

FILM REVIEW

Viggo Mortensen stars in *The Road*, directed by John Hillcoat and based on a novel by Cormac McCarthy.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF CATCHPLAY

When civilization collapses, for whatever reason, barbarism is quick to return. In a brutish land in which only the most vicious survive, the good man is at the mercy of violent gangs who will take all he has, even his life. In the Hughes Brothers' *The Book of Eli*, which opened earlier this month and is still showing around town, the good man — played by Denzel Washington — is upheld by his Christian faith and some impressive martial arts skills. In John Hillcoat's *The Road*, which opens today, the lead character has neither religion, karate, cool nor grunge chic to get him through the wasteland that the world has become. He has no mission other than to survive, because giving up is mean, weak and selfish.

The Road presents a world not dissimilar to that of *The Book of Eli*, but Hillcoat has removed every element that makes the latter an adventure film and everything that could link it to other post-apocalyptic classics such as *Mad Max* or *The Day of the Triffids*. Viggo Mortensen's character has not a single movie hero attribute. His only ambition is to survive, and ensure that his son survives — though given the world they live in, it is far from certain that any kind of salvation is to be found at the end of their tribulations. The road that father and son follow may lead somewhere, but where that might be, and whether it might be any better, is anybody's guess. *The Road* does not even try to answer that question, and this calculated indifference is what makes it such a powerful and disturbing film.

Mortensen and Charlize Theron are a couple who decide that despite the apocalypse, which has destroyed most of the population and reduced the land to a barren moonscape, life will go on, and commit to this belief by having a son. The hardships of raising a family finally prove too much for Theron's character, and she walks off into the wilderness, a calculated act of suicide. It is a testament to the bleakness of this film's outlook that her decision seems entirely justifiable compared to her husband's almost manic faith in ... well, that's just it, a faith in

On the road to oblivion

In John Hillcoat's chilling story of post-apocalyptic deprivation, love is no salvation

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER



Film Notes

THE ROAD

DIRECTED BY:
JOHN HILLCOAT

STARRING:

VIGGO MORTENSEN (FATHER),
KODI SMIT-MCPHEE (BOY),
CHARLIZE THERON (MOTHER),
ROBERT DUVALL (OLD MAN, ELI),
MICHAEL K. WILLIAMS (THE THIEF)

RUNNING TIME:
111 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

something that he is not able to articulate.

Left with his son, Mortensen decides that they will walk out from the frozen wastes of their mountain home and head for the sea. Along the way they meet gangs of marauding men and cannibal communes. The hardship and horror are presented in a matter-of-fact manner with little attempt to heighten the atmosphere with cinematic tricks. The danger is real, and death always preferable to capture.

The voice of innocence is presented by Kodi Smit-McPhee, but in a gormless and wet fashion. Even as we see that Mortensen's efforts to keep his son alive rot his soul and skew his moral sense, his response seems entirely comprehensible — more comprehensible than his son's, who wants to share and help others regardless of their own peril. Why indeed should the father share his puny store of food with strangers on the road, even the tramp Eli, the only named character in the film. Eli (as also in the *Book of Eli*, a variant on the name of God as spoken in Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic), appears briefly, eats and then regurgitates a can of peaches, then stomps off to an uncertain future. In *The Road*, God may have created the world, but in its destruction, he seems to be totally indifferent.

While Mortensen escapes many horrors, he is not above perpetrating some himself, and a scene where he faces off with a thief (Michael K. Williams), taking all the man had stolen and everything else he possessed despite the protestations of his son, is painful to watch. While Mortensen does not play his character for sympathy, it is a mark of his success in the role that while we may not care for the man, we certainly care for the loss of his humanity.

Despite its deliberate pacing and muddy palette, *The Road* is worth watching for Mortensen's magnificent performance as a man who, in his efforts to pass on civilized values, sacrifices his own humanity.

Though the story is simple, its detached treatment of a horrific event allows the ramifications to linger long after the credits roll.

FILM REVIEW

Walking backwards through life

French auteur Agnes Varda sifts through her life as she celebrates her 80th birthday in this charmingly breezy documentary

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Agnes Varda walks backward along a beach at the beginning of her new documentary *The Beaches of Agnes* (Les Plages d'Agnes). She traipses across the sand, pauses and address the audience: "If we opened people up, we'd find landscapes. If we opened me up, we'd find beaches."

One of most revered filmmakers in France, the 82-year-old director is known to the world as the auteur behind *Cleo From 5 to 7* (1962), *Happiness* (1965), *Vagabond* (1985) and *The Gleaners and I* (2000). Varda's latest work is an autobiographic portrait narrated by the self-described "little old lady, pleasantly plump and talkative," recounting her life journey that begins on the North Sea beaches of her Belgian childhood.

The filmmaker spent her adolescence during World War II at the Mediterranean port Sete in southern France, where she returned at 26 to make her first movie *La Pointe-Courte* (1954). Then there is Paris, where Varda



At the center of *The Beaches of Agnes* is the genially wise and ever-sprightly figure of Agnes Varda, who takes the audience into her world as witness and participant. PHOTO COURTESY OF CINEPLEX

joined the New Wave boy's club and called Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais and the likes her cinematic brothers.

Despite its autobiographic origins, the film is never a straightforward recording of a bohemian granny reminiscing, neither is it stuffed with excessive facts and information about the artistic luminaries on view. Intimate and buoyant in tone, it feels like an engaging self-portrait that the octogenarian auteur wishes to leave to those close to her to remember her by. Yet Varda doesn't tell us about her life. She shows how her memories and thoughts shape the cine-autobiography being played in front of us. Locations and people Varda holds precious overflow from the screen, finding their places in her life through cinematic devices including photos, clips from her

old films, fantasy sequences and theatrical tableaux.

Sometimes, the filmmaker feels the urge to resurrect the past. Early in the film, she re-creates a moment captured in a family photo of her younger self and a sister playing on the beach and wonders if there is any meaning found in the act of reenactment. She made a similar effort in *Jacquot de Nantes* (1991), created for her dying director husband Jacques Demy, who succumbed to an AIDS-related illness in 1990. Varda stages moments of Demy's childhood that appear later as moments in his films. The past and present interact, echo and feed into one another.

The Beaches of Agnes works the same way as the mind works, oscillating among different time frames and easily digressing into reveries. With her elliptical

approach to storytelling, Varda plays the charming guide as she "walks backward" through her colorful life. Friends and associates are recalled along the way, and the company the filmmaker keeps is a starchy, divergent crowd that includes Jane Birkin, Jean Vilar, Jim Morrison and Harrison Ford. Fellow director Christ Marker appears in the form of a cartoon cat, with a digitally altered voice, who rolls his eyes at the impish Varda. Yet the most heartfelt presence in the film is that of Demy, whose name still brings tears to the director's eyes.

The film also reveals other sides of Varda, who started out as a still photographer. Her association with the Left Bank group whose members include Marker and Resnais prompted the then-young artist to travel to China in 1957 and Cuba in 1962 where she took thousands of photos. When she moved to Los Angeles with Demy in the 1960s, she filmed the Black Panthers and made films about the social and political movements of the time.

Now in her ninth decade, Varda still strives to find new ways to tell stories and infuses her filmmaking with a sense of liberation. When she was a girl she was impressed by the surrealists, and she roams freely in the several imaginative surrealist set-ups in *The Beaches of Agnes*. The scene of trapeze artists performing on a beach is one of her own fantasies brought to life. So is the giant whale made out of tarps inside whose belly Varda

sits in to share her story. And there is the sandy beach the director creates in the heart of Paris where the all-women staff at an alfresco production office conduct business in bathing suits.

Varda returns to the beginning of it all in the opening sequence, standing on the shore of the North Sea near Brussels, where she was born. With the aid of a group of film students, the director covers the beach with mirrors of different sizes and shapes. Images of the sky, shoreline, sand and ocean and Varda's own reflections refract and reflect back on each other, much in the same way memory works.

Film Notes

THE BEACHES OF AGNES (LES PLAGES D'AGNES)

DIRECTED BY:
AGNES VARDA

STARRING:

AGNES VARDA AS HERSELF,
ROSALIE VARDA AS HERSELF,
MATHIEU DEMY AS HIMSELF,
STEPHANE VILAR AS HIMSELF,
VINCENT FOURNIER AS HIMSELF

RUNNING TIME:
110 MINUTES

LANGUAGE:
IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH WITH
CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE:
TODAY

OTHER RELEASES

COMPILED BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW

The Blind Side (攻其不備)

Sandra Bullock seems to be making something of a return to form after a series of duds with this Golden Globe winner and Oscar-nominated picture (Best Picture and Best Actress in a Leading Role). It probably helps if you are a fan of American football, or at least of inspirational sports movies. *The Blind Side* makes a determined grab for the heartstrings, and this "based on a true story" account of a homeless boy making it to become an all-American football player sheds complexity to achieve maximum uplift. Features cameos from a number of former and current NCAA coaches.



Shutter Island (隔離島)

The all-star cast includes Leonardo DiCaprio as an improbable US marshal and the likes of Ben Kingsley and Max von Sydow providing lurking menace on an isolated island that is home to a hospital for the criminally insane. Martin Scorsese directs the action, which is full of sound and fury, but critics agree that the maestro was unable to find a balance between the psychological thriller and supernatural horror genres. In an attempt to explain this embarrassment away, *Shutter Island* is laden with clunky exposition and intimations of everything from Cold War shenanigans to Freudian high jinks.



Nine (華麗年代)

If *Moulin Rouge* wasn't enough, Nicole Kidman is back with an all-singing, all-dancing cast that includes Daniel Day-Lewis, Marion Cotillard, Penelope Cruz, Judi Dench, Kate Hudson and Sophia Loren in this musical inspired by Federico Fellini's *8 1/2*. Directed by Rob Marshall, who brought us *Chicago*, *Nine* by all accounts manages to look dazzling and suave, if rather chaotic, though over-elaborate editing may spoil it for dance fans, who rarely get to see complete sequences (Day-Lewis doesn't have Richard Gere's moves), and the song lyrics are, by general consensus, over-burdened or just plain dumb.



Good Morning President (早安總統)

A South Korean flick that draws (tenuous) comparisons to Rob Reiner's *The American President* with Michael Douglas and Annette Bening. It was the opening film at the 2009 Pusan International Film Festival and did well with Korean audiences when it premiered in October, but its focus on the country's political culture is unlikely to cross national frontiers. Casting an amused eye over the romantic and family life of three successive presidents, director Jang Jin has created a light, fluffy confection that will likely feed Taiwan's appetite for Korean product.



Hot Summer Days (全城熱戀熱辣辣)

A star-studded cast ornaments this ensemble piece about relationships finding their true level as tempers and passions flare during a heat wave that engulfs Hong Kong. It strongly resembles the recently released *Valentine's Day* with numerous mini-subplots coalescing into a romantic montage. It also sports a who's who of figures from the Chinese-speaking entertainment establishment, from Taiwan's own Barbie Hsu (徐熙媛) and Rene Liu (劉若英) to Hong Kong stars Nicholas Tse (謝霆鋒) and Jacky Cheung (張學友). There are even cameos by art house director Fruit Chan (陳果) and Maggie Cheung (張曼玉). This is entertainment royalty having fun in the sun.



Little Big Soldier (大兵小將)

An engaging movie in a historical setting, the pet project of action star Jackie Chan (成龍) has reportedly been in the works for nearly two decades. Directed by Ding Sheng (丁晟) and featuring pop star Wang Lee-hom (王力宏), the flick about a cowardly soldier who takes a defeated general captive in the hope of garnering a reward produces good chemistry between Chan and his young co-star. Chan, who also has writer credits for the film, has succeeded by keeping things simple and avoiding the overblown pomp that has characterized many recent Chinese historical dramas. With minimal romance and few set-piece battles, *Little Big Soldier* falls into an easy buddy-flick road-movie groove that harks back to the good old days before Hollywood dreams ruined Chan's mojo.



The Rainbow Maker (爺爺的彩虹故事)

This story about childhood, imagination and love from Georgia was released in 2008 and has been doing the rounds of minor European film festivals ever since. Directed by Nana Djordjadze, whose 1986 success *My English Grandfather* picked up the Camera d'Or the following year. A whimsical comedy about a father who returns to his home after imprisonment to find his children convinced he is a spy and his wife run off with a circus strongman. He discovers that while he may not be the super spy his children believe, he does have magical powers that may help put his world right.



When a Man Comes Home (老爸靠邊站)

Danish art house comedy with the whimsical formalism of a Mozart opera by Thomas Vinterberg, one of the founding fathers of the Dogme movement. Hints of this stripped-down cinematic credo are visible in what is essentially a standard dysfunctional family (in this case a small Danish village) rom-com; its art house cred comes in the form of canny cutting between farce and chilling realism. This bold juxtaposition is also found in the cinematography, which combines hyper-real colors while maintaining a spontaneous, handheld sense of movement.

