

Virtual cinema Warum 2.0

Richard James Havis

Virtual cinema has finally come of age – in Rotterdam. The Rotterdam International Film Festival (www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com) has always stood at the forefront of new cinema, and has advocated the idea of blurring what, in internet parlance, would be called “delivery systems”. Traditional cinema, web-based virtual cinema, CD-ROMs and video installations have all been presented in different programmes at the festival. Uniquely for a film event, the festival has even highlighted an artist in focus.

But this year Rotterdam took a bold step forward by abolishing any distinctions in its programming categories. Whereas in previous years internet and other works would have had their own section, they are now presented as part of the main film programme.

“It’s obvious that one of the most important developments in film these past 10 years is the integration between the cinema screen and other types of screens,” says festival director Rutger Wolfson, who hails from an arts background himself.

Expanding the idea of cinema has been discussed at Rotterdam in previous years. Russian filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov, the director of a marvellous exploration of St Petersburg’s L’Hermitage art gallery called *Russian Ark*, visited to expound his ideas on cinema in all its manifestations.

Sokurov says cinema didn’t just spring into being at the end of the 19th century, but developed out of painting. The visual arts, he implies, are connected by an umbilical cord that can be traced back through the history of images.

In terms of today’s media, that means the history of our virtual, digital internet cinema can be traced back to the earliest cave paintings. All visual images – whether made



Warum 2.0 allows visitors to juxtapose images to reveal “the truth”

from chalk, paint, celluloid, or digital bits – are essentially one. The pixels of virtual cinema don’t herald a new art form. They are just another step in the evolution of the visual arts.

Rotterdam’s idea of virtual cinema uses the internet and goes beyond it. This year, films made for mobile phones made an appearance, as did commissioned movies designed to be projected outside in public spaces. But the internet’s inbuilt possibilities for interactivity have given it the power to infiltrate much of the media on show. A centrepiece installation called Warum 2.0 – the title is itself a comment on Web 2.0 – used the internet so that users could upload images and contribute to the debate about the objectivity of documentary films.

Warum 2.0 is linked to the internet to allow viewers to interact with it. The idea is to look at how images of war are distorted by the media. In documentary films, time, space and locations are changed – sometimes unintentionally – to fit the format of the documentary. This,

say the artists, means that the truth may not be reflected in the film. By interacting with Warum 2.0 viewers can learn how the meaning of images change by seeing what happens when they’re placed next to images they pick and upload themselves.

“Warum 2.0 has strong political aspects. The installation itself can be seen as a way of creating impact and taking direct action against blind acceptance of the documentary image,” says Stefaan Decostere and the Cargo foundation in a group statement. “Warum 2.0 amplifies the constant input from media, turning it into an intense arena of constantly changing images.

“If the strategy of corporate media is presenting war within the constant flow of entertainment, then Warum 2.0 uses confrontation, chaos and direct involvement. Only by taking mediated reality to its extreme we can maybe understand the mechanisms behind it.”

With ideas like this in play, virtual cinema deserves to have come of age.

Reel talk Virtuosos

Michael Cidoni

If you’re looking for some red-carpet dish, this is good company: actors Viola Davis, Rosemarie DeWitt, Richard Jenkins, Melissa Leo and Michael Shannon, who collectively have likely walked down kilometres of arrivals lines over the past few months. And all have at least a few more steps to go, as four of them are Oscar nominees.

They were honoured two weeks ago at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival with its second annual Virtuosos Award, presented to actors who marked their breakouts over the past year.

And such is undoubtedly the case with these five thespians: Davis and Leo, who portrayed tortured mothers in *Doubt* and *Frozen River*, respectively; Shannon as a mentally unstable son in *Revolutionary Road*; acting veteran Jenkins, the oldest of the group at 61, as a lost soul who finds a new life thanks to *The Visitor*; and DeWitt as the exasperated, titular sister with one toxic sibling in *Rachel Getting Married*.

So, what’s the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word “virtuoso”?

Leo: I thought maybe I needed to bring along my violin. (Laughs.)



From left: Viola Davis, Michael Shannon, Rosemarie DeWitt, Richard Jenkins and Melissa Leo. Photo: AP

My understanding is the award is given to those who enjoyed film-career breakthroughs last year. So, Richard, how does it feel to be an overnight sensation?

Jenkins: You know, the truth is nobody’s ever said that to me. I mean, they look at me and they think, ‘He couldn’t have just started.’ (All laugh.)

DeWitt: For me [this group is] like a

master class in acting. You remember to have a sense of danger, like Michael [pointing to Shannon], or [turning to Davis and Leo] these two, ferocious, ferocious women in performances.

Jenkins: And what about me? DeWitt: Subtle stillness, and so much beauty.

In her acceptance speech at Sunday’s Screen Actors Guild Awards, Meryl Streep said, “Viola Davis – my god, somebody give her a movie!” So, did the phone ring the next day?

Davis: Hmm... I decline to answer that. Here’s the thing: doing all of this publicity, I didn’t think much of it other than it was a great compliment. So it surprises me when everybody is talking about it. But that is part of the business. I just saw it as a tremendous compliment that this woman who I was terrified of [on the] first day of shooting and who I have admired so many years, liked me. She really, really liked me.

Jenkins: OK, but did your phone ring the next day?

Davis: I decline, Richard. I decline. *Associated Press*

Postcard

Richard James Havis

New York

In hard times, audiences like escapist entertainment. That was as true in America’s Great Depression as it is now. But *Breadlines And Champagne*, a retrospective at New York’s Film Forum, reveals that some films did highlight the soul-destroying poverty and physical hardships of that era.

“There weren’t that many films where the depression was the actual subject matter,” says forum programmer Bruce Goldstein, who organised the retrospective.

“The depression is mainly known for its escapist entertainment,” he says. “But in Warner Brothers’ films the depression is always in the background. You get a sense of how people are living during that time.”

Breadlines and Champagne is a broad programme that shows the ways studios and audiences reacted to the poverty of the 1930s.

A few films, such as William Wellman’s *Wild Boys of the Road*, focus directly on the hardships of the time. The 1933 movie tells the story of a group of teenagers who leave their poor families so they aren’t a burden on them. Other films use the bad times as a backdrop. *Man’s Castle* is a love story set in “Hooverville”, a slum full of unemployed people in New York’s Central Park.

The era also became known for its screwball comedies. These were popular with audiences seeking respite from their tough daily lives. They were witty films that often dealt with the differences between rich and poor.

Naughtiness was also a popular form of escapism. The “Pre-Code” movies – so named because they ignored the Production Code, the newly adopted censorship guidelines – stand in stark contrast to everything else.

The depression was an angry time, and films such as Wellman’s *Heroes for Sale* and *Wild Boys of the Road* depict that anger. In the latter the nomadic boys just want to do an honest day’s work, but they have to fight with the police, railway employees, and just about everyone else to get one.

Goldstein says it was rare to show this anger on screen. “Only a handful of these films are really angry,” he says. “*Wild Boys of the Road* is [angry] and the ending of *Gold Diggers of 1933* is an indictment of the government. But these are the exceptions. Hollywood suspected

the audience didn’t want to have their nose rubbed in the depression – they wanted escapism. So production of these films tailed off, although Warner Bros would continue to make a few late into the 1930s.”

Audiences wanted escapist entertainment, says Goldstein. “Screwball comedies became very popular,” he says.

“They were comedies with a social consciousness and they often focused on the clash between the rich and the poor. One of the big films of the decade was Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night*. That film transformed Hollywood by jump-starting the screwball comedy,” Goldstein says.

The story is about an heiress who falls in love with a reporter, and the theme is that the poor lead happier lives than the rich. “That film may be the most emblematic of the period. It defined the spirit of the era.”

Sex was also in demand as entertainment. Although the censorious Production Code had arrived in 1930, racy and sexually outrageous films were screened before it was enforced in 1934.

Films such as *Baby Face*, which features Barbara Stanwyck as a hooker sleeping her way up the corporate ranks, provided some thrills. (“She climbed the ladder of success – wrong by wrong!” quips the original poster.)

“*Baby Face* is more than racy – it’s still quite outrageous today,” says Goldstein. “After all, she takes a guy to the Men’s Room to ‘stoop’ him, as we say here in New York. Some groups put a lot of pressure on Hollywood, saying that films like this were going to degrade children. So after 1934, there was no hint of sex in films. Any vestige of real life was erased from the movies.”

The depression films weren’t the big pictures of their day, Goldstein says. “They made money for the studios, but they weren’t the movies that are remembered, or the movies that won the Academy Awards.”

As the 1930s progressed, comfortable films became the order of the day. “The depression movies were replaced by films that were the complete opposite,” says Goldstein. “Shirley Temple captured everyone’s hearts. All the big stars were homey types. Marie Dressler, a kind of ugly duckling, was the biggest box office attraction of the early 1930s. The depression made people want to celebrate the traditional homespun values.”



Films such as *Heroes for Sale* depict the anger of the depression at the retrospective *Breadlines and Champagne*. Photo: Film Forum