Thai film won the Palme d'Or at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival.

[ Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives — ลุงบูญมีระลึกชาติ ]

From Cannes, 10 to watch and wait for

May 28, 2010

After the notorious on-screen extremes of last year's Cannes Film Festival, which was punch-drunk on violence and sex as well as quality, the comparatively tame 2010 edition generated a good deal less excitement. Yet the way some long-time Cannes attendees have been wringing their hands, you'd think it was the end of cinema. (Soon enough, I suppose: The number of features shot on digital video, rather than film, was remarkable, and in terms of visual quality remarkably varied.)

It was a quieter festival than usual for many reasons. The winner of this year's Palme d'Or, "Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives," came from Thai filmmaker Apichatpong "Joe" Weerasethakul. Like South Korea's Hong Sang-soo, the winner of the Un Certain Regard sidebar this year (for a wan comedy, "Ha Ha Ha"), the "Uncle Boonmee" creator studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago on his way to becoming a filmmaker.

This year's main competition jury president, Tim Burton, noted the "reflective" nature of the best work he saw in the main competition. "Uncle Boonmee" is not, for example, the sort of foreign or specialty title that is destined to become a commercial success in America. It is not, in other words, "The Lives of Others." It speaks in a murmur rather than dramaturgical bullet points, though in its delicate interweave of spirituality, nostalgia and grace the film's strengths cannot be denied.

When it won the Palme, the international press corps watching the closing ceremony in the Debussy Theatre via closed circuit responded with a whoop and a heartening amount of applause. This was a victory for the small and the beautiful. In its way, so was the win (it deserved more, and better) for best screenplay awarded to Lee Chang-dong of South Korea for his exquisite drama "Poetry." Unlike "Uncle Boonmee," "Poetry" is a film that holds strong appeal for those who require a good story, well told, in a straightforward narrative style. It is no less or more valuable than "Uncle Boonmee," simply in its way a little more mainstream.

I find the grousing short-sighted. Maybe it's because this was merely my fifth Cannes, and many other critics' 25th or 30th or more. The truest work I saw registered in a confidential key. There was nothing like the major American wallop of last year's "Inglourious Basterds" (on which I remain mixed), or the delirious insanities of last year's "Antichrist." This year's sole U.S. main competition entry, the fact-based political thriller "Fair Game," won't burn down anyone's barn, cinematically or otherwise. As for the out-of-competition "Robin Hood" which opened the festival: Well, I like that picture. And it was better than the glam opener for Cannes four years back, "The Da Vinci Code."

When a commercial picture as good as last year's "Up" opens the festival on a festive note, yes, you hope that festivity continues throughout the next 12 days. But if this film festival cannot

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make room for eccentric, wry, ruminative and haunting personal visions such as "Uncle Boonmee," then it is lost. Therefore by my definition, Cannes is far from lost, though this year, to my taste, it showcased in competition too many staid Projects of Quality, such as "Of Gods and Men" (picked up by Sony Pictures Classics for U.S. release), about French Christian monks living and dying in the Maghreb North African region.

The 10 best films I saw at Cannes 2010:

"Another Year," directed by Mike Leigh. Facile but marvelously acted, Leigh's portrait of an extremely happy marriage contrasted by various, less happy relational circumstances has been picked up for U.S. distribution by Sony Pictures Classics.

"Certified Copy," directed by Abbas Kiarostami. Juliette Binoche won the best actress award at Cannes for this supple two-hander, co-starring a game if limited William Shimell, set in Tuscany and shot on digital video beautiful enough to make anyone rethink their prejudice against digital video. Picked up for U.S. distribution by IFC.

"Poetry," directed by Lee Chang-dong. A story of a grandmother succumbing to Alzheimer's, faced with a profound moral dilemma involving her grandson. More tightly plotted than the filmmaker's previous Cannes title, the great "Secret Sunshine," and this is very nearly perfect. Picked up for U.S. distribution by Kino.

"A Screaming Man," directed by Mahamat-Saleh Haroun. Born in Chad and now Paris-based, Haroun tells of a hotel pool attendant and his son, dealing with globalization, civil war and mortal sacrifice. Cineart will distribute domestically.

"The Strange Case of Angelica," directed by Manoel De Oliveira. Reworking a script he began 60 years ago — 60! — the Portugese filmmaker's fable of eternal love proved a highlight of the Un Certain Regard slate.

"Tuesday, After Christmas," directed by Radu Muntean. Heretofore the greatest of the contemporary Romanian films, from "The Death of Mr. Lazarescu" to "4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days," have dissected institutional corrosion in addition to personal reckoning. Muntean's minutely observed tale of adultery is different, less ambitious but wholly absorbing. No distributor yet.


"Inside Job," directed by Charles Ferguson. This out-of-competition favorite comes from the meticulous documentarian who made "No End in Sight." See it: It's an improbably lucid and gripping explanation of who, exactly, got us into the current global economic mess. Due later this year from Sony Pictures Classics.

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"Kaboom," directed by Gregg Araki. IFC at Midnight recently picked up this merry genre pile-up (which played out of competition), part college comedy for all genders and persuasions, part nihilistic romp, per the title.

"Film Socialisme," directed by Jean-Luc Godard. Many detested it, others found its riddles genuinely stimulating. If Godard were inessential as a filmmaker in the 21st century, could he have divided Cannes audiences this way? No U.S. distribution as yet.

Movies on the radio: Michael Phillips chats with Greg Jarrett in the 6:30 a.m. hour Friday on WGN-AM 720. And on TV: Phillips co-hosts "At the Movies" with A.O. Scott, airing 10:35 p.m. (after late local news) Saturdays and 10:30 a.m. Sundays on WLS-Ch. 7.

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