

Viennale 2008

"Our Beloved Month of August":

Miguel's Labyrinth – A Tribute to Miguel Gomes

By Markus Keuschnigg

The heart of the Viennale, beating in the darkness of the cinemas, can only be found within the unorthodox tributes Austria's largest film fest annually dedicates to a handful of outstanding – if usually marginalized or little-known – filmmakers. Whereas the main program has to be carefully balanced between artistic integrity and economic rationality, placing mainstream-friendly American independent films next to such hardcore fare as Jean-Marie Straub's *Le genou d'Artémide*, the essence of festival director Hans Hurch's vision of today's cinema lies in its sidebar programs. Along with a tribute to American filmmaker John Gianvito this year, the work of Portuguese director Miguel Gomes was highlighted.

What immediately comes to mind when confronted with the labyrinthine universe seen in each and every one of Gomes' six shorts and two feature-length films is the credo of another renegade of international cinema: The organic amalgamation of what is usually known as fiction and non-fiction in the work of Werner Herzog, producing image-monuments filled with stories – some based on facts, some on lies – clearly has an echo in Gomes' strange cinema. One could argue that his most recent film, the two-and-a-half-hour-long *Our Beloved Month of August* (Aquele Querido Mês De Agosto) is a sort of climax to all the ideas expressed in his previous films.

Centered in and around the small town of Arganil in central Portugal, the film is a multi-faceted, playful yet earnest foray into the border zone of narrative filmmaking, starting with what might turn out to be a key image for Gomes: a vixen sneaking around a henhouse until she can find a small gap. The fevered clucking of the birds and a few flying feathers make up the last moments of this scene, which has no clear connection to the rest of the film but serves up an image open to various interpretations. *Our Beloved Month of August* works best as a kaleidoscope, blending documentary, fictional and metafictional elements into one sturdy yet tender film, which is less interested in handing out an operating guide to the viewers than in standing on its own legs as an autocratic and anarchic piece of cinema.

As some critics were quick to draw comparisons between Miguel Gomes and other playful modernizers of world cinema like Abbas Kiarostami or Nuri Bilge Ceylan – arguing that all three of them are contemplating the nature of cinema and filmmaking alike by way of including the process of directing into their narratives – one has to mention that Gomes, unlike the others, is not that interested in a theoretical approach to cinema, in a sober deconstruction and/or analysis of its pillars. His films are formed by the experience of making them: bits and pieces of the difficult production of *Our Beloved Month of August* made it into the final cut. It was originally conceived as a slightly more conventional narrative feature, but after production was halted due to financial problems, the movie transmuted in a way no one could have foreseen: it was out of control.

Therefore, when Gomes intersperses his Panopticon of rural life with sequences in

which he himself and his crew and his cast appear in front of the camera, re-enacting what happened during the production of the film, they become stories themselves. This subordination of (and inclusion into) the final film is neither pretension nor egocentricity, but a humble gesture, acknowledging the primitive, archaic power of cinema, letting go of what was meant to be controlled. And that, in essence, is the main philosophy of Werner Herzog's cinema.

The first half of the film is taken up with townspeople telling gruesome, tender stories and legends of the area: Gomes films them with utter patience, with very few cuts. Their sentences are as chaotic as the film's structure itself; one hears about axe murders and a menacing riverman. And then there are the songs, performed by cheesy local bands on stages of town festivals; songs that tell stories of love and hatred and passion, songs that tell stories that for their gruesomeness and truthfulness could never be passed from person to person. Slowly, via beautiful and precise vignettes, the main story arc of the second half of the film emerges, centring on the love story between a young man whose family, like so many others, left Portugal for good, only returning to this place during the summer months – during that beloved month of August – and a young woman, daughter to an overly protective father with whom she may or may not have an incestuous relationship.

Gomes ends his film with what may be seen as a joke: members of the technical crew are on screen, with the sound recorder mentioning that he captured a great many sounds not actually present at the place where he has been recording. Strange cheesy music floating through the woods, a rumbling earthquake sound deep in the mountains: this is the secret of *Our Beloved Month of August*. No matter how perfect a film production is organized, there is always something that creeps into the array of shots, something that transcends the sheer technicality and the necessary economic rationality during the shooting of a film. Something that is not so much anchored in reality, but in the world as seen through a movie camera. In his heart, Miguel Gomes is a romantic as Vincent Minnelli was, a true wizard of his art. And somewhere deep within this strange film is encapsulated a village called "Brigadoon" in shimmering colours, inhabited by dancing, singing dwarfs. A lie? No! The truth of cinema at last!

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