

we will engage the media in debates on the GMMP 2005 findings..

- To expose media to existing gender instruments which would guide gender responsive coverage.
- To target mainstream and community media through workshops and informal sessions.

## 2. Training of trainers

To organise a regional training of gender and media monitoring trainers workshop, covering sub-Saharan Africa.

- To replicate the training of trainers nationally and facilitate expansion of GMMP 2010 into new countries.
- To develop a training manual for gender and media monitoring.

## 3. Regional directory of women experts

To create a regional on-line and print version of the directory of women experts covering diverse thematic areas.

- To partner with existing networks and contacts in the region to develop the directory.
- To distribute the directory to media in order to increase the ratio of women as news sources.

## 4. Media literacy training

To raise critical gender and media awareness with consumers and encourage their active engagement with media.

- To create an interactive gender and media monitoring website for media users.
- To promote the use of traditional forms of communication, radio and short text messages to enhance critical media literacy.
- To establish annual gender media awards in recognition of best practices in this area.

## 5. Gender sensitive media codes of conduct

To review existing media codes of ethics and communication policies in sub-Saharan Africa to establish whether or not they are gender sensitive.

- To propose amendments of the codes to make them more gender responsive.
- To advocate for the adoption, dissemination and enforcement of these codes. ■

3-5 December 2007, Nairobi, Kenya.

# Cinema as metaphor: Montreal 2007

*Heike Kühn*

*Montreal's 31st Festival des Films du Monde (2007) – at least the first few days – might have confirmed the impression that rumours about a loss of quality were true. However, while many film critics have favoured the Film Festival of Toronto in recent years, Montreal is fighting back.*

The two main programmes of the international competition, one reserved for film debuts, and in the thoughtfully investigated section 'Focus on World Cinema', were rich in beautiful films. But the international competition itself suffered from a lack of aesthetic knowledge.

*DP75-Tartina City*, for example, a contribution from the Chad, combines a devastating story of systematic torture with a parable of the eternal return of immortal despots. Politically engaged, the film hesitates to translate its embarrassment into a language of images which reaches beyond the status of information.

A gripping vision of ethical admonition, interwoven with a provocative film aesthetic, *Ben X*, the Flemish contribution to the international competition, won the prize of the Ecumenical Jury as well as the Grand Prix of America and the Most Popular Film award.

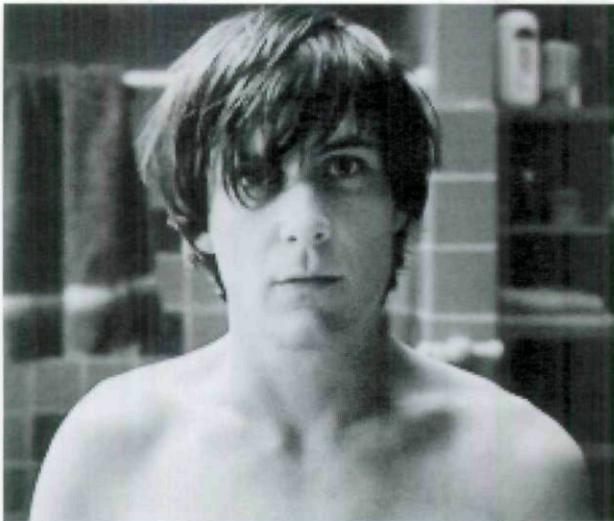
Director Nic Balthazar uses critical views towards society and media, as have been seen in other movies dealing with pestered juveniles, in order to thwart these well known motifs in the end. Starting like a drama of the gifted, autistic child driven to death by rudeness and prejudice, *Ben X* develops as a refreshingly unorthodox revenge-satire.

Seventeen-year-old-protagonist Ben is the

hero of a computer game, killing monstrous creatures on the highest level. In real life the boy suffers from a condition of hypersensitivity, leading to constant implosions. From his point of view, every detail is blown up to the size of a universe; every little task is a gigantic challenge.

Whereas the simple minds that make Ben's life a misery search for originality by looking alike, Ben is strikingly different. His playful reception of the world opens windows into a widened reality where he can talk fluently with fictive characters, such as the heroine of his beloved computer game. This heroine is the virtual character of a girl, who in real life is as shy as Ben. They agree to meet but fail, because Ben's worst enemies make him arrive late. Ben compensates for his disappointment by creating a ghostly companion, visible only to him. This apparition of the girl accompanies him and suggests committing suicide.

'One has to die first', says Ben's mother,



Still from *Ben X*, directed by Nic Balthazar (Belgium/The Netherlands).

bursting into tears in front of a TV-camera. This sentence is more enigmatic than we think. Indeed, it is a triumph of fantasy. If it is only the sacrifice of the innocent that moves the TV-cameras, why not fake it? After arranging his suicide, seemingly 'proven' by his own video-camera, Ben appears safe and sound in a church to bring a little life back to his funeral. His resurrection blames the media that refused to report the daily war at school, but is willing

to capture every single tear of his devastated family.

Ben's revenge is completed by an accidentally taken mobile-picture of his humiliation in front of a yelling class, not focussing on his bitter role, but on the delighted faces of his torturers and the cheering crowd. The imagery strikes back and claims an alternative power.

The Passion of Christ needs no repetition; one crucifixion is enough to save us from our sins. The scapegoats of today, states this cunning movie, will not die, but rehearse their death as part of a cinema strategy. No use killing, if a picture brings us back to life.

A worldly life? A spiritual life? *Ben X* is a fascinating example of my personally preferred film-theory: a movie with a strong and unique aesthetic is a good candidate for discussion about more or less hidden religious impact. Why so? Maybe because digging deep into the parameters of aesthetics reveals the roots of humanism – and its blossoms.

#### Talk Film, Talk Faith

*Ben X* might be the perfect choice for one of the next Talk Faith, Talk Film seminars, 'which were begun by, and have continued under the direction of Interfilm, North America' as James M. Wall, senior contributing editor of *Christian Century* magazine, located in Chicago, Illinois, USA, wrote. He continued, 'From the beginning the seminars have involved support, as well, from the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). Under the leadership of the Rev. Andrew Johnston, now the pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Ottawa, and formerly pastor of the Briarwood Presbyterian Church, in Montreal, Talk Faith, Talk Film, has energized and informed film viewers since its first sessions in 1997.

Referring to the work of Susanne Langer, the art philosopher, Jim Wall suggests a way of decoding images, which, by the way, should also be the overriding concern of every film critic who deserves the privilege of writing. 'The methodology appears simple enough, but most viewers fail to make the distinction, remaining largely fixed on the film's "aboutness", rather than remaining open to its "isness". Sadly, this is also how many religious

people view faith and doctrine, fixing on the surface data rather than its deeper significance.'

Participants at the 2007 seminar, held during Montreal World Film Festival, asked to meet the members of the ecumenical jury. We were asked a complicated question: What do we expect from movies? My colleagues, Alyda Faber, Scott Malkemus, Guy Marchessault and Roman Maurer, found these crucial keywords: transparency and translucency. An open-minded view, which neither underestimates our imagination nor our sensitivity. A vision of humankind and the world which is universal, but neither predictable nor dogmatic.

As for me, I believe in metaphors. Such as in Edward Yang's film *Yi Yi*, telling the story of a disconnected family. The grandmother is the only person caring for the family literally and symbolically. One day, she has a heart attack and is found lying next to the litter box. She goes into a coma and a doctor recommends speaking with her, luring her back to life through thrilling narrations.

Her little grandson is too scared to do so. To console and distract him, he is given a photo camera. He starts photographing mosquitoes, which no one appreciates. A heartless teacher mocks him. 'There is nothing to see,' the teacher howls with laughter. 'You need to look better,' the boy replies and is instantly punished.

Even so, he does not give up the idea that some things are just invisible to the unsophisticated viewer. Claiming you don't see a thing does not necessarily imply that things do not exist. Obviously, touching the sphere of religion and philosophy in the frame of childlike perception, the film confronts us with our limited and narrow perspective of the invisible and visible world. With the help of a little boy and a great filmmaker we are challenged in our stubborn belief of reality as a one-way street.

The next project of the boy is to photograph the backs of heads of people. Interrogated by his uncle why he would do so, the boy states: 'You cannot see yourself from the back.' I wonder if a philosopher could have expressed it any better. We have no idea of our appearance in the world: we neither see our what is behind us nor what is behind the mask people wear in

order to protect themselves. A mirror is an impostor, betraying us at the core of our self-understanding. A cinematographic image, referring to a sublime aesthetic, emphasizing the intense self-interrogating process of filmmaking, is a window on the world, enlightening foreign visions of life as well as the routine in which we might be stuck.

### Inspiration from China

At Montreal 2007 we were lucky enough to see amazing films. If *Ai Quing De Ya Chi* (Teeth of love) by Chinese director Zhuang Yuxin had been shown in competition, it could have been *Ben X's* greatest rival. It is almost unbelievable that this elegant piece of work is a debut. 'The teeth of love' leave their traces on the body of a beautiful woman, acting as representative of so many supporters of the communist party who never doubted the almighty rules of a regime that defeated the smallest sign of individuality or personal pleasure.

From 1977 Qian Yehong, the female protagonist, discovers that love is not a party member. Violent towards her own feelings as well as towards the beloved enemy, a handsome young poet, her self-abnegation is literally painful: a chain reaction of physical injuries and invisible wounds, which will never heal. For ten years this is the credo of the Red fundamentalist – until she realizes that the communist credo of discipline, restricting emotions and sexuality, denies life itself.

From the beginning of her medical studies to her work as a doctor, Qian Yehong's failed love-stories are part of a bigger frame: The private moments of a forbidden love with a married and high-ranking party member, an abortion that is found out, and the punishment of 're-education' in a factory, symbolize the agony of a whole decade.

It's the killing of the inner voice and the cutting of the roots of humanity that interest the filmmaker. Reflecting utter subordination and embodying self-deception, he shows what made the disaster of Tiananmen Square possible. That's what cinema is all about. ■

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