

FEATURES

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The rebels' favorite film festival

From Wall Street's profligacy to political corruption, this year's Cannes simmers with agitprop discontent

BY XAN BROOKS
THE GUARDIAN, CANNES, FRANCE

This year's festival has been low on Hollywood stars, and the market feels flat. The weather is chill and the lineup spotty, and yet none of this matters — because God is coming to town. Jean-Luc Godard! Inside the Palais, the delegates recite his name like an incantation. Who cares if he's old and frail (79 last birthday)? So what if he says his latest work — *Film Socialism* — will be his last? If anyone is guaranteed to raise Cannes to the rafters, it is the revolutionary firebrand behind *Breathless*, *Weekend* and *Contempt*.

There are still some at this festival who can recall the heady days of May 1968, when Cannes was galvanized by the uprisings in Paris. They will tell you how Godard was at the vanguard of a gang of nine filmmakers who stormed the festival hall and brought the event to a juddering halt. These directors came to rally support for the strikers and the students. The audience, however, thought they had come to burn the cinema down and proceeded to break for the exit. Cannes 68 was officially cancelled the following morning.

Cannes 2010 is just a few days old. The man himself has yet to arrive but that's OK, because a glance through the program suggests that the spirit of 1968 is alive and well. The lineup includes pointed political films from France, Italy, Africa and China, amid the usual crop of Hollywood

blockbusters and B-movie rip-offs. It has become a Cannes tradition to balance its ticket, to offset the celebrity glitz with the sort of films that kick up a storm and clamor for action. The Rolls Royces cruise down the Croisette while the newspaper vendors cry "Liberation!" on the steps of the Palais.

This festival, in fact, sparked a diplomatic incident before it even began, courtesy of a film by Italian director and comedian Sabina Guzzanti. *Draquila: Italy Trembles* is a grand, tub-thumping polemic in the style of Michael Moore, who won the Palme d'Or here in 2004 for *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Where Moore tackled Bush, Guzzanti targets Silvio Berlusconi, and his handling of last year's Aquila earthquake. She makes the case that he used the resulting crisis to crack down on civil liberties, forcing survivors into militarized tent cities while he embarked on a lucrative development project. Inevitably, her film has outraged the Italian government, prompting culture minister Sandro Bondi to boycott the festival. *Draquila*, he claims, is "propaganda that offends the truth of the entire Italian population."

In the courtyard of her hotel, Guzzanti suggests that we sit in the sun, beside the pool, so she can top up her tan. If she's going to be exiled anywhere, it may as well be here. "Italy is not a parliamentary republic any more," she says. "I'm ashamed of it. The



Actress Faith Wladyka dances for photographers as she arrives on Tuesday for the screening of *Blue Valentine* presented in the Un Certain Regard selection at the 63rd Cannes Film Festival.

parliament has no power because Berlusconi makes the law. When I was shooting this film, people were scared to speak to me. These days, you lose your job if you open your mouth, or dare to join a union."

Guzzanti describes herself as a "dissident filmmaker," a spiritual cousin to blacklisted Chinese directors such as Lou Ye (娄烨) and Li Yang (李杨), who have shot their films on the sly and then unveiled them at previous festivals. She used to present her own TV show, but is now effectively banned from working on Italian television. Instead, she

organizes theater tours and funnels any profit into filmmaking. "I discovered that no producer in Italy would dream of funding my films," she says. "Why? Because they're cowards."

Guzzanti has been sued in the past: A case brought by Mara Carfagna, the former topless model and Berlusconi's minister for equal opportunity is ongoing (Carfagna objected to Guzzanti's suggestion that her job was a reward for sexual favors). "This time it's different. Previously I've always been found innocent. But you can always find a judge who is corrupt, who does as he's told,

particularly now Berlusconi has rewritten the entire constitution. The justice system is just one of his tools." She gives a crooked smile. "I think that this time they will find a way to punish me."

If so, it's small wonder she's making the most of her time in the sun. Cannes, she says, has a proud history of promoting freedom of expression. "It's a festival that encourages filmmakers to speak about their time, and to try to make sense of the world. I think a lot of that comes from the French filmmakers, from people like Truffaut and Godard. French filmmakers and critics tend to be very committed and politicized. I remember a few years back when they showed *Amelie* here, and people were so angry: 'Why are we showing this stupid, whimsical little film? We should be showing films about real life!'" Guzzanti guffaws. "They hated that film!"

Happily, there is no *Amelie* in this year's lineup. Instead, the big French picture looks set to be *Hors la Loi* (Outside the Law), a Palme d'Or contender that screens here on Friday. This is by the writer-director Rachid Bouchareb, his sequel to the acclaimed *Days of Glory* (2006). That film shamed the French government into restoring pensions for Algerian soldiers who fought for France in World War II; his new film examines the plight of Algerian refugees in Paris, including the notorious 1961 "massacre" after a pro-Front de Liberation Nationale demonstration. Government ministers have already lined up to lambaste it as "an insult to France" and a tale that "falsifies history." A right-wing protest is planned for the premiere.

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Jean-Luc Godard's latest work, *Film Socialism*, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival on Monday.

Film legend blames Greeks for Cannes no-show

BY MANOHLA DARGIS
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, CANNES, FRANCE

If I am remembering clearly — and my head is filled with so many densely layered words and images, it is hard to unpack them — the first image in *Film Socialism*, the new movie by Jean-Luc Godard, is of two red-headed parrots, side by side on a tree limb. The parrots are among a handful of animals that appear in the movie, which had its press premiere on Monday morning at the Cannes Film Festival, including a pair of hilariously talkative cats (whose meows are, in turn, parroted by a young woman watching them on a laptop), as well as a llama and a donkey. Surrounding these animals is a menagerie of talking, quoting, babbling human beings, speaking in French, German, Russian, English and Arabic, among other tongues.

Wittily, perversely, contrastingly, the final words in the movie are "no comment," which appear in large English letters like a declaration, bringing this 1 hour and 41 minutes of sights and sounds to an abrupt close. Godard, 79, was scheduled to appear at a press conference after the screening, but made good on these last words by not showing up. Though the rumor that he would be a no-show had circulated before the screening, several dozen journalists trooped to the press room to see if a representative might appear with an explanation. Nothing. Not even a note. No comment.

According to the French newspaper *La Liberation*, Godard sent a fax to the festival's director, Thierry Fremaux, saying that "problems of the Greek type" ("*des problemes de type grec*," perhaps referring to Greece's financial crisis) had prevented him from attending and that he would go to his death for the festival, but not one step more: "*Suite a des problemes de type grec, je ne pourrai etre votre obligé a Cannes. Avec le festival, j'irai jusqu'a la mort, mais je ne ferai pas un pas de plus. Amicalement. Jean-Luc Godard.*"

Any new Godard movie is a noteworthy occasion, and this initial screening was packed with an audience primed for difficulties of some kind. On Friday, British

newspaper *The Independent* reported that the movie's English-language subtitles would be in what was characterized as "Navajo English," to replicate the fractured words spoken by Hollywood-style American Indians in Westerns (and in the sitcom *F Troop*): "If a character is saying, 'Give me your watch,' the subtitle will read, 'You, me, watch.'" In the 1950s, Godard worked in the Paris publicity office for 20th Century Fox and knows how to stir things up.

My thoughts on the movie — which looks as if it were shot in both low-grade video and high-definition digital — are tentative and, for now, brief. Structurally, it can be divided into three sections, the first set on Mediterranean cruise ship on which the mostly white passengers eat, mingle and gamble. Among the travelers are several men and women, as well as a teenage girl and younger boy, who speak to one another and themselves in largely untranslated languages. As promised, the English-language subtitles are sparse, with words sometimes joined together or widely spaced: "nocrimes noblood"; "German Jews black"; "impossible story"; "Kamikaze divine wind"; "right of return." Every so often, Patti Smith appears, singing in a cabin and strolling on deck or below with an acoustic guitar.

The second section is set in and around a small gas station and adjoining house, where two women, a white journalist, perhaps, and a black camera operator, are lurking around the garage owners, a French family of four. (An exterior wall is emblazoned with the name

J.J. Martin.) Here, the discussion turns to the *liberte, egalite, fraternite*, and with these ideals the French revolution is invoked.

The third section turns to different places: Egypt, Palestine, Odessa, Hell As (more on that in a moment), Naples and Barcelona. "Hell As" refers to Hellas, the Greek word for Greece, but might also be a punning reference to the French word for alas — *helas* — and an earlier Godard film, *Helas Pour Moi*, which retells the myth of Amphitryon and Alcmene. Along the way, Jews, Hollywood and the Holocaust are referred to.

Obviously, it will take many more viewings of *Film Socialism*, an improvement in my French and many more fully translated subtitles before I can begin to get a tentative grasp on it. Such are the complicated pleasures of Godard's work: However private, even hermetic, his film language can be, these are works that by virtue of that language's density, as well as the films' visual beauty and intellectual riddles, invite you in (or turn you off). I imagine

it will be awhile before the movie travels to the US, but if you want to prepare, I suggest you look at an interview with Godard from *Telerama.fr* that includes this quotation from the movie: "*Les Americains ont libere l'Europe en la rendant dependante*," which translates as "the Americans liberated Europe by making it dependent."

