Notebook Feature

TIFF 2016. Correspondences #4

From the festival, Kelly Reichardt's "Certain Women," an epistolary love story, and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's haunting French debut.

Daniel Kasman • 13 SEP 2016

Daguerrotype

Dear Fern,

I've heard a lot of mixed things here about Terrence Malick's *Voyage of Time*, so I'm very pleased at your enraptured praise. Did you know from the first moment that you liked it so much? Sometimes, in those rare

Related Films

THE DREAMED OI
Ruth Beckermann

CERTAIN WOMEN
Kelly Reichardt

DAGUERROTYPE
Kiyoshi Kurosawa

special occasions, you know right off that a film is great. From the first shot of Kelly Reichardt's ***Certain Women***, a grainy Montana landscape grayed by winter, with hills so soft in they could be painted on, and a train arcing its way towards the camera, it is clear this film is special. Based on stories by author Maile Meloy, the film takes the unusual form of a sequence of three stories, all set in small town Montana, and each foregrounded on a woman and her conflicted yearning.

Laura Dern is a lawyer whose client (Jared Harris) in a dead-end malfeasance lawsuit gets increasingly dejected and unhinged at the same time her love affair with an anonymous man—played by James Le Gros and introduced in the film's opening scene as an homage to *Psycho*'s work break rendezvous—falters. In the second tale, Michelle Williams sneaks a cigarette in Lululemon running gear on a nature trail, returned to her family's deluxe campground, and with her down-to-earth but somewhat apathetic husband (Le Gros, re-appearing) continues a discussion with a local to buy a pile of historic stone with which the couple can build their second home. The final story follows seasonal horse tender Lily Gladstone as she goes about her solitary work and shows up at a local adult education class out of curiosity and loneliness. It is being taught by Kirsten Stewart's haggard greenhorn lawyer, moonlighting from several towns over as an instructor, and Gladstone, drawn to her, invites the distracted and exhausted young woman along after each class for a chat over a diner meal.

In each story—connected causally, with Le Gros subtly wavering between Dern and Williams in the background of their two stories, and Gladstone eventually looking for Stewart at Dern's law firm—we see Reichardt's exquisite skill realized: a breathtaking precision that captures the reality, character, and emotional tenor of her people and their world in nearly every shot, and builds up this observation and insight with economy and beauty. (This is realized in no small part by Christopher Blauvelt's gorgeous, restrained Super 16 mm photography.) With the

exception of Gladstone's lone rancher, these certain women are actually doing much better in their lives than Reichardt's Oregonian outcasts she has so movingly introduced us to in the past, yet they each are united in a common feeling, emotional and existential, of just being on the outside, of being held on the cusp of what would make them happy and fulfilled.

Dern's story cleverly displaces her bumpy romance—briefly suggested—with a pocket-sized but deeply felt relationship study between herself and her distraught client. She is patient and calm in the face of his exasperation, yet something of his despair seems to echo in her. Williams' story is a flashpoint for the stumble this otherwise impeccable filmmaker sometimes takes, of making her political point too on the nose. The film is already suffused with the frontier landscape of Westerns, and the story of a yuppie re-claiming Montana's past for herself (the stones belonged to an old schoolhouse) clangs a bit obviously. Yet this story is shot with the same detail and loveliness as the rest, and it continues Reichardt's wonderful collaboration with the actress, recasting Williams not as social outcast of *Wendy and Lucy* but as the kind of person who may never have noticed that earlier incarnation of herself. The final tale works best at integrating the film's desire to connect across the landscape echoes of America's bygone history with the smaller, sadder lives in the present in these same epic spaces. The attraction—like that between the two men in *Old Joy*—of the kind-faced Gladstone to the grouchy Stewart is marvelous in its ambiguity: it is sexual, certainly, but the attraction is also professional, friendly and social. This figure of Montana's past, spending all her time as a ranch hand, encountering this other young American woman, clawing herself up—with remarkable lack of charisma, I might add: Reichardt and Stewart make her character a bit unpleasant, which pays off in a bracing final scene between the two women—is a tenuous but moving connection. That Stewart may eventually turn into Dern's lawyer, for better or for worse, continues the film's quiet engagement of American lives lived not only through specific spaces but through time, and is one of

many subtle nuances evoked by this feature film unexpectedly made of short stories. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more quietly rich, or more obviously beautiful film this year.

I went directly from this quintessential Sundance drama—in the best of ways, the way it used to be—to an exemplary Austrian documentary. I somehow missed ***The Dreamed Ones*** when it premiered at the Berlinale and then played again in New York earlier this year, so I thank the Wavelengths section for re-introducing this fresh and moving take on the epistolary film. It is quite literally a series of epistles: it films the recitations of love (and hate) letters between Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann (read by musician Anja Plaschg) and Romanian poet Paul Celan (read by Laurence Rupp) at a radio station in Vienna. Is this a rehearsal or a performance? Is it drama or is it radio? It is so many things: we encounter the texts that chart a nearly two decades relationship that begins in ecstasy, swerves towards anger and confusion, and back again, beautiful letters that read (as subtitles) with such feeling and nuance. Even if you don't understand the German as it is spoken—I do not—you cannot but be moved by the aural tones of Plaschg and Rupp's readings, which as recitations of joy, yearning, hate and anguish are a success.

But it deepens: since we are watching these two read, we cannot help but take them as acting, as taking on the characters of Ingeborg and Paul. So: we have the experience of the poets reading out loud letters only heard in the heads of their recipients. And we have the cinematic fantasy of seeing glances of one poet's reactions to the letters of the other. Or is it one actor's response, caught with the documentary camera, to another actor's performance? Director Ruth Beckermann includes scenes between the two actors, taking smoking or eating breaks and wandering around Vienna's Funkhaus building, which introduces an additional dynamic, as the two actors' rapport and chemistry in these (supposedly but not necessarily) extra-documentary moments are far different than the emotional force of them as Bachmann and Celan. In

fact, these scenes suggested there could be an even more ambitious film lying within this, twining the poets, the actors, the texts, and the performance into a even deeper knot. But as is, its shading of time and art and love into these performances is already an inspiration and discovery.

After an independent and an art film, it's finally time for some genre filmmaking. Gone are the glory days when Hollywood would identify and poach remarkable foreign (inevitably European) directors, enticing them with greater budgets and production capabilities. France, with its generous co-production financing, cannot compete with Hollywood of the 1930s, but half a decade ago they brought over a spate of our favorite East Asian auteurs to make several great films: Hou Hsiao-hsien (*Flight of the Red Balloon*), Hong Sang-soo (*Night and Day*) and Tsai Ming-liang (*Visage*). Now count Kiyoshi Kurosawa with that number. The Japanese director, best known for a cluster of haunting mysteries that coincided with the J-Horror trend and still conflated with that brief cultural moment, has made ***Daguerrotype***, a haunted house gothic featuring French stars Tahar Rahim and Olivier Gourmet.

Though often creeping towards horror—“thriller” might be more appropriate if his films didn’t move at an unsettling, dreamily stilted pace—Kurosawa has a deft touch at blending genres to hold us, with pleasurable discomfort, at the edge of convention and gradually erode predictability and maximize the uncanny or unexpected. *Daguerrotype* begins replete with convention: We find in a moldering, dilapidated mansion in Paris’s outskirts Stéphane (Gourmet, sporting a mad professor goatee), a mourning photographer fixated on how his old equipment preserves life. His wife has died—under mysterious circumstances—and his distant, doe-eyed daughter Marie (Constance Rousseau) is now taking her place as subject in a posture forced and held by a Cronenbergian apparatus while she awaits the daguerreotype’s long exposure. (The film’s original title translates to "The Secret of the

Dark Room.") Enter the photographer's naive new assistant Jean (Tahar Rahim), who thinks little of his boss's metaphysics or his pretty daughter, passingly notes a door or two in the house that creaks open on its own volition, and is otherwise pleased to find a job in the impoverished suburbs. Thus the elements are in place for something scary: a dead wife, zombie-ish ingenue, and an old house languishing into torpor, all watched over by a philosophical artist crazed with ideas about chemistry and photo-alchemy capturing life.

Yet perhaps inspired by his new surroundings, and developing the tone of his unfairly forgotten, otherworldly romance *Journey to the Shore* (2015), Kurosawa keeps the horror at bay and instead infuses his film with lyrical sensitivity and a wryly developed but nevertheless touching romance reminiscent of *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. Helped by Grégoire Hetzel's score, which grows more lush and *Vertigo*-like after a sinister accident and beguilingly spectral car ride gently intertwines the assistant and the daughter's fates together, *Daguerrotype* gracefully shifts before our eyes from the eerie to the haunted, from fear to obsession. Our surrogate is Jean—with his growing enchantment with Marie and disconnection from reality—and Tahar Rahim's unexpectedly modest, tender performance that remains imperturbable despite the ominous permeating each and every scene.

Doubling down on genre expectations like Stéphane's grand experiments in photo-resurrection or a frantic elopement are not what the film is after. Rather, it sets up its terms early—including tantalizing murmurs of the eco-consciousness and paranoia of the director's great *Charisma* in Marie's awe-filled botany and a subplot conspiracy to buy the mansion and turn it into a development—and then let's us sink into the atmosphere. A seeping swathe of grief, a spooky manor, lonely souls, the discomfort of photography's lifelike aura, and the muted desire to escape inevitable circumstances: all are delicately held by the film conventions. Kurosawa's greatest attribute is his beguiling ability to conjure cinematic

spaces that ache: in their emptiness, their organic decay, their oneiric strangeness, their powerful pull on sensitive souls, impinging their sense of reality. These movies carry the writhing double feeling that either the world is corroding from our presence or that reality's mask is gradually being leeched away—or, somehow, both at once. This is why it's a flush pleasure for *Daguerrotype* and its entropic world to evolve into a forlorn romance, a dream sweet, diaphanous and doomed, dissipating before our eyes.

Warmly,

Danny

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