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Cannes 2010 Day Six and Seven: *Biutiful* is Beautiful and Jia is Beautifuler

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The theme of this year's Cannes? It's not economics, as some suggest. It's "less." Less movie stars. Less parties. Less print journalists. Less frenzy. Less crowds. And especially less interviews. This may be the year that Cannes officially stopped being a festival where American reporters could get interviews with talent and either run them now or simply "bank" the story till the film got a US release or use the one interview to do both. Even splashy Hollywood films weren't catering to American reporters. I heard of one major outlet told no for *Robin Hood*, even though it was opening that weekend in North America. *Fair Game*? A deeply American movie about politics and

the Bush administration and outed CIA agent Valerie Plame? Starring Naomi Watts and Sean Penn and perfect for the highbrow atmosphere of Cannes? Almost everyone was denied a slot. And on and on. I had publicists talking me out of even asking to do an interview. That's a dramatic shift from a decade ago when you could easily and regularly get round tables and one-on-ones with top talent, who benefited from doing one-stop shopping with their junkets (the entire world press is here so they can get it all done in a few days no matter when the movie opens in each country). No more.

Should you care? A little. It's just one more nail in the coffin of serious entertainment journalism and one less opportunity for freelance writers to actually make a living writing about film. And the fewer of those in the world, the fewer chances you have to find out about great films that aren't automatic summer blockbusters. A running joke at the festival among reporters I knew was wondering how much money journalists were losing by coming here. One reporter considered sleeping on the beach just so they could turn a profit. Roger Ebert is correct that we're in a golden age of opportunity for film criticism; but it's a shame it has become an expensive hobby for so many, rather than a way to make a modest living.

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Thousands Of Birds Found Dead In Italy

Freelancers used to have to juggle going to screenings with interviews and filing features. Now they juggle screenings with online work for jobs back home so they don't go broke.

DAY SIX

BIUTIFUL *** out of **** -- We all have unfinished business when we die. Me? I'm going to be staring hungrily at a pile of books, CDs and DVDs and saying "Not yet, there's a play in the fall I want to see!" But Uxbal (a great Javier Bardem) really feels the weight of things undone as prostate cancer eats away his remaining days. His two children can't stay with Uxbal's ex-wife: she's bi-polar, resents the son and slaps the boy when she loses patience. He also needs to straighten out the difficulties of the illegal immigrants he both befriends and exploits as construction workers and peddlers of junky knock-offs. Oh and on the side Uxbal is a psychic who is paid to help souls find peace and stop haunting people; as the end nears, Uxbal realizes he should never have used his gift to make money. Hard to believe but his problems only mount as Uxbal gets weaker and weaker. Can we ever do everything we hope to accomplish? No, of course not, but this heartbreaking film makes that point in a thousand painful ways. It's a dank, dirty existence Uxbal has and everyone in his world is exploited one way or another. But even when ghosts are climbing the walls (literally) it's a beautiful one too. Director Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu has never been a favorite of mine. The tricky plots of *Babel* and *21 Grams* felt more O. Henry than oh so profound to me. But I've always respected him: he makes serious films with talented actors. Here his technical command is at its peak, with Javier Bardem delivering a soulful, heartbreaking performance. This movie could easily rise in my estimation on a second viewing. It's already the best film Inarritu has ever made.

TAMARA DREWE ** out of **** -- Based on the graphic novel by Posy Simmonds, this frothy little comedy is the latest from the eclectic Stephen Frears. In it, a writer's retreat in rural England provides the backdrop for a story that can mock both the pretentiousness of artists and the "bucolic" life in which kids trapped in small villages despair of *anything* ever happening. The catalyst is Tamara, an ugly duckling who -- thanks to some plastic surgery on her honking nose and a huge boost of self-confidence -- returns a swan ready to flirt and generally get revenge on the men who ignored her before, mainly best-selling crime novelist Nicholas Hardiment. Throw in a pop star (Dominic Cooper), loads of infidelity and teenagers who snap photos with their mobile phones and you've got a very loose modern spin on Thomas Hardy's *Far From The Madding Crowd*. (Maddened cow, is more like it.) Generally faithful in tone to the novel, the film makes some understandable switches and one or two very odd ones. The crucial difference is that Nicholas was conceived as quite good-looking and well-preserved, which makes his potential attraction to Tamara (played by Bond girl Gemma Arterton) quite reasonable. But here he's played by Roger Allam, who looks more like a pontificating Christopher Hitchens than a love interest to a babe like Tamara. It throws the film quite off balance for me. And while Arterton is certainly striking, she doesn't come close to making the most of her role. The only one who does is Jessica Barden, who runs away with every scene in the small but pivotal part of Jody, a bored out of her skull local teen who obsesses over Tamara's rock star boyfriend and wrecks havoc with emails and text messages. I found it all rather flat, if harmless. But to my surprise quite a few people at Cannes spoke fondly of the film. This is either a genuine reaction or just the knee-jerk pleasure of watching something silly and easy after days of angst and heavy-going dramas.

HAI SHANG CHUAN QI/I WISH I KNEW *** 1/2 out of **** -- Chinese director Jia Zhangke's exploration of a sort of hybrid documentary (*24 City*) bears remarkable fruit in this formally brilliant and moving look at Shanghai, Taiwan, and controversial events in China's modern history as reflected in the movies. How to begin? As far as I know, all the interviews in this movie are genuine (whereas *24 City* had a few actors "playing" people mixed in with real interviews). Their stories are a grab-bag of tales, often describing how people moved to Shanghai or Taiwan or Hong Kong. Countless taboo topics are broached and while I'm certain I've missed many of the subtleties in these tales, it's impossible not to get caught up in stories of families riven apart by the Cultural Revolution, the Siege Of Shanghai and other events. But time and again these stories intertwine with the movies. (Famous actors and directors like Hou Hsiao Hsien are featured, sometimes briefly, along with many film clips.) So in a way this is also a documentary about the movies and how movies are a repository for our memories or perhaps how movies have always dealt with taboo subjects and Jia (whose films often aren't screened in China, officially) deserves to do so as well. One great segment shows a Party worker assigned to help director Michelangelo Antonioni when the Italian master is invited to come make a movie about China. The man gets concerned when he thinks Antonioni is always focusing on the "backward" aspects of China and tries to complain; Antonioni insists that isn't his desire at all. But then the Gang Of Four use the film as an excuse to attack a rival. This poor worker is caught in the middle, forced to go to every site where the movie was filmed and make a confession, be criticized (a public form of humiliation) and so on. And he still hasn't seen the film itself or have a clue as to what's in it! Interspersed with these stories are shots of

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Shanghai and other parts of China. Jia is in such command, virtually every image is magnetic, bursting with striking details or simply beautiful. The only flaw in an otherwise perfect film is the repeated image of a woman in white in a few very brief staged sequences that appear in the middle and towards the end of the film. Quite unnecessary and distracting in what is otherwise a remarkable work. Now the confession: I seem almost alone in my opinion. People at the screening I attended didn't even bother to boo: they just trudged out when it was over without a sound. No one I know has seen it and no one is talking about it with any enthusiasm. (It's in the Un Certain Regard section.)

HA'MESHOTET/THE WANDERER *** out of **** -- We always instinctively identify with the protagonist in a film, whether it's a young woman looking for love or a serial killer. If a prisoner is trying to escape from prison, we can't help hoping he'll get away with it, no matter how vicious his crimes may be. Writer-director Avishai Sivan knows that and builds up a great deal of empathy for his character Isaac before having Isaac behave in a despicable manner that leaves us feeling a little betrayed. Not only did we identify with Isaac (because that's what viewers do), we liked him! He's a young man living in an Orthodox Jewish community in Israel. Isaac does not quite fit, though he's not a rebel in the same way as other young men, who turn to smoking and cursing the moment their studies are over. Isaac is simply a wanderer, someone who leaves their hermetically sealed world from time to time. He's also in pain, thanks to kidney stones which takes him to a hospital where they discover a problem with his testicles that demand surgery and perhaps permanent infertility. Isaac can't bring himself to discuss this with his parents because their world is so sexually repressive. His father moans in anguish during the night, though Isaac doesn't know why. (His mother says that Isaac's father was once accused of a terrible crime, but she knew he could never hurt anyone.) Isaac's mother is simply stone-faced when he asks her why they never had another child. A friend's sister is appealing but of course talking to her is nigh on impossible. And when an arranged date for courting is set with another young woman, Isaac clumsily, even hungrily tries to kiss the girl which horrifies her no end. That inability to express or even mention the needs of the body and the heart proves disastrous in this solidly constructed, promising debut.

COPIE CONFORME/CERTIFIED COPY ** out of **** -- It's nice to see Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami embrace narrative again and almost trippy to see him making a movie in French and English and Italian with an honest-to-goodness movie star in the form of the radiant Juliette Binoche, one of the more quietly daring actors working today. Still, I wish I could be more enthusiastic about the end result. A major problem is that this is basically a two-hander and Binoche's tennis partner is opera singer William Shimmel, who just isn't up to the task. By the way, I'm not absolutely certain what is happening in this film but no one else is either. At first, Binoche is a woman attending a reading. Afterwards she and the author meet for an afternoon of coffee and casual sightseeing. The woman is quite on edge, far more than one would expect when dealing with a stranger she presumably is attracted to. But as they argue endlessly over authentic originals versus copies, they wind up in a cafe of sorts. In easily the best scene of the film, Binoche engages the woman behind the bar, who assumes the couple is married. Binoche goes along with the mistake and even tells the writer when he returns to the table. But then...somehow, they are married and have a long history together. Were we mistaken before? Or is it playacting? Since a copy is as good as the original (the thesis of his book), is it simply that their desire to copy the actions of a married couple actually made them married? I assumed the movie has two realities: the one prior to the cafe where they are strangers and the one after the cafe which they are an estranged couple, not simply people pretending to be married. It would make an intriguing play and with someone like Binoche and an actor worthy of her, it might just work.

DAY SEVEN

DES HOMMES ET DES DIEUX/OF GOD AND MEN ** 1/2 out of **** -- One of the priests at my local church reads a letter by a monk every year. The monk was in some country and knew terrorists or bad guys of some sort were going to come and harm or kill them. So this monk wrote a remarkable letter in advance forgiving and expressing love for his murderer. Indeed, the monk was killed along with other men in 1996 in Algeria. I had no idea this film was based on that incident I've heard about for a decade now until we get to the climax and hear that letter. Until then, it's a simple, straightforward look at the life of the Cistercian monks which tries to illuminate why they would stay and face slaughter when the monks had an opportunity to flee. I'm eager to see the film again, because I was awfully tired the morning it screened and faded out once or twice. Besides, I'd done my homework and read excerpts from a collection of writings by the major figures in their order to prepare for the film. As men of the cloth devoted to a no frills existence (to put it mildly), they would have appreciated the movie's lean approach. With an economy of detail, we get sharp, penetrating ideas of who these men are, their foibles and strengths, their humor and their love for each other, the community they serve and above all God. My priest is going to love it.

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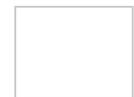
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SCHASTYE MOE/MY JOY ** out of **** -- Documentary filmmaker Sergei Loznitsa shows an impressive command of technique and actors but fails in the rather important department of story in his fictional debut. I generally avoid production notes: the less I know about a film, the better as far as I'm concerned. But you can spot movies that desperately need explaining a mile away at a film festival. And *My Joy* is such a film. The production notes helpfully inform me that the film's structure is based on the road system of Russia: main roads lead to arteries which lead to smaller roads which can dead end in a village. If you want to get anywhere, you have to turn around and go back. Not knowing that, all I knew was that one character led to the next in a series of vignettes, most of which ended in violence and corruption. A truck driver delivering flour gets "trapped" in a town. At one point, he takes up with a very young prostitute, who maybe is 14 or 15. His decency is somehow so obvious, we know he's not going to buy her services. What's amusing is how furious she becomes when he tries to do her a good turn. Like so many scenes in this film, it's vivid and funny and memorable. Unfortunately, the driver is killed and we move on to new characters. One after another is knocked off, with venal and vicious authority figures a favorite source of pain. Russia is trapped in a cycle of violence? Corruption is endemic? Life is bleak? Take your pick. It's a pity the film reduces itself to slogans since so much solid acting is on display. But with the right script, Loznitsa could really shine.

BLUE VALENTINE *** 1/2 out of **** -- This Ryan Gosling/Michelle Williams drama debuted at Sundance, so that fest gets the credit for debuting this terrific film by Derek Cianfrance. On the other hand, it was announced at last year's Cannes so it's perfectly fitting the film returns here in triumph. In short, this serious film with two award-worthy performances (I would say Oscar-worthy, but they're probably too raw and uncompromising for that) is the hard-edged flipside to the delightful *(500) Days Of Summer*. That movie used a fractured timeline to give the romantic drama a kick-start and underline the bittersweet nature of a romance that doesn't work out. Its tone is wistful and sad. *Blue Valentine* isn't bittersweet: it's just bitter. Friends joked that you'll hire a divorce lawyer as soon as you leave the theater. But the film is not a harangue against relationships. It just acknowledges that sometimes they simply don't work out. The film is almost remarkable for not placing blame, really. But what exactly is Cindy (Williams) fed up with? Dean (Gosling) is a great dad to their kid, albeit one with very modest prospects as a house painter for hire. Jumping back and forth, we see them fighting, meeting cute, having an awesome first date, his wooing, and their stab at a romantic evening in a theme hotel room called "The Future." Believe me, the future looks bleak. Moment to moment, these two marvelous actors are simply breathtakingly good, with neither one ever trying to justify or soften anything they do. One song that recurs throughout the movie? "You Always Hurt The One You Love." OK, so NOT a date movie. Just a great one.

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