

# FILM REVIEW

## Still rivers run deep

*Liquid Works, POP Cinema's new program, focuses on cinematic representations of water*

BY HO YI  
STAFF REPORTER

Curator Wang Pai-chang (王派彰) readily admits that audiences who see only one or two movies at *Liquid Works* (液態影展), the latest installment of the POP Cinema (國民戲院) program, are likely to feel bored and uninspired. Moviegoers who manage to make it through the entire lineup of 21 films will more likely appreciate the idea behind the project.

The subject isn't weighty or impenetrable: the transformation in cinematic representations of water from the silent film era to the present day.

"As cinema becomes more and more grammatical, we believe that in order to innovate it, we have to create something new in editing, camera language and structure ... But water is a carrier of emotions. It's close to poetry and doesn't follow grammatical rules of any kind," Wang said.

Most of the films have little or no dialogue, beginning with the silent movie *Tabu, a Story of the Southern Seas* (1931), F.W. Murnau's last work. Shot on location in Bora Bora, the film tells a deceptively simple story about doomed love and conveys the stirring power of myth and tragedy through Murnau's dazzling imagery. *L'Atlante* (1934) is Jean Vigo's only feature-length movie, often described as a cinematic poem about love that is lost and then found.

Decades before the advent of CGI effects, Czech animator and filmmaker Karel Zeman made his science fiction masterpiece *A Deadly Invention* (1958), inspired by French author Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Blending live action, animation, engravings and puppets, the film has a handmade feel that will be foreign to contemporary audiences brought up on Pixar animation.

Employed as a symbol of life, death, the unknown or of cleansing in these early films, the image of water becomes an omnipresent being in *A Lake* (2008). French director Philippe Grandrieux had a vision in which a lake is surrounded by trees, which make it inaccessible to humans. He wanted to film this lake and eventually found it in Switzerland. In the finished film, there are merely a few of shots of his long-sought vision.

"He didn't feel the need to film it, because it's present everywhere," Wang said.

To Wang, all the directors featured in the program begin their work with an obsession: eliciting emotional responses in audience members. Following the films' stories and understanding their characters is no longer important when watching these films. The viewing experience is marked by

an awareness of time and of being driven by fluid emotions. Nothing much takes place in Kaneto Shindo's *The Naked Island* (1960), but by its end, audiences would most likely feel that some 90 minutes of their lives had been whiled away together with the film's islanders, who throw themselves into daily routines to survive on a barren islet.

In *Los Muertos* (2004), by Argentine director Lisandro Alonso, a middle-aged man is released after serving a 20-year prison sentence for murder. Why and how the murder happened is never explained. The film slowly plods along, with the man traveling on a small boat into the jungle, which prompts comparisons with Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Also on the lineup is *Tren de Sombras* (1995), made by Spanish filmmaker Jose Luis Guerin. Hired to restore a 8mm home movie made in 1930 by a father who died mysteriously when he went searching for better lighting while shooting by the side of a lake, Guerin was fascinated by what he saw and created a feature-length experimental piece by tearing apart, juxtaposing and reconstructing the father's original footage.

The faded imagery has been given a new lease on life in Guerin's hands. He gradually carries audiences deeper and deeper into the family's life with mesmerizing visuals. Watching some of the scenes feels like seeing through the father's eyes.

It seems fitting to use Armenian-born director Karen Gevorkian's *Spotted Dog Running at the Edge of the Sea* (1990) to end the film festival. Based on Chingiz Aitmatov's novel of the same title, the film is a parable involving a 10-year-old boy from the Nivkhis tribe in Sakhalin, Russia.

The flick generated much excitement when it screened at Spot's Russian film festival in 2005.

"The film begins, and people would think: 'Oh, God, I am watching a documentary about a primitive tribe.' A few minutes later, they would say to themselves: 'Should I leave now?' Then all of a sudden, they get sucked into it, and leave the theater feeling completely drained," Wang said. "This is liquid power."

### FESTIVAL NOTES

**WHAT:** Liquid Works (液態影展)

**WHEN:** Today to June 5

**WHERE:** Spot — Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家), 18, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段18號)

**TICKET:** NT\$170 for members and NT\$200 for non-members, available at NTCH ticket outlets or through [www.artsticket.com.tw](http://www.artsticket.com.tw)

**ON THE NET:** [www.twfilm.org/liquidworks](http://www.twfilm.org/liquidworks)

## OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

### Angels and Demons

Tom Hanks and director Ron Howard return with this frenetic sequel to *The Da Vinci Code*. Hanks' Harvard professor turns from irritant to savior for the Catholic Church as he rushes through Rome trying to solve the murders of cardinals



— by the Illuminati this time, not Opus Dei — as a new pope is prepared to be named. Hanks' selfless service to the Holy See didn't stop those noted movie buffs at the Vatican from banning location filming in Rome's churches, however. There's a whiff of *National Treasure* about the direction the sequel has taken, which for most viewers would likely be more reason to see it. Likewise, early notices are calling this a distinct improvement on the first film.

### The Haunting in Connecticut

The wonderful Virginia Madsen (*Sideways*, *Candyman*) and indie film fave Martin Donovan star as the world's most set-upon parents: Dad has an alcohol problem and their son suffers from cancer. Oh yeah ... and their new home has unfriendly ghosts and a brutal past.



Based on a true story, as they say, though the vomitous apparition on the poster seems a bit familiar ... maybe the producers saw *Pottergeist II: The Other Side*? By the way, the *Hartford Courant* reported that the house's current family of 10 years' standing love their home and that "Nothing strange ever happened here."

### Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame

An Iranian film set in Afghanistan is a novelty, to say the least, but that's where the appeal for this award-winning film from 2007 by the famed Makhmalbaf family of filmmakers might end. The title refers to the ancient cliffside statues known as the Buddhas of Bamyan that the Taliban destroyed in 2001. The film is set in that very same place; it focuses on a young girl determined to receive an education but who is beset by all manner of social obstacles. *Variety* was not so impressed; for its reviewer the narrative collapsed out of obviousness.



### Chameleon

A scam artist finds the tables are turned on him when he and his cohorts record a kidnapping connected to powerful politicians and his friends start to disappear. This relatively stately action-revenge flick from Japan, which stars heartthrob Tatsuya Fujiwara of the *Death Note* films as the scam artist, is an update of a script written 30 years ago.



## Fail to plan ... plan to fail

*'Revanche' relies on cheap erotica and a strong cast to dress up its pseudo-intellectual examination of guilt and carry audiences to the closing credits*

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CINEPLEX

*Revanche* might have been a perfectly good thriller if Austrian filmmaker Gotz Spielmann had been content to leave out his transcendental musings on the nature of guilt, but it is this that probably got the film its nomination for Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars.

The film starts out strong, producing a very downbeat and gritty picture of a brothel staffed by Eastern European prostitutes and serviced by various lowlife types. Among these is Alex, a wannabe tough guy who has fallen for hooker Tamara and wants to get her away from the life they live of furtive meetings between tricks.

This life is certainly not glamorized, but Spielmann, for all his hard-edged realism wants to cater to our voyeuristic streak, which he does with a singular lack of flair. Tamara (Irina Potapenko) is shown in a kind of anti-erotic nakedness that is pretending not to be the titillation it really is.

Aside from the flagrant use of sexual images to appeal to his audience, something that Spielmann also used in his previous feature film *Antares* (2004), the two central roles of Tamara and Alex (Johannes Krisch) are strongly realized. There is something touchingly pathetic about Alex's insistence that



"he has a plan," which almost from the beginning we all know will go wrong. "It is only stupid people without a plan who get caught," he insists. He doesn't get caught. Things actually pan out much worse than that.

The first half of the film deals with Alex and his dreams to run away with Tamara. After his bank job goes awry and Tamara is killed by a stray bullet, he finds refuge with his aging father in a rural town, where his dreams of life with his

dearly departed lover become dreams of revenge for her death.

Unfortunately, both for Alex and *Revanche*, he still doesn't have much of a plan, and Spielmann substitutes a laboriously constructed morality tale instead of pushing ahead with the revenge story.

Alex becomes involved in a physical relationship with Susanne, a wife who has lost touch with her policeman husband. Here again, the role is finely realized by Ursula Strauss, but

## Film Notes

### REVANCHE

**DIRECTED BY:** GOTZ SPIELMANN

**STARRING:** JOHANNES KRISCH (ALEX), IRINA POTAPENKO (TAMARA), ANDREAS LUST (ROBERT), URSULA STRAUSS (SUSANNE), JOHANNES THANHEISER (GRANDFATHER HAUSNER)

**LANGUAGE:** IN GERMAN WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

**RUNNING TIME:** 121 MINUTES

**TAIWAN RELEASE:** TODAY

ultimately wasted as simply one more building block in Spielmann's increasingly complex structure of coincidences designed to play off the question, "Whose fault is it if life doesn't go your way?" which was used as the tag line for the film's US release.

There is never any doubt that Spielmann will pull the story together, for it is clear that he is a talented craftsman and the film wraps up nice and neat — and eminently forgettable. The workmanship shows cleverness, but it is a self-satisfied cleverness that leaves the audience on the outside looking in.

*Revanche* is saved by its outstanding cast members who work hard to give the characters an emotional depth. It is the acting that makes even the slow second half of the film worth watching. But the end is a long time coming and nobody seems to get anything as satisfying as revenge.