

The Politics of Mediterranean Identity

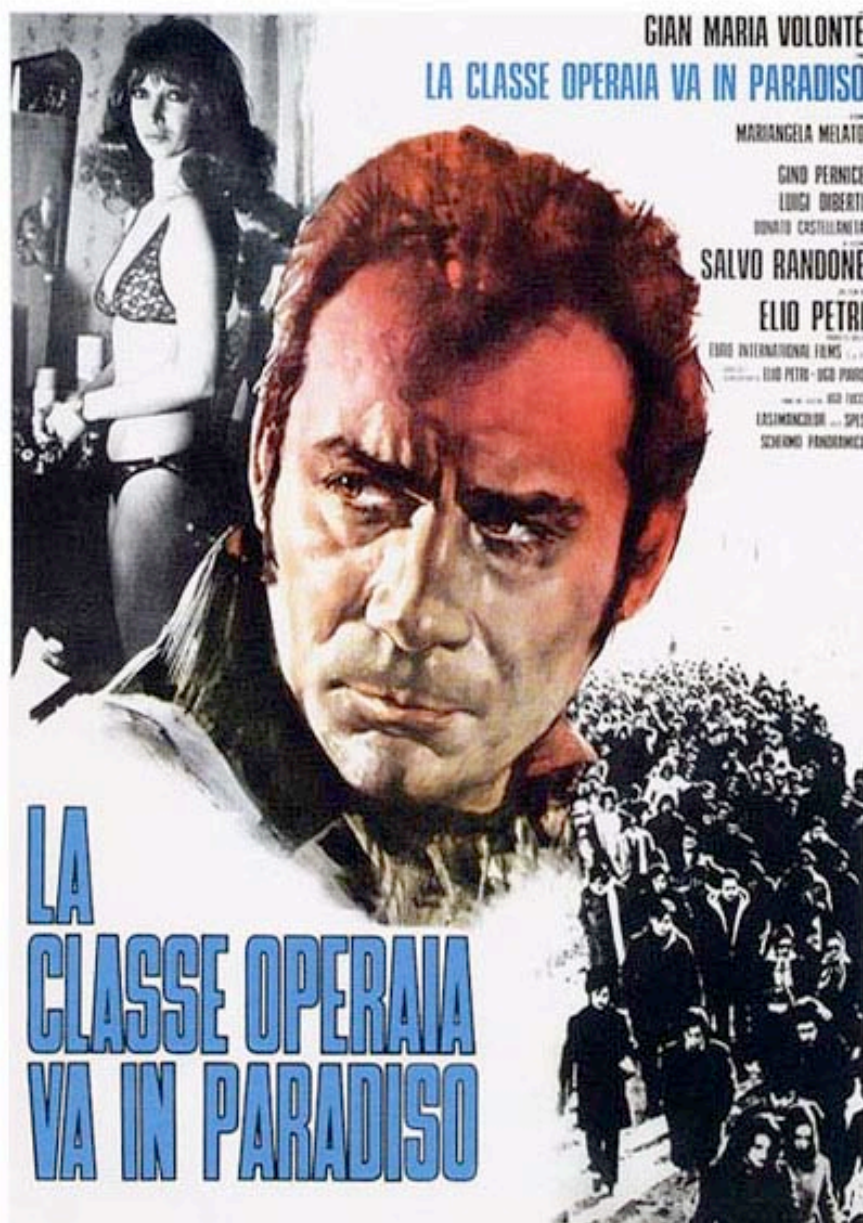


France is the land of cinema for different reasons. Not only was motion picture technology invented there; to this day the French population constitutes the most intensely concentrated national group of film aficionados in the world. Everyone knows of the Cannes film festival; what is less well understood is that almost every French city and a great many towns have their own annual film festivals, each focusing on some topical, geographical or cinematographic aspect of film production. The Mediterranean Film Festival, held in Montpellier, France, is important in this regard because its vocation of uniting films that form a collective identity from an area of the greatest geopolitical importance, one fraught with conflict at the heart of global preoccupations, cannot be ignored. The thirty-first edition of the Mediterranean film festival in Montpellier more than ever featured a sense of common identity and internecine political conflict.

This year, from 23 October to 1 November, the festival included 239 films of all types — full-length features, short films, documentaries and experimental films — carefully selected for their contemporary social significance. As in previous years, pre-release showings of major films, the films of promising young directors and retrospectives of important films or the work of directors that have become difficult to see in commercial circuits were prominently featured.

The festival was opened to great effect by the projection of Alejandro Amenábar's new film *Agora* (Spain - USA, 2008, 141 min.). Whatever the merits and defects of this controversial return to the genre of Roman and Christian epic, it must be said that its depiction of life in cultivated Alexandria at the end of the fourth century — that is, just some years before the fall of the Roman Empire — is impressive both in terms of its visual reconstitution of the historical period and, especially, for its contemporary relevance. This is a film about religious intolerance and sexism. Centered on the life and (gruesome) death of the female philosopher Hypathia, the conflict between scientific inquiry and religious fanaticism is revealed within a context of imperial *real politik*, male chauvinism, and social oppression. Any relation to people or places today is wholly intentional.

Clearly, these themes reveal the antinomies of culture and society in the Mediterranean basin today. The festival organizers were concerned (consciously or not) to present aspects of how universal concerns are given particular expression that are peculiar to the region.



In addition to the films selected for competition in different categories, assiduous *cinéphiles* (cinema connoisseurs) were treated to several special thematic programs attesting to the organizers' pedagogical seriousness. For example, an attempt was made to stimulate a renewal of interest in the work of Elio Petri, arguably the best of Italian "political" filmmakers. Petri, spawned by the post-war wave of Italian neo-realism (he was Giuseppe De Santis' directing assistant), made and released his first feature film in 1961 (*Il Assassino / The Murderer*) starring Marcello Mastroianni. Over the next twenty years, he made a dozen films that startled critics and public alike. In films like *La decima vittima* (*The Tenth Victim*, 1965), *A ciascuno il suo* (*We Still Kill The Same Way*, 1967), *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni* (*Investigation of a Citizen Beyond Suspicion*, 1970), *La classe operaia va in paradiso* (*The Working Class Goes to Paradise*, 1971) and *Todo modo* (1976) he combined social criticism and political commitment with an exploration of existential subjectivities in individuals. In other words, he tended to go beyond political denunciation, on the one hand, and "psychological" studies, on the other, by showing that we cannot understand one dimension of reality without relating it to the other. In doing this, he was considered the equal, at the very least, of Federico Fellini, Marco Bellocchio, Bernardo Bertolucci, Michelangelo Antonioni and the other prominent directors of his day. But everyone did not understand his accomplishment during the rather sectarian years of political contestation. Or perhaps some understood all too well. Although a fictional film, *Todo modo* was clearly a critical examination of Aldo Moro, who was killed two years later while held hostage by the Red Brigades. In any case, by the end of the 1970s times were changing, and then Petri suddenly died in 1982 at the age of 52. The result is that this giant of contemporary Italian cinema is now virtually unknown, a situation that the festival may help change by having located and projected nine of Petri's astounding and rare films.

Equally interesting was a thematic grouping of the "fantastic" genre exploiting the theme of parapsychology in new Spanish cinema. Eleven films, including two of Alejandro Amenábar (*Abra los ojos / Open Your Eyes*, 1997, and *The Others*, 2001) and two of Guillermo Del Toro (*El espinazo del diablo*, 2001, and *El laberinto del Fauno*, 2006). Neither of these directors is Spanish, but both have a privileged relationship to this country and participate in the exploration of memory and perception that is the hallmark not only of the psychic dimension of the genre but also of the concern to explore the political and spiritual consequences of civil war and then forty years of totalitarian repression in Spain. We see the same themes in other films of the genre, such as *Rec* (2007) by Jaume Balagueró, *El Orfanato* (*The Orphanage*, 2007) by Juan Antonio Bayona, *Segundo nombre* (*Second Number*, 2003) by Paco Plaza, and *El rey de la Montaña* (*King of the Hill*, 2008) by Gonzalo López-Gallego among others. Here there is political and physical repression and the memory loss that it causes, all of which contribute to subliminal tensions and inexplicable occurrences. It may be said that much of the creative dynamism of the contemporary Spanish cinema is most profoundly motivated by the pain and frustrations transmitted by the unresolved trauma of the Spanish war and dictatorship. The cinema of the fantastic does more than any other to bring these tensions to the surface.

However, the political implications of the new Spanish cinema are also evident in the satires of Álex de la Iglesia, to whom the festival devoted an evening and a night in one of its projection halls. Five of his films, each more outrageous and satirically revolutionary than the other, revealed the critical vision popularly associated with Pedro Almodóvar and Bigas Luna, but in an even more raw and hilarious way. No one has depicted contemporary society with more contempt and humor than Álex de la Iglesia. See especially *Mutant Action* (*Accion mutante*, 1992) where handicapped people form an underground guerrilla group in order to combat their oppression in society, and *800 Bullets* (*800 balas*, 2002) that pits the inhabitants of a western movie film set, left over apparently from a Sergio Leone shooting in Spain, against real estate promoters who intend to destroy their “ghost town”. Never have capitalism, the state and the police been so ridiculed. I’m tempted to say that only in Spain could this be pulled off.

Another category presented at this edition of the Mediterranean film festival is the contemporary Turkish film, that which is most effectively the link between the oriental sensibility of the Near East and that of Europe. In fact, there are no real cultural barriers between the different cinematographic expressions of the different countries of the Mediterranean; the contacts between them are too intimate and long standing. But they do exist in the popular imagination, and for this reason Turkish society and culture seen through the camera’s eye are troubling reminders of how the twain between West and East is much more subtle than generally assumed. The sixteen recent feature films from Turkey that were shown are eloquent in this regard. Notable are Reha Erdem’s *Hayat var* (*My Only Sunshine*, 2008) featuring the ambivalences generated by family ties and adolescent revolt, and Zeki Demirkubuz’s *Yazgi* (*Fate*, 2001) expressing the viscosity of existence through the indecision and lack of will of an ordinary employee, based on a story by Albert Camus.



The thematic presentation of films is certainly an effective, pedagogical method of festival organization, but I believe the richness of this festival lies in the sheer profusion of new and known films that stimulates the imagination and nourishes the understanding of the public. Here is an example: the films that deal with different forms of attraction and interdependence between the countries contiguous to the Mediterranean Sea. Three films stand out in this regard: *Harragas* (France-Algeria, 2009) by the Algerian director Merzak Allouache, *Retorno a Hansala* (Spain, 2008) by Chus Gutiérrez, and Jawad Rhalib's excellent documentary *Les Damnés de la mer* (*The Wretched of the Sea*, Belgium, 2008).

Harragas and *Retorno a Hansala* both treat the generalized phenomenon of people from the countries south of the Mediterranean who attempt to cross the sea by boat and enter the northern shore illegally. As it is well known, these desperate "boat people" pay large sums of money to take passage on motorboats in order to arrive and find employment. A large proportion of them never arrives, at least not alive. This type of illegal immigration is of course a normal response to the tremendous inequalities between the industrial-capitalist countries and those victims of a lack of development, a situation largely caused by the relations of dependence maintained between the industrial powers and former colonies who have been maintained as exporters of their finite natural resources. At any rate, "human resources" figure importantly into the equation.

Allouache's *Harragas* (a word that means "burners" in reference to those who "burn" their identification papers and their bridges with the African continent in attempting to pass over to Europe) reveals not only the tragedy of death at sea for those who don't make it, but also the tragedy of immediate capture and rapid expulsion to their countries of origin of many of those who do make it across. Allouache shows how these mostly young people generally pay a tremendous sum of money, provided mostly by family members to often unscrupulous "passers". This horrifically well-made film shows that failure also means bankruptcy and despondency to numbers of people left behind, when it does not result in the loss of loved ones.

Chus Gutiérrez, one of the most brilliant of the new Spanish directors, has discussed this massive tragedy from the standpoint of a young woman who succeeded in the passage, who found work in Spain, and who financed her younger brother's passage which ended in the young man's death by drowning. Here human and financial loss is compounded by guilt and a forced exploration of redemption and cultural confrontation. This film was, for me, one of the most powerful in competition at the festival.

The difficulties of the Moroccan population in relation to European economic dominance is also the subject of Jawad Rhalib's study of how local fishermen on the Atlantic coast are losing in their attempts to maintain a livelihood as huge industrial fishing boats from Sweden, Russia, China and elsewhere are allowed to exploit fish off the coast of Morocco to virtual depletion, while the small Moroccan boats are prohibited from engaging in their ancestral occupation on a regular basis by their government, which accepts bribes from the foreign fishing interests.

A Moroccan filmmaker living in Belgium, Rhalib focuses on the plight of Moroccan fishermen (and women, because in the film a woman demands the right to fish with the men). However, he is especially concerned to reveal the economic and political mechanisms that lead to social deprivation and professional degradation. As the film's title suggests, the accent is on the desperation of people impoverished and discarded like so much flotsam and jetsam thrown up by the twin and related forces of capitalist globalization and national political corruption. Indeed, Frantz Fanon would have approved of this appropriation of the title of his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*. The Algerians and other Africans defended by Fanon were the forebears of the Moroccans and others depicted in *The Wretched of the Sea*.

Rhalib has made other outstanding documentaries, such as the award-winning *El Ejido, The Law of Profit* (2006) concerning the industrially produced fruit and vegetables raised in Spanish greenhouses by the virtual slave labor of illegal immigrants (for which he earned not only festival awards, but also death threats), and *Burn They Say, or the Reasons of Wrath* (*Brûler disaient-ils ou les raisons de la colère*, 2004, 58 min.), his own magnificent contribution to our understanding of clandestine immigration from Africa to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea. Rhalib's sensitive, intelligent, politically committed documentary film work is of today's best.

But identity is also of a more intimate sort; love, sex and gender are now openly discussed even in societies where religious strictures often dominate attitudes. Two films presented at the festival are particularly noteworthy in this regard.



Firstly, Panos H. Koutras' *Strella* (Greece, 2008, 116 min.) calls into question the very notion of the family as he explores the love affair between a young transsexual and an older man to whom *Strella* bears more than a family resemblance. In this exquisite film, trans- and homosexuality is simply a backdrop for an examination of human relationships at the most profoundly human levels. In addition, a sub theme concerns, in my opinion, beauty and the sublime. *Strella* (a Greek first name signifying madness or hysteria) is a (gay) cabaret singer inspired by Maria Callas. The beauty of *Strella* and her (his) infatuation with la Callas provide a visual and audio exercise of the most touching quality. Here is a film that bigots will love to hate.

Speaking of bigotry, the pathos of prejudice, religious and otherwise, is painfully revealed in Egyptian director Saad Hendawy's documentary *Private File* (*Malas khas*, Egypt, 2009, 61 min.). Here the question is not gender identification or even equal civil rights for men and women, but rather a girl or woman's right to live if she has sexual relations before marriage or outside marriage. How to investigate such a taboo subject for a documentary film? Saad Hendawy proceeded in what is perhaps the only way possible in this country or others where customs and religion make open discussion almost impossible: he simply interviewed passersby in downtown Cairo. More exactly, he had a young woman do the interviewing, because such questions might be badly received posed "man to man" (and even the female interviewer had some disagreeable responses. Hendawy commented in an interview at the festival that many men, when asked, flew immediately into a rage that anyone dare ask such questions). For me, the remarkable thing is how ordinary and, seemingly, intelligent and affable men of all ages stated matter-of-factly that the only solution in such situations is for the girl or woman to be immediately killed. It is the only way to save family honor. The lesson of

Hendawy's powerful film is that many countries of the Near East have entered a superficial kind of modernity typical of the western industrialized countries, but the decadence exported from these western countries can reinforce the worst forms of reaction. Here is the dilemma of countries like Egypt, a staunch and well paid ally of the United States, where the absence of truly democratic forms of expression impedes progressive change and even discussion of social questions.

It is regrettable that space does not allow a more complete review of the dozens of important films projected at this festival. In passing, I should at least mention those awarded prizes, which of course were not necessarily my personal favorites! The grand prize was given to *Ajami* (Israel/Germany, 2009, 120 min.), directed by Scandar Copti and Yaron Shani, both Israeli citizens (but Copti a Palestinian, non-Jewish Israeli, whereas Shani is Jewish). This film about forms of violence in Israeli society, against a vague backdrop of inter-ethnic division, apparently appealed to the consensual leanings of the jury. Other prizewinners include *Fortapâsc* by Marco Risi (Italy, 2009, 108 min.), *Return to Hansala* by Chus Gutiérrez, *Alive!* by Artan Minarolli (France/Albania, 2009, 110 min.), *Canine* by Yorgos Lanthimos (Greece, 2009, 94 min.) and *Um dia frio (A Cold Day)* by Claudia Varajão (Portugal, 2009, 27 min.).

Contributor details

Larry Portis is the author of a number of books on history, culture and politics and often writes about the cinema. He is about to publish a history of fascism in the United States and is presently preparing a history of the U.S. presence in the Middle East.

Festival Reports
