonist. We just can't. Our doubts seems to gain a focus when El finds an Ella (Pilar Lopez de Ayala) on whom he fixates all his formerly wandering attention. He is stalking her. When she confronts him, he expresses sorrow, remorse, and, above all, innocence. His story is that he thought she was a woman named Sylvia, whom he met in Strassbourg, and has returned to find. Can this be true? The film never tells us. Moreover, El turns increasingly eerie when, after his rather intense game of cat and mouse with Ella, he goes on to seduce another woman whom he meets in a bar with something like the same determination. There's no reason the disappointment of his aborted search for Sylvia should not lead to the self-medication of casual sex. But the mysterious mood of the film somehow raises the fear that there

is more here than meets the eye, especially when the camera skims with just a little too much glancing attention a provocative newspaper headline about “another” local murder of a woman. Indeed, we never see El’s conquest again, and he does go on to yet another woman. Still, the film taunts us with the possibility that our own insecurities and not El are responsible for our suspicions. Shades of Johnny Aysgarth (Cary Grant) in Hitchcock’s *Suspicion* (1941).

Guerin’s much more beautiful and much less political film than De Palma’s *Redacted* is arguably born out of a similar impulse to test what can be known of reality through visual storytelling. Hypnotically compelling, *In the City of Sylvia* does not speak to the large issues of war and peace, but it does provoke reflections on the perturbing potential nexus between demonic energy and art, eroticism, and freedom.

Secret Sunshine takes another difficult route, this time we are confronted with a film concerned with the life of an immensely unlikeable protagonist. Lee Shin-ae (Jeon Do-yeon) is a single mother who moves from Seoul to a small Korean town, whose name means secret sunshine, where her dead husband was born. The first shot of the film is a vision of the sunlit sky through the windscreen of Shin-ae’s car, which has broken down, as she is making her pilgrimage, young son in tow, to her husband’s birthplace. Kim Jong-chan (Song Kang-ho), the mechanic who shows up to help her, is taken by Shin-ae and pursues her through the rest of the film, perhaps in vain, until the last frame, which focuses on a pale ray of sun hitting a dirt patch in the yard outside her house. The indeterminacy of Jong-chan’s courtship of Shin-ae, likely to be all but incomprehensible to most Western viewers, may be mitigated by a precise understanding of the visual progression from sky imagery to an image of dirt, but more of that later.

The story of *Secret Sunshine*, untouched by Hollywood genre conventions, is a simple slice of life punctuated sporadically by suspense. Shin-ae, a loner, feels isolated when she first arrives in town. More cultivated than the people she meets, she makes the townspeople feel uneasy about her desire to set up a local music school. We see her in desultory conversations with her new neighbors, the smitten Jong-chan, and her brother, who visits briefly. Shin-ae fills the rest of her time representing herself to local bigwigs as a wealthy woman interested in making big deals, a complete lie, and suddenly, during a girls’s night out with her new acquaintances her son is kidnaped. He is subsequently found dead after a tense search for him, and Shin-ae, who had previously scorned the overtures of a born-again Christian sect, becomes a fanatic convert. Her disappointment in the salvation she at first enthusiastically embraces leaves her anxiously stranded in her shabby house, bereft of her son, no closer to establishing a music school than she had been, and ambivalently confronted by Jong-chan’s continuing interest in her.

Secret Sunshine is abundantly packed with the feel of life. It would have been extremely easy to narrate its events in melodramatic form, but Lee Chang-dong works hard to keep the film from pulsating with heated emotional crescendos, despite the sensational nature of what happens. Shin-ae remains unfathomable in her reactions to her son's death, the interest shown in her by Jong-chan, and her ultimate failure to make anything of her life. The shots visualizing her plight are not artfully composed and yet they quiver with the sense of place. The only aspects of the story that resonate with cliché are those associated with the Christian fundamentalists. But even here, there appears to be something vital trapped underneath the formulaic speech and gestures.

Many critics at the press screening persisted in seeing the film as a satire of fundamentalist religion, even in the face of the director Lee Chang-dong's insistence that he had much larger purposes. Indeed, Lee responded to questions about what had happened during the course of the film by pointing toward Shin-ae's evolution away from abstraction toward concrete life. Though this had not been evident to me during the screening, in retrospect I found it useful to think of the film in those terms. There is a trajectory toward the concrete as Shin-ae moves away from her grandiose designs for her music school through her self-deluded religious "enlightenment" to a "be here now" moment at the conclusion of the film. This arc is supported by a transition from the images of sky to the terminal image of the materiality of the small patch of earth. Still, the concrete existence toward which Lee is pointing in the film holds little or no rescue from Shin-ae's initial anxieties. The most we can say is that they have ceased to be complicated by the fantasies of cloud-cuckoo land. Shucking life lies makes her more grounded, but she remains full of existential angst. *Secret Sunshine* does not go down like candy, but it has the piquant bitter bite of living.

Margot at the Wedding is the story of an equally unappealing heroine, the eponymous protagonist (Nicole Kidman), but it manifests decidedly less artistry and insight into the human condition. Director Noah Baumbach has demonstrated remarkable success in pulling together impressive casts of actors, and, with any luck, he will eventually grow into a cinematic maturity worthy of his "talent." Baumbach appears to be striving for the feel of life that is manifest in *Secret Sunshine*. But where Lee Chang-dong is skillful at using the freedom he claims for himself, Baumbach appears to be unable to maneuver in a terrain devoid of melodramatic conventions, much as he would like to. His subject too is a single mom, Margot, who is traveling to her sister's wedding with her young son, Claude (Zane Pais). This SM is a divorcee rather than a widow, and she is a successful, well known writer, but she is, in her way, as grandiose as Shin-ae. She doesn't

need to imagine herself more socially important than she is; rather she strains for a youth she has long since passed and frequently behaves as if she were Claude's contemporary rather than his mother. What else is new? Another American baby bitch.

Margot is as unlikeable as Shin-ae, but the reason for telling Margot's story escapes me. Margot doesn't evolve during Baumbach's tale of the wrecked wedding of her sister Pauline (Jennifer Jason Leigh). Margot and Pauline seem doomed to an eternal return to the patterns of rivalry of their childhood and doomed to pulling everyone around them into the maelstrom of their hysterical—and not in a funny way—lives. I have only seen two of Baumbach's three films, but *Margot* and *The Squid and the Octopus* both give strong evidence that his obsessions lie with adults who can never grow up. I do think arrested development is a major feature of American life, and that it needs examination, but just vomiting scenes of infantile behavior on the part of adults, as Baumbach likes to do, doesn't throw light on the situation or provide entertainment. The anxiety of people whose material needs are amply provided for—Baumbach traffics in the kindergarten antics of the haute American bourgeoisie—begs for more perspective than we get in his representations.

Finally, for sheer pessimism with a frisson, you can't beat Catherine Breillat, ever eager to prove that we are such slaves to our ids that chaos cannot help but come again—and again, and again. The title of Breillat's entry in NYFF 2007, *The Last Mistress*, is translated from the French title *Une Vieille Maitresse*. A story of the unquenchable human penchant for the dark side or eroticism (Is there any other kind of eroticism for Breillat?), *The Last Mistress* subtly alters Breillat's French title in nuance. The word "vieille" of *Une Vieille Maitresse* means old, possibly in the sense of former, but also possibly in the sense of both aged and/or endemic, as in "that old feeling." Unsurprisingly, the French title is much, much more evocative.

Set in the 18th century, *Une Vieille Maitresse* is the story of Ryno de Marigny (Fu'ad Ait Aattou), a beautiful libertine lad, short on funds but long on breeding, appeal, and moxie; who cuts a swath through the female population of Paris, and has won the love of the dangerous, irresistible courtesan, La Vellini (Asia Argento). Somehow, as I write this, it strikes me that the overheated characterization of La Vellini reminds me naughtily of Kay Kendal's drunken remark in *Les Girls* (Dir. George Cukor, 1957), as she is travestyng Carmen, "I am the naughty cigarette girl, and all the boys, they want my—cigarettes." Indeed, all the boys, young and old, want La Vellini's—cigarettes. But she prefers to subject Ryno to physical torture, and literally lick the blood of his wounds. Don't get me wrong, Asia Argento is convincing in the role of seductress; she isn't beautiful, but she has intensity and offers the kind of visceral challenge to respectability that appears to be

ravishing to men both entitled and trapped by the strictures of elegant manners and social position. And the costumes Breillat has come up with are actual clothes of the period. The frames are sumptuously composed and lit. Moreover, the landscape is gorgeous. This is Breillat's biggest budget film, and, at her press conference, she expressed her joy at having comparatively generous resources. But it's all just too familiar for my taste. Handsome, dissolute, but potentially redeemable Ryno is wedged between the disreputable, hard-way woman, La Vellini, who despite her precarious social standing takes lip from no one (the little devil); and the beautiful, *comme il faut* *Jeune Femme*, Hermangarde (Roxane Mesquida), whose even, loyal disposition, faithful heart, and fortune will give Ryno the stable place in good society that he needs—quelle wife she will make. Zut! What do you think happens?

Oui. He promises wife that he will have no more to do with mistress, but..... And wife cannot forgive. Result: not only is home and family impossible in this world; it is also a place in which the birth of children is out of the question, they are doomed to die either before or after they exit the womb. Moreover, for adults, Breillat acknowledges no grey area between obsessive, death haunted compulsions or stoic, mannered face saving. *C'est une veille histoire*. Wouldn't surprise Charles Swinburne at all. And for my part, it more provokes the chuckles of the grand guignol than the passionate tremors of anxiety.

And so, my friends, in Part One, the center does not hold. Once again, Breillat tells us it never did. The other directors discussed above exude the aura of Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*, seeing though the meaninglessness of the established, well-padded system to a perspective more open, both free and sinister. Coming next: Affirmation?