

Post-Festival Report 2011, Part 2: Life, Love and Death

BY STEVE GARDEN | AUGUST 11, 2011

At the New Zealand International Film Festival, reflections on the beginning and end of things.

I very nearly overlooked writer-director Katell Quillévéré's debut feature, **Love Like Poison** (*Un Poison Violent*) given that there was little in the festival booklet to indicate that the film would be more than an engaging coming-of-age movie with erotic overtones ("It seems that sex is in the air ..."), and certainly nothing to alert cinephiles to the film's pedigree, namely its thematic and formal connections to the work of Maurice Pialat (and less overtly to films by Catherine Breillat, Robert Bresson, Agnes Varda and others).

That said, the film is by no means formally or thematically austere. There's a palpable physicality to *Love Like Poison*, a robust, though by no means overstated earthiness in the performances and settings. In her acting debut, Clara Augarde is very good in the central role of 14-year old Anna, perfectly balancing innocent vulnerability and perceptive resolve as her character negotiates the unfamiliar *terroir* of adulthood. While the film offers much scope for philosophical contemplation (by way of the seemingly inexhaustible conflict between faith and flesh), the characters are more than mere signifiers serving a dry central thesis. These are wholly recognisable, flesh and blood human beings, and Quillévéré handles their various complexities and tensions with insight and sensitivity.

Drawn from her early experience as a devout young Catholic, Quillévéré's film surely has more than a hint of autobiography in it. However, she handles her characters and subject matter with a resolutely non-judgmental even hand. Whether Anna's future will be as self-determining as it seems, or a temporary illusion that will at some point need to be revisited (perhaps in another film?) is left for the viewer to ponder. In any event, it's clear that questions concerning female self-determination in a world *still* dominated by male power are key subtexts in this deceptively intelligent film.

The central character in **Aïta** (*Father*) is the dilapidated 13th Century Basque mansion inherited by Spanish director José Maria de Orbe. In a recent interview, he said that he made the film to create art where decadence and destruction once ruled. While neither a documentary nor a work of fiction, *Aïta* is most assuredly a work of art, a mesmerising, poetic contemplation on light, texture, space, the past, the present, decay and rebirth. In the first shot we see overgrowth being cleared away, and in the second, two workmen discuss the outer shell of the house while another

fossicks among bones in the basement. These shots prime us for a contemplative film that will require our active participation.

With the measured opening of doors and windows, de Orbe uses natural light to not only paint beautifully composed frames of textured surfaces and shifting perspectives, but to suggest a broader (perhaps political) metaphor for the need to reveal, examine, and restore. In this respect, the mansion could be read as more than just a building. While the film largely explores textures and spaces, it frequently pauses to focus on sound: the resonance of rooms, dripping water, wind, rain, birds, and the distant sounds of other life. We get the sense that everything we hear and see is as the house might perceive it. As a silent witness to centuries of war and injustice, this is indeed a haunted house, and *Aita* could be an attempt to exorcise some of the ghosts.

In a scene where school children visit the house, two girls whisper to each other in the attic. When one tells the other they should leave because she's scared, I was reminded of Victor Erice's masterful *Spirit of the Beehive* (1973), another subtle Spanish film about a nation haunted by its past. It's also worth noting that *Aita* is another name for Hades: lord of death, ruler of the underworld, the invisible or unseen one. I wouldn't know if this had anything to do with choosing the name of the film, but it is an interesting aside.

Throughout the film, a number of (mostly playful) conversations between the mansion's elderly caretaker and a younger priest allude to various themes and ideas, such as whether the past should be unearthed and examined or simply left in peace. All the while, the film patiently waits on the house to reveal itself. Shown but never fully revealed, the house remains something of an enigma, but as night falls it does indeed start to speak, as images from the past flicker upon walls. Silhouettes (of former occupants perhaps) and numerous other ghosts silently re-enact their eternal rituals in a captivating display of light and texture, a purely cinematic sequence reminiscent of Bill Morrison's equally extraordinary *Decasia* (2002). Of the many films I saw at this year's festival, *Aita* was probably the most original. While the pacing may test some, those with an eye and an ear for such rarefied delicacies will be well rewarded.

As the titular centre of Pia Marais's *At Ellen's Age*, Jeanne Balibar delivers a skilfully restrained performance of a woman suffering a crisis of identity that sets her on an aimless journey of self-discovery. As the still point of Marais's appropriately meandering film (a risky formal identification with the main character that caused the film to teeter a few times), Balibar's deliberately dislocated performance anchors a supporting cast who skate perilously close to caricature, particularly Julia Hummer (who did very good work in early Christian Petzold films), as a prescriptively humourless idealist. The prolonged central section, wherein Ellen falls in with a group of animal rights activists, wears out its welcome well before Marais shifts focus again, but just when it seems that Ellen will never reconnect with a world that no longer holds meaning for her, Marais slips into the kind of territory we associate with Claire Denis. The mysteriously elusive quality of the final section introduces a layer of cinematic depth that previously had only been hinted at. By turns intriguing and slightly irritating, *At Ellen's Age* asks a lot from the audience, and it's questionable if that patience is adequately rewarded. While fitfully reminiscent