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Peter Bradshaw

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Peter Bradshaw is the Guardian's film critic.

Caught in Cannes' intriguing undertow

Breaking open the official Cannes catalogue has already uncovered some tasty surprises, but that's as nothing compared with what's happening outside the competition



Gutsy... still from Neil McEnery-West's short film Undertow

On arriving at Cannes, your first job is to crack open the official festival catalogue and read the elliptical and sometimes bafflingly laconic descriptions of each film. These single-paragraph guides are traditionally accompanied by a "teaser" fragment of dialogue, which often simply compounds the mystery. Of course, these contributions are offered by the directors who wish to keep their cards as close as possible to their creative chests - especially if they have shocks in store for us.

But the catalogue is often a revelation, especially when up to now you have been relying on web rumours for any sense of what the films are going to be like. For example, I now see that my blogged description a fortnight ago of the Dardenne brothers' *La Silence de Lorna*, comparing it to Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, is pretty wide of the mark. My sense of a languidly expressed moral dilemma of a woman married to an ailing man for material advantage, and wondering how far to exert herself to keep him alive, doesn't exactly fit the bill. The catalogue makes it sound considerably more dramatic and indeed more complicated:

"In order to become the owner of a snack bar with her boyfriend, Lorna, a young Albanian woman living in Belgium becomes an accomplice to a diabolical plan devised by mobster Fabio. Fabio has orchestrated a sham marriage between her and Claudy. The marriage allows her to obtain Belgian citizenship and then marry a Russian mafioso willing to pay a lot of money to acquire the same quickly. However, for this second marriage to be possible, Fabio has planned to marry Claudy. Will Lorna keep silent?"

I see.

One relatively new thing I am looking forward to in Cannes is the Short Film Corner, a very lively forum for new short films and new film-makers. The festival has long had its official short film section, in which there is this year a British entry: *Love You More*, directed by Sam Taylor-Wood, written by Patrick Marber, shot by Seamus McGarvey and produced by the late Anthony Minghella. But the Short Film Corner is much more informal and less tuxedo-ish. One British film that intrigues me in this section is *Undertow*, by Neil McEnery-West. It's a 27-minute film set in some kind of post-apocalyptic future in which London has been emptied of almost all human beings, a little like *28 Days Later*, only without the gurning extras pretending to be zombies.

One man, haunted, troubled, in continual discomfort from what appears to be a recent head wound, staggers around an eerily empty city. His only companion is a stranger who cannot speak. The man is plagued by flashback memories of a relationship with a delicate young woman. On a bleak seafront he gazes into her eyes, and reads there - what? Yearning? Reproach? Incomprehension? Pain? Now he must traverse the deserted city on a mission to find her, if she is still alive, accompanied only by this strange mute. Is the mute a projection of his own anxiety? Is the deserted city itself a metaphor, an emotional void caused by a violent crisis for which he is responsible, and the memory of which he is suppressing?

I liked the gutsiness of this piece, and the guerrilla filming approach of simply getting a deserted-London effect, not by roping off streets, getting official permission etc, but by simply getting up at the crack of dawn on a summer's day and shooting like that. And it's intriguing that, despite our assumptions about a 24/7 capital, London can look utterly empty in the early morning: even locations like Tottenham Court Road and Tate Modern. *Undertow* has polish, and inhabits the short-film space with panache. I hope the Cannes Short Film Corner showcase brings Neil McEnery-West the attention and future assistance he deserves.

Meanwhile, we are looking forward to today's opening film in the official competition: Fernando Meirelles's *Blindness*. Weirdly, it has a theme not dissimilar to *Undertow*. As the catalogue introduces it: "A city is ravaged by epidemic of instant 'white blindness'..." Intriguing.

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bioisy

Comment No. 1102744
May 14 15:38

Looking forward to see *Blindness* when it reaches the UK screens. But why has no one mentioned that it is based on the same name novel of Jose Saramago?

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octavian4

Comment No. 1103005
May 14 17:06

Because they probably didn't know. Most film critics are blind to the other arts.

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LionelMessias

Comment No. 1104193
May 15 10:07

Octavian,

That's a bit sweeping there, "Most film critics are blind to the other arts."

Jose Saramago's *Blindness* is an excellent book, perhaps not on too many best-seller lists though, one to pass on to friends and family, as it was to me.

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