

RECENSIONI 2015 New York Film Festival The Biographical Impulse



The centerpiece of the 53rd New York Film Festival (September 25–October 11) was Danny Boyle's biopic *Steve Jobs*, a Universal Pictures release, starring Michael Fassbender and Kate Winslet. This feature deals with the entrepreneur who launched the first Macintosh, the NeXT work station, and the iMac. On the strength of this and other great selections, the 2015 NYFF demonstrated a biographical impulse in today's cinema which is worth commenting upon, and possibly

explaining. With the expression "biographical impulse," I mean that it is as if the recent cinema of the 21st century had decided to tell the life story of its photographic, analogical predecessor by devoting fiction and nonfiction productions to the biography of the cinema itself.

Closing night, for instance, was graced by *Miles Ahead*. Written, directed, and interpreted by Don Cheadle, it is a wonderful biopic of trumpeter Miles Davis (1926–1991). Although the narrative focuses on the 1970s, it explores how the musician invented his artistic persona. When he started the era of "cool jazz," Miles Davis was also one of the first sounds of the incipient French Nouvelle Vague. How can anyone forget Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud / Elevator to the Gallows* (1958), with Jeanne Moreau walking alone and wondering where her lover might be? Miles Davis happened to be in Paris when Malle was going through the rushes of Moreau's nocturnal walk. The young Malle, a former assistant of Jacques Cousteau during the oceanographer's expeditions on his legendary *Calypso*, invited the young Davis to play his trumpet and improvise in front of the screen. There he was, standing inside a small studio and pointing his trumpet towards a film-in-progress. By placing the camera inside a stroller, Malle had shot his black-and-white images without any artificial lighting, except for the sources of illumination normally in place at night: the glare of cars and traffic lights; glimpses of crowds and drinking glasses in bars and restaurants; luminosities from windows in shops; and most unforgettable, Moreau's anxious silhouette looking for the former *légionnaire* who had just murdered her husband.

At the festival the biographical impulse carried over into *Carol*, directed by Todd Haynes. Working with his longtime cinematographer Edward Lachman, and shooting on the Super-16mm film he favors for his echoes of the movie history of 20th-century America, Haynes explores a lesbian relationship during the early 1950s. With Cate Blanchett and Rooney Mara, this film is biographical because it brings out of the closet author Patricia Highsmith's least-known work, published under a pseudonym. Patricia Highsmith (1921–1995) was born in Texas, but set all her mystery crime stories in Europe. As an American exception, *Carol* is a treat for cinephiles who will appreciate the care and tactfulness with which Haynes explores fluid sexual identities, in the wake of Douglas Sirk's melodramas from the fifties and R.W. Fassbinder's Brechtian re-visitations in the seventies.

The 1950s loomed large in the festival, while the seriousness of this decade took over any kind of nostalgic idealization. On one hand, the fifties were a time of immigration as we learn from John Crowley's *Brooklyn*, the story of a young Irish girl, Eilis (Saoirse Ronan), who finds her new life by emigrating to America. On the other hand, the fifties witnessed the migratory experiences of cinema itself with Ingrid Bergman leaving Hollywood for Roberto Rossellini, and Rossellini leaving Bergman for India. Stig Bjorkman's *Ingrid Bergman in Her Own Words* traces the Swedish star's voyage to Italy, her family life

RECENSIONI with children and pets in Rome and by the sea, her love affair with photojournalist Robert Capa, her late years between London and Paris as an accomplished performer and an independent-minded woman. This documentary is precious, thanks to the discovery of Super 8 and 16mm footage shot by Bergman herself.

Were we to shift from acting to directing within the biographical mode, Noah Baumbach and Jake Paltrow offered a film portrait of director Brian De Palma, with a title-by-title approach that escalates into an essay on the craft of filmmaking, with its peaks and downfalls. In nonfiction and within portraiture, Laura Israel's world premiere of *Don't Blink*, about the Swiss-born American photographer Robert Frank (b. 1924), charted this artist's career from his first book, *The Americans* (1958), to his films and videos made in the nineties.

Between biography and home movie, the so-called "biopic" genre seemed to have shifted itself from epic spectacle to the depth of an essay or the intimacy of a memoir, through an even longer list of biographical films punctuating the festival. Here I can only mention: *Visit, or Memories and Confessions* by Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira, a film he made in 1982 at age 73, thinking he was at the end of his life. This great work, however, is screened only now, 33 years later after 25 more films. In fact, the director died just last year, at age 106. In *Visit*, biography turns into the space of a house shaped like a ship which becomes a place of historical and private memories. Very difficult to summarize, De Oliveira tells the history of the cinema by remembering anyone who ever visited him in Porto.

Originally conceived as a goodbye to life, De Oliveira's film never loses hope for the future. By contrast, Chantal Akerman's *No Home Movie* reflects on how time has brought her closer and closer to her dead mother, a Holocaust survivor who married and raised a family in Brussels. Sadly Chantal Akerman—a giant of the avant-garde, feminist, experimental cinema of the seventies—died at age 65, possibly a suicide, in Paris, on October 5, 2015. She left us only one month after *No Home Movie*, one of her last brilliant works, had been accepted at the New York Film Festival. At least she spent the last months of her life working on a project that gives an afterlife to the mother she loved so deeply.

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