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Cannes 2010 Day Ten and Eleven: Not So HaHaHa

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There you are back in the US watching the *Shrek* franchise implode and shaking your head as *MacGruber*, the TENTH attempt in a row to spin off a decent feature film from *Saturday Night Live* proves disastrously unfunny. (Boy, that Betty White episode is fading fast from memory isn't it?) You're wondering if you should bothering diving back into *Lost* for the series finale, though the homework you'd have to do is daunting. You don't even care if Lee Dewyze pulls an upset over Crystal Bowersox on *American Idol* but you know it's happening. And here we are back at Cannes, wondering if a Thai film featuring Monkey Ghosts with glowing red eyes is going to snag the

Palm d'Or. (The thinking? Tim Burton is the head of the jury. Tim Burton made *Planet Of The Apes*. That film has Monkey Ghosts very much like Burton's apes. Thai film wins top prize! Counter-argument: Tim Burton may want to *forget* that he ever made *Planet Of The Apes*.)

Oh, thank you fest bubble for letting us believe such debates really matter. Sure, we discussed the box office potential of *Robin Hood* (I was too bullish about its fate overseas) and other Hollywood flicks like *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* and *Fair Game*. But by and large all we cared about was whether a movie was good. Everyone is saying it was a dull, off year. Certainly there was no frenzy to see any of the films (one blessing about fewer journalists coming to Cannes is that it's less stressful to get inside.) But I'm still heading home with at least four movies that will appear on my Best Of the Year list if they get a theatrical release in the US. How can seeing four films worthy of being named among the best of the year in a 12 day span be considered bad?

DAY TEN

HORS LA LOI/OUTSIDE THE LAW ** out of **** -- This Algerian film is a case of a politically charged film being revolutionary for being so conventional. (Stephen Garrett of [Time Out New York](#)

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Thousands Of Birds Found Dead In Italy

weighs in on the politics of Cannes's movies here.) It's a classically minded, very familiar tale of three brothers and their heroic struggle to gain independence for their homeland, Algeria. I say heroic even though they are involved in groups that killed innocent men, women and children in France via terrorist acts to gain that freedom. Right wingers protested the screening of the film and security was ultra-tight throughout the day. Certainly nothing onscreen would startle anyone not steeped in the politics. You get three brothers: one becomes a crook to survive (of course) and the other two are in the underground devoted heart and soul to the Cause. You get nods towards complexity -- one brother feels guilty for the murders he's committed; a few of their questionable actions are included as well (though we see a lot more of French atrocities). But by and large this movie makes it clear that as far as the troubled country of Algeria is concerned, they acted and the country became free. For an insightful look at France's troubled years in Algeria, read *A Savage War Of Peace* by Alistair Horne. For a great film that is far bolder in both its complexity and its filmmaking, watch the classic flick *The Battle Of Algiers*, a tense and exciting and great film. For a middle of the road take on the same issue, watch *Outside The Law*. Just don't invite **Jean-Marie Le Pen** to go with you.

THE TREE ** out of ****-- Whoever did the "tree casting" for this drama deserves a prize. In the film, a young girl named Simone (Morgana Davies) becomes convinced that her dead father's spirit has taken root in the tree that looms over their ramshackle Australian home. The little girl can hear him talking to her, she insists, and spends half the film sitting in the tree and the other half decorating the tree and defending it from the ax. Charlotte Gainsbourg is the mother finding it hard to recover from her husband's unexpected death, not that anyone notices very soon since her household has always been unconventional. Along with Simone, there's the oldest son who is looking to pass his exams and move to Sydney and a little boy who hasn't spoken yet. Gainsbourg spends a fair amount of time in the tree as well and who could blame her? It's a great tree. The tree practically has its arms wrapped around the house, roots stretch out like fingers embracing the earth, the many branches are low and rise slowly (making it perfect for climbing and tree houses) and it looks like it's been in place for about 10,000 years and will be there for another 10,000 to come. I wish the film had as much presence. It's fine, but after a certain amount of energy it gets a bit desperate what with a massive storm cleansing away everything and allowing mom to start fresh in a deus ex machina that's quite forced and unconvincing. But boy, what I wouldn't give for an afternoon in that tree.

SZELID TEREMTES: A FRANKENSTEIN TERV/TENDER SON: A FRANKENSTEIN TALE * 1/2 -- Certain films couldn't exist outside of the hothouse atmosphere of a festival, where experimentation and an audience willing to take a leap of faith are a given. I'm sure the Dardenne brothers play in art houses around the world. But they're superstars at festivals (and one of my favorites from the past decade) whereas most people have never heard of them and would be perhaps bewildered by one of their films. (Start with *La Promesse*, if you haven't given them a shot yet.) And that's good. But it can also encourage directors to indulge themselves, to treat the audience with disinterest or disdain. How else to explain this film by Kornel Mundruczo, which doesn't even attempt to offer up a plot or any discernible emotion with its characters? You could see more tiresome, less accomplished movies at Cannes, trust me. But after a promising opening in which people audition for a director (his demand that they cry -- immediately -- provokes amusing responses), the movie stops dead in its tracks. A young man, whom we quickly realize was the son our director never knew he had, has returned. Utterly lacking in empathy, the young man is violent without exactly being murderous. That would be far too emotional a start for him to exhibit. He just wanders through the film like Frankenstein's monster, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unwittingly wrecking havoc. But Frankenstein's monster was bursting with emotion and neediness. It simply wanted to play with the little girl that it drowned. It was scared and angry and sad and filled with longing. In contrast, this young man, this monster created by adults that ignored him, is merely a cipher. So is the film.

LA CASA MUDA * out of **** -- It's the only sensible question anyone asks at the festival: what have you liked and what have you hated? No matter how many films you see (I'm gonna hit 40+) countless more will slip through your fingers and some of them will invariably be acclaimed. But when you overdoes on arty fare, a genre pic can seem awfully appealing. Plus, when we spoke to someone who'd seen this horror film, they said it was alright. But right about now, an alright horror film sounds pretty good. Plus, the movie is notable for having been shot in one take. The story is simple: a man and his daughter are taken to a country home, so they can clean it and make it presentable for sale. They're going to spend the night - in the dark -- and then get to work first thing in the morning. Why drop them off into a home with no electricity at night rather than just take them there first thing in the morning? Don't ask so many questions. Anyway, something goes bump in the night and the dad goes upstairs to check it out. Then something really goes bump in the night and the young woman spends the rest of the evening frightened out of her mind and struggling to survive. Oh if only I could say the same for the viewers. This is an absurdly laughable film, inane on multiple levels. Some of it can be explained by the reveal towards

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Lohan ticketed

the end, but sorry, it's just a poorly thought out, silly silly movie on every level. It's possible making a horror film in one take could add to the tension, give you a sense of experiencing the suspense at the same time as the protagonist. Hey, if Hitchcock wanted to do it, it must be worth doing. But all you get out of *La Casa Muda* is a mild chuckle or two at the goofiness of the premise and the execution.

DAY ELEVEN

BURNT BY THE SUN 2: THE EXODUS * out of **** -- Does director Nikita Mikhalkov really think we've been spending years wondering whatever happened to the characters in his Oscar-winning film? We haven't, we shouldn't and he shouldn't. Nonetheless, there they are. It's the sort of sequel that diminishes the original. Which was in fact, very good, however Stalinist Mikhalkov's politics may be -- only a Stalinist would rewrite history and try to pretend they weren't a big fan of his. I have been: *Dark Eyes* and *Burnt By The Sun* were very good films. But the sequel is not, bursting as it is with endless shots done in slow motion and humor of the broadest sort. Whereas *Burnt By The Sun* was perhaps nostalgic, *BBTS 2* is dripping with sentimentality. It's even cartoonish, as we return to the retired General being tracked down by the family friend who betrayed him in the original, as well as his daughter Nadia who is now a proud young woman. I can't emphasize enough how fatal those slow motion shots are; they're almost always a sign of panic in a movie, a moment when a director hopes to signal intense emotion or drama or elongate some suspense. It almost never works. Here it's just a creaky device as we watch World War II swing into action, with the General (played by Mikhalkov) now just a regular soldier and Nadia a self-styled nurse. A few scenes have a spark, such as the standoff between some new recruits (proud members of an elite training corp) and the hardened vets who have seen it all before. But this is tiresome stuff, by and large, with a truly shocking ending. Nothing is resolved and we are told (threatened?) that this film is merely "the end of part one."

SHORT FILMS IN COMPETITION ** 1/2 out of **** -- Just watched nine short films in Competition. If there's a consistent fault in them, it's in the aping of their feature length brethren in Competition, which can easily choose mood and atmosphere over an honest to goodness plot. Tell us a story, for heaven's sake!

Estacao ** -- A would-be actress lives in a bus terminal in between auditions. Good lead and good detail, but literally nothing happens.

Blokes *** -- This short with a gay theme is the reason I went to this screening. Happily, it's one of the best. Director Marialy Rivas nicely delivers a complex story of a teenage boy smitten with the older boy (all of 16) living in the apartment building across the street. It's all set in the oppressive atmosphere of Chili in 1986. Rivas delivers a lot of humor, some suspense and a political note while the boy maneuvers to be near his object of desire on the bus and doesn't even hesitate to use a mass roundup of suspects as an excuse to get closer. And it's all done without the boy speaking a word of dialogue. If there'd been more of an emotional punch at the end from the boy, this would have been great. But as it is, a very ambitious short that accomplishes most everything it sets out to do.

Chienne d'Histoire ** -- A meandering animated short with a cool style tells the obscure true story of Istanbul in 1910, when dogs grew so thick on the ground that 30,000 of them were "deported" to a barren island and left to die. The style won me here.

Micky Bader ** -- The crowd responded with the most enthusiasm for this documentary short about an old woman in Denmark who speaks out her Jewish husband, their decision not to have kids until after the war, the trials they faced during the war, and their escape before the Nazis grabbed him, all wrapped in footage of Micky bathing in what looks like extremely cold water. The two sides -- her past history and current comments -- never quite coalesced or bounced off each other in different ways.

Muscles ** -- A pretty interesting short in which a teenage girl loves body building and her timid younger brother feels left out. A stretch of an ending threw this one out of whack.

Rosa ** 1/2 -- A strong entry in which an older woman gets up the energy in her lonely life to go on a date. Studied sadness, but with a sense of discovery that keeps it moving forward.

To Swallow A Toad ** -- I'm a sucker for animation. But than can only take you so far. Once the novelty wears off, all you're left with is an oddball tale of people who suffer woes but comfort themselves with nice delicious live toads popped into their mouths. I'm sure there's some political/social analogy to be drawn, but I don't care

Maya ** -- Prompted the most walk-outs, by far. This documentary is about a guy training his pet for a dog fight. We watch three days before the fight, two days and then one day. I've rarely felt such dread in

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an audience at Cannes as these people when they feared having to watch an actual dogfight. (The movie ends before it takes place.) Highlight is the training session where the dog Maya locks jaws with another dog and the owners spend a long time trying to disconnect the two.

Ezra Rishona *** -- Directed by Yarden Karmin, this is the strongest of the bunch. A man stops by a woman's house and they have sex. But we're thrown off when she gives him a hickey and then blithely say it won't show the next day at his wedding. Effortlessly, they create two vivid characters that grab our attention. They had a great final enigmatic shot by a tree but felt the need to go 30 seconds longer and show our hero driving. Not necessary but hardly a fatal mistake in a very good movie.

ROUTE IRISH ** 1/2 out of **** -- Has Ken Loach lost his mind? After his brilliant Palm d'Or winner *The Wind That Shakes The Barley*, he's made two relatively commercial films in a row. First, there was the lark of a comedy, *Looking For Eric*. Now we've got this tense drama, almost a thriller, about mercenaries in Iraq. An Irish man is torn by the death of his best friend, but gets focused on revenge when he begins to suspect his mate was killed to hush up a war crime by fellow mercenaries. The film deals with grief and the war and the problems raised by using mercenaries without ever losing sight of the driving momentum. What's next for Loach? A romance?

HAHAHA ** -- This winner of Un Certain Regard is the latest from Hong Sangsoo. In it, Sangsoo tells the all too familiar story of friends who are inadvertently dating the same woman. This has been his theme for year after year. At least Woody Allen made ten or so good to great films before he started to repeat himself in a tiresome manner. Just spelling out the details of the characters (tour guide, poet, restaurant owner) hardly seems worth the bother since any of them could have traded places with others on the outside. Exhausting.

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