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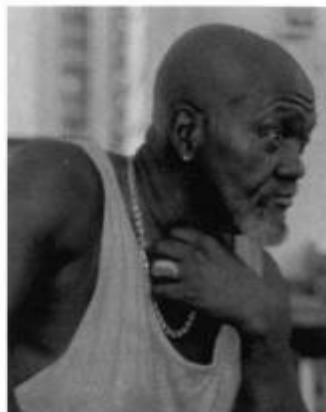
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REVIEWS
 reviews
 by gordon brent INGRAM

Notes from the Vancouver International Film Festival
 September and October 1997.

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Ecuador **Between Marx and a Naked Woman/
 Entre Marx y una mujer desnuda**
 Dir. Camilo Luzuriaga
 Ecuador, 1996. 90 minutes
 Canadian premier

For those with a taste for magic realism, this is a low-budget *Like Water For Chocolate*. Its focus is the Ecuadoran Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) in the period of the military dictatorship in the 1960s. The plot: a sort of revolutionary novel unfolding in the head of a youth while he is working in an organizing cell trying to reach out to the masses in preparation for hoped-for free elections that don't come. The novel in his head is supposed to be some kind of political statement but is constantly veering off into soft (heterosexual) porn. This is cute to a point. Fortunately, the movie is a brilliant period piece with highly memorable scenes of Communist organizers being thrown out of an Indian village and a rock 'n' roll band, à la the Velvet Underground, with black turtle-necks and red banners, being shut down at a party social for being anti-social—to be replaced by the worst lounge music. The scene of the military massacring demonstrators in front of a church puts to shame that sanitized scene of the same kind in *Evita*. There are some detours that made me wince though. There is an anarchist who looks like Jesus and is an alcoholic. Karl

Marx makes a cameo appearance while dressed like a street person. One of the male protagonists whose legs are crippled is shown trying to decide between dumping his gorgeous girlfriend and having his legs amputated. But for every awkward moment there are some charming ones. There is the almost predictable music box playing *The Internationale* while the military ransacks an apartment and mistakenly takes the comple-

cent landladies away to prison, missing the revolutionaries who stand around pretending to be innocent bystanders. *Between Marx and a Naked Women* may well rate as the quirkiest magic realist film from the smallest country at the festival with the smallest budget.

USA **Licensed to Kill**
 Dir. Arthur Dong
 USA 1996. 80 minutes

This is one of the most disturbing documentaries I have seen in a long time and already has won the major prize in the documentary category at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival. The director was bashed nearly twenty years before on the edge of the Castro District in San Francisco and suffers from lingering anxiety around the episode. He sought out five men sentenced for homophobic hate crimes and both interviews them and reconstructs the events around the crimes. The police videos and photographs are grisly. The result deepens profoundly the understanding of homophobic violence and the shifting motives at work. At one point, a closeted, highly religious, well-educated man who, when diagnosed HIV+ went on a killing spree in a Minneapolis park, says that he is not homophobic. He argues that homophobia is based on fear and his motivations were deeper than that—a more profound

loathing. Some of the other men were either closeted or had been raped as boys. All change their stories in the course of their interviews. With such a poor grip on reality, each is motivated by hatred of gay men and lesbians. What is most chilling is the calm quality of "it was a bad day for me so I killed him." There is little remorse for the hatred, just for the carnage and having gotten caught at it. The photographs of the dead victims will stay with you for a long time.

"RE: The Fanon Recovery Industry, this might be worth reviewing—though I was disappointed"

Britain
Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Skin

Dir. Isaac Julien
 Britain, 1996. 70 minutes

The creative team of Isaac Julien and Mark Nash has produced the most lyrical discussion of the legacies of Martinique-born Frantz Fanon. This alone makes the film worthy of viewing. But the pastiche has far too much thrown in to make a coherent statement on any of the many theoretical impacts of the several books written by Fanon just before his untimely death (from leukemia at 36 in 1961). Most problematic is the application of the



Julien / Nash trademark device of mixing actual photographs and interviews with dramatic re-enactments. While it might have worked for Julien's *Looking For Langston*, which was made nearly a decade ago, the treatment falls short on Fanon, whose legacy is unresolved and whose influence on a range of fields has yet to be fully assessed. Julien does not establish his own relationship to Fanon's work, some of which was homophobic. For the producer to be discussing Fanon's contentious theories of race without positioning himself in relation to it, especially as a self-described "snow queen," is highly problematic. This lack of

confrontation with father-figure Fanon makes the film "fluffy" stuff in deed. The operatic singing and piano clanging that come and go (also used in Julien's *The Attendant*) are pure distraction. There are brilliant moments followed by excruciating re-enactments—notably the ones with Simone de Beauvoir. Thankfully Sartre did not show up. The eminent British theoretician Stuart Hall is the bright-eyed muse and his commentaries provide the only real structure for the film. The interviews with Fanon's family are poignant as are those with some former Algerian revolutionary fighters.

"this deserves some B/L recognition""brilliant"
Happy Together / Chunguang Zhaxie

Hong Kong, 1997. 92 minutes

Hong Kong

A sub-genre of queer films, the obsessive love-hate gay male relationship is alive and well in this sultry tale. Call me twisted but I loved this film. I was charmed, nearly even seduced. *Happy Together* starts out with sodomy, aka buttfucking, shot under the worst fluorescent light and recorded on the grainiest of film stock. Who cares that ejaculation occurs after twenty seconds? After the fucking is out of the way, the plot proceeds simply: a handsome young gay male couple from Hong Kong moves to Buenos Aires. There are countless scenes of kissing, tangos—yes male-male dancing, arguing, working at bad jobs, breaking beer bottles, breaking up and searching for each other—often in vain.

Fortunately for both the protagonists and the audience, the only assaults are symbolic in the form of one lover's purposeful hiding of the other's Hong Kong Overseas British passport. If you believe that there is never any resolution to intense relationships like these, this film is for you: a meditation on bitter-sweet loss and misery as the purest form of love and eroticism. Southern Chinese gay male stud culture busts out in the land of the tango, but mind the glass.

"this is a maddening Canadian-gov't funded erasure of homoeroticism"

Regeneration

Dir. Gillies MacKinnon
 Britain / Canada, 1996. 110 minutes

This film is as beautifully crafted as the Pat Barker historical novel on which it was based. "Regeneration" is the story of the partial convalescence from World War I of the real-life poets Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen in Craiglockart Military Hospital in Edinburgh. But Sassoon is not really "ill" except in the sense of being sick of war. His denunciation of the British government and its complicity in prolonging the carnage landed him in what amounts to the country club military hospital for "public school fools." Sassoon bonds with Owen (played by the stunningly handsome Stuart Bunce) who is much more damaged by the war and develops a strained friendship with military doctor William Rivers. The pro-war doctor's

Britain / Canada

relatively humanist therapies are at odds with the prevailing trends such as electro-therapy. Sometimes coming off as too rich a period piece, the superb cinematography of architecture and landscape, not to mention handsome men's faces—these talking heads will turn heads—is, fortunately, equal to the acting. The fragments of morbid poetry are beautiful, in part due to their understatement, though the soundtrack is a bit heavy. Sadly, the undoubted homoeroticism of the participants is nearly completely

stay erect long enough, has promised himself to the queen dancer of the neighbourhood rave scene. But the love story is barely developed. *Clubbed to Death* is painfully predictable; the film reproduces the worst aspects of orientalism and places them in the contemporary rave scene. There is a white-centred voyeurism that makes the film highly suspect. This film has that painful combination of a weak story line with a brilliant soundtrack.



"relevant to discussions of queer Chinese mainland and diaspora culture"
East Palace, West Palace / Dong Gong, Xi Gong
 Dir. Zhang Yuan
 China / France, 1996, 94 minutes

This variation on the hunter being captured by the prey may well be one of the more influential films of this decade on homosexuality, sadomasochism and drag. *East Palace, West Palace* is an awesome breakthrough for Chinese cinema. Set in a series of imperial parks in central Beijing that see a lot of gay male cruising at night, a young writer is singled out by a guard. After a few run-ins with this one officer, the young man sets himself up to be detained—those handcuffs please!—where he taunts the increasingly interested guard through divulging his personal history and sex life. This film explores the links between state power and

removed from the narrative except for some unbearably steamy movements. Such historical censure is embarrassing in the 1990s especially given Sassoon's well-celebrated bisexuality. For there not to have even been a serious hug or a kiss between those men, rescuing each other from their post-war deliria in the privacy of the hospital grounds, was a painful and inaccurate omission. The trench warfare scenes were highly realistic, though, and will cause nightmares.

"this film is fucked up and neocolonial and may be important to discuss in terms of resurgence of such perspectives in European film"

Clubbed To Death

Dir. Yolande Zauberman
 France, 1996, 90 minutes

France

The centre and the periphery collide in this painfully predictable first world / third world melodrama set on the outskirts of Paris. A white, teenage virgin falls asleep on the bus while going home after a party in central Paris to wake up in the nether world of African and Middle Eastern rave culture. Like Alice in Wonderland, she takes a pill, starts tripping and ends up in the arms of an impotent boxer/junkie, yes—more or less and that order, who, if he can ever

sadomasochism in a way that few would ever dare—especially in China, of all countries. With lean dialogue and steamy scenes galore (though no sex), the cinematography is powerful in juxtaposing the architectural spaces of the Manchu, nationalist, revolutionary and current state capitalist periods. In the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Beijing was one of the most erotically tolerant cities and had some of the densest enclaves of homosexuality in the world. Today, while homosexuality is not illegal per se, many gay men and lesbians are repeatedly arrested for hooliganism, especially around public sex, and repeat offenders in some areas receive long prison and even death sentences. There are some subtle statements at work about the resonance of the former tolerance of homosexuality invoked through the traditional palace architecture. This marvelous film will change the face both of Chinese and gay films. ■

China / France