

FILM REVIEW

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

Different strokes, different folks

This year's Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival looks at how bodies and minds are imagined and treated in different cultures

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER



Transparent Time, directed by Gali Meiri.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TIEFF

Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival (TIEFF, 2009 台灣國際民族誌影展) curator Lin Wen-ling (林文玲) drew on her experience of illness to settle on the themes of this year's edition: the body, disease and healing.

"Being ill changes the way one senses and perceives the world," Lin said. "The dominant Western medical system is by no means the only model to care for the body. Different cultures have developed different ideas ... regarding the body, mind and soul."

● *People Say I'm Crazy* examines how schizophrenia is treated and understood in the US. The film's director, John Cadigan, and his sister, who co-directed, will attend a question-and-answer session after tomorrow's screening.

● Taiwanese filmmaker Yang Jen-tso (楊仁佐) studied Hansen's disease for 10 years, which resulted in the documentary *Leprous Life* (時間的牢籠).

● *Leprous Life* complements *Lady Camellia*, a South Korean documentary about a former Hansen's disease sufferer who, aged four, was quarantined on

Sorok Island.

Shamanism takes center stage in several documentaries that fix the lens on traditional beliefs and practices linking the spiritual and corporal worlds.

● *Living With the Invisibles* follows a group of Moroccan women who believe they are being targeted by malevolent spirits and practice rituals to rid themselves of the perceived affliction.

● In *The Shadow*, Wana shamans from Sulawesi, Indonesia, diagnose diseases by observing patients' shadows and cure them by insufflation.

Films made by Aboriginal directors about their own communities have become the focal point of the biennial festival, which aims to change the conventional perception of ethnographic filmmaking that consists of outsiders making documentaries on exotic groups.

Bilin Yabu of Taiwan's Atayal (泰雅) tribe, this year's featured Aboriginal filmmaker, has made documentaries about his community's culture for more than 10 years. His *The Stories of*

Rainbow (彩虹的故事) is an insightful study on the disappearing tradition of facial tattooing, which is closely related to the Atayal understanding of life, death and the universe.

● In *Men's Ocean, Women's Calla Lily Field* (男人的海洋, 女人的水芋田), director and Tao (達悟) tribe member Hsieh Fu-mei (謝福美) documents the boat-building tradition that is practiced by the men of her community on Orchid Island (蘭嶼).

Also on the lineup of 34 films, which will be screened over five days are Norwegian Sami director Ellen-Astri Lundby's *Suddenly Sami*, which follows the filmmaker's search for identity; *The Captive* (被俘虜的人生) by Chen Hsin-yi (陳心怡), which tells the unusual story of her father, who was a Communist soldier taken captive by the Chinese Nationalist Army (KMT) and brought to Taiwan but remained silent about his true identity until his offspring turned the camera on him.

An international forum titled Just How Close Can a Filmmaker Get? will be held today from 2pm to 5pm at Spot



The Captive, directed by Chen Hsin-yi.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TIEFF

— Taipei Film House (光點—台北之家), 18, Zhongshan N Road Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段18號).

For more information, visit the festival's bilingual site at www.tieff.sinica.edu.tw.

FESTIVAL NOTES:

WHAT: 2009 Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival: Body and Soul (2009 台灣國際民族誌影展)

WHEN: Today through Oct. 6

WHERE: Taipei Shin Kong Cineplex (台北新光影城), 4F, 36 Xining S Rd, Taipei City (台北市西寧南路36號4樓)

ADMISSION: Tickets are NT\$130 per screening, a festival pass costs NT\$1,800 for unlimited screenings, both are available at the door or through tickets.books.com.tw

ON THE NET: www.tieff.sinica.edu.tw



Transparent Time, directed by Gali Meiri.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TIEFF



Suddenly Sami, directed by Ellen-Astri Lundby.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TIEFF

FILM REVIEW

China's new guerillas

Though audiences at home are thin on the ground and output is modest, a crop of indie filmmakers is shooting unsanctioned movies and testing the government's resolve to control the industry

BY KIRK SEMPLE

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, BEIJING

Over the course of six years Zhao Dayong (趙大勇), an independent filmmaker from Guangzhou, China, spent many months living among the residents of Zhiziluo, an impoverished and forgotten village in the rugged mountains near the Myanmar border, and filming their lives.

Using his own money and simple digital filmmaking equipment he made *Ghost Town* (廢城), a quiet, hypnotizing, three-hour documentary that provides an extraordinary and intimate portrait of Chinese life.

Like independent filmmakers everywhere, Zhao worked with no guarantee of an audience, or even a place to show his work. By his estimates only a few thousand people have seen *Ghost Town* in China since he finished it last year. Several hundred saw it Sunday afternoon when the film premiered at the New York Film Festival.

But what makes Zhao's

commitment particularly noteworthy is that his project was apparently illegal.

The Chinese government has decreed that all films must be approved by government censors before being distributed and screened, including in overseas film festivals.

Zhao, 39, said getting the approval of the censors was never a consideration. "It's like asking to be raped," he said this month in an interview here. "The government certainly has its own agenda. They want us to stop. But at the same time we know we're doing something meaningful."

This mixture of defiance and principle defines China's nascent yet highly dynamic crop of independent filmmakers who pursue their art in apparent violation of the law.

For decades the Chinese government had nearly full control over all aspects of the film industry, from celluloid filmmaking technology to financing

to distribution and screening. An underground filmmaking subculture emerged in China in the late 1980s, but it began to flourish only about a decade ago with the advent of inexpensive digital cameras and postproduction computer programs that helped put filmmaking further out of reach of the government authorities.

Many of this latest generation of Chinese filmmakers have no formal film training and shoot on minimal budgets, often with small crews, or alone. Ying Liang (應亮), whose films have won numerous prizes on the international circuit, shot his widely celebrated debut film, *Taking Father Home* (背鴨子的男孩), using a borrowed camera. Relatives and friends were his cast and crew.

"Unlike in previous generations, the stars of this generation are not only Beijing Film Academy graduates," said Karin Chien, a film producer in New York and president of dGenerate Films, a company she founded last year



to distribute this new crop of independent Chinese films outside China. "They're journalists, they're painters, they're people who just picked up a camera and made a film for US\$1,000."

Output is still small. Several leading filmmakers put the annual production of unsanctioned, independent films at fewer than 200. But this work has provided unusual ground-level views of China that possess an unvarnished authenticity often missing from mainstream, government-sanctioned films.

"There's been an extraordinary explosion of young filmmakers — quite a few of them are quite talented — who are dedicated to record and tell the real story of

what's going on in China," said Richard Pena, program director for the Film Society of Lincoln Center, which produces the New York Film Festival. "That story is really more fascinating than the story that the regime wanted to be told."

These achievements have come at a price.

About 20 filmmakers have been banned from making films for two to five years, according to Zhang Xianmin (張獻民), an independent film producer and a professor at the Beijing Film Academy. Others have received intimidating phone calls, had tapes confiscated or been detained and interrogated.

But according to several filmmakers and film scholars both here and abroad, the government

Filmmaker Zhao Dayong estimates that only a few thousand people have seen his latest documentary, *Ghost Town*, in China since he finished it earlier this year. PHOTO BY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

recently appears to have adopted a somewhat hands-off, though highly watchful, posture toward this film vanguard, leaving it to operate in an undefined gray area.

It seems that as long as certain incendiary topics are not broached — among them the Tiananmen Square massacre, Tibet, the Cultural Revolution, the outlawed religious group Falun Gong — then independent filmmakers are allowed to work.

Yet no one is absolutely sure where the boundaries are, or whether the government will start to clamp down more fiercely.

"You don't know where that limit is," said Zhang Yaxua (張亞璇), a critic and documentary filmmaker who is organizing an independent film archive for the Iberia Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing. "You have to try to touch it. In the process of trying, you know."

Huang Wenhai (黃文海), a documentary filmmaker in Beijing, said that the process of filmmaking here "is the process of

conquering your fear."

Despite this pressure and uncertainty, there are now at least four major independent film festivals around the country and at least two theaters, both small, dedicated to showing Chinese independent films.

Meanwhile Chinese audiences largely remain out of reach. With cinemas and television off limits to their unsanctioned films, independent moviemakers are mostly restricted to screenings in front of small audiences in art galleries, bars, universities and homes.

As a result the most accomplished filmmakers have found their largest audiences overseas, especially at international film festivals.

"I feel very frustrated," Zhao said. "I'm a Chinese filmmaker, and of course my audience should be the Chinese people, especially since my films are about ordinary working Chinese people." He added, "That would be more valuable than winning an international film festival."

Kungfu Cyborg: Metallic Attraction (機器俠)

Hong Kong's China-market-friendly (read: suffocatingly naive) version of Michael Bay's *Transformers* series holds back until late before the action kicks in. A policeman must look after a cyborg that has joined the force, but romantic complications between the robot and "his" colleagues take the plot hostage before an evil cyborg can do his thing. As the title suggests, there's more love stuff in this one, but the reviews are even worse than for *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, which at least had splendid effects. Note: The English title is reversed in some markets. Directed by Jeff Lau (劉鎮偉), perhaps best known for *Operation Pink Squad* (霸王女福星) and its sequel from the late 1980s.



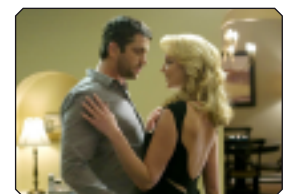
Looking for Eric

"Eric" is none other than Eric Cantona, retired French soccer superstar and hero to Manchester United fans, and now actor. In this film by working-class-champion director Ken Loach, he is also a key character in the life of another Eric (Steve Evets), an English postman and soccer nut whose life is going down the toilet. Footballer Eric then proceeds to help postie Eric get his life in order, though violence threatens to get in the way. A must-see for United fans and anyone who admires Cantona, who co-produced this strange film.



The Ugly Truth

After a weekend of previews, *The Ugly Truth's* season proper starts today. Set in a California news station, producer Katherine Heigl (*Knocked Up*) is required to fix sinking ratings by bringing in sexist consultant Gerard Butler (*300*), who also acts as a kind of antihero Cyrano de Bergerac for the lovelorn Heigl as she woos some doctor. This one seems to adopt sexism as a source of humor and sympathy rather than villainy. *Rolling Stone's* Peter Travers suggested that viewers looking for a romantic treat "toss this ugly-ass crap to the curb" and see *(500) Days of Summer* instead, but Taiwanese audiences will have to wait until Nov. 20 for that privilege.



Pandorum

Intriguing title and poster art give way to an amalgam of classic and not-so-good sci-fi/horror moments in *Pandorum*, a German-American co-production. Dennis Quaid leads a largely continental cast as two space travelers find themselves on board a vessel whose salvatory purpose they can't remember and which is afflicted with an *Event Horizon*-style tendency to induce madness — and a batch of nasty creatures ready to pounce. Oh, and there's a countdown to a massive explosion. In space, no one can hear the kitchen sink scream.



Whiteout

Kate Beckinsale is a law enforcement officer in the Antarctic who suffers the inconvenience of having to probe the continent's first homicide. This only brings her tormented past to the surface as she tries to solve the crime and fend off a killer. Despite its lack of sci-fi, this film's set-up, plot and embellishments merely activate memories of John Carpenter's classic remake *The Thing*. Based on a reputedly much tougher graphic novel and directed by Dominic Sena, prominent music video maker and director of *Gone in Sixty Seconds* and *Swordfish*.

