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Indelible Images: 2008 Tribeca Film Festival Wrap

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Although it is tempting, it is actually quite difficult to take a diverse event as the **Tribeca Film Festival** and tie its themes or influences into one neat bow. Film festivals are, after all, about diversity and multiplicity of voices. While the programmers of the event certainly have an overall picture of how the films interact with one another, oftentimes the influences are not that clearly on the surface, and only become revealed days after their initial, sometimes accidental, pairing. There is also the confusing sense that as a member of the Press, my Tribeca viewing experiences were largely sans audience, at specially scheduled Press and Industry Screenings, filled with blasé reviewers and industry mavens.



Among the predominant themes that one could see from the vast program of 120 films from around the world was the continued vitality of what has been classified as the “coming-of-age” film. This theme seems to be one that never runs its course and is an acknowledged favorite of new directors who draw upon semi-autobiographical themes that have played out in their own lives.

That magical and transitional time when a young child forever leaves behind the innocence and certainty of youth for an adulthood where the predominant color is gray (not black nor white) makes for dramatic filmmaking and has a built-in resonance for many audiences. At this year’s event, these themes were played out in a number of excellent films. In the comic saga **BART GOT A ROOM**, American director Brian Hecker offers a colorful and quirky comedy about a young man’s panic when he doesn’t yet have a date for his high school prom. With the help of his wacky parents (played by William H. Macy and Cheryl Hines) and

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a plain-Jane best friend, the young man learns important life lessons as he steps into the role of neurotic adult.

A quirky narrative style is also at play in the film **BITTER & TWISTED** by debut director Christopher Weekes. In this drama of longing and loss, a young man dies and the film flashes forward three years to assess the toll it took on his parents, brother, and ex-girlfriend. A similar atmosphere of loss and redemption is played out in **LOST INDULGENCE**, a visually stunning meditation on loss by Chinese director Zhang Yibai. A sense of loneliness and alienation also pervades the French film **CHARLY** by Isild Le Besco. In this intimate story, a 14 year old boy crosses paths with a tough girl named Charly, who takes him into her mobile home, where an unusual domestic arrangement evolves. The transition from innocence to knowingness is also the theme of the feature documentary **GOING ON 13**, which follows a group of young girls as they navigate the precarious path to womanhood.

In the Best Picture-winning film **LET THE RIGHT ONE IN**, Swedish director Tomas Alfredson mixes the classic elements of the coming-of-age story with an usual macabre touch, in his story of the budding romance between a 12 year old boy and his next door neighbor Eli, who also happens to be a vampire. This is a seductive and surreal adaptation of a best-selling novel that turns the conventions of the standard coming-of-age drama on its ear. The same can be said of the drama **NEWCASTLE**, directed by Dan Castle, a former distributor-turned-director. In this unusual film, a 17 year old surfer treads the line between success and self-destruction as he experiences love and eroticism as if no one had encountered them before.

Sometimes the most likely of people have the most to teach us. Such is the case in the cross-cultural drama **SOMERS TOWN** by UK director Shane Meadows. The film, set in the working class milieu of North London, chronicles the unlikely friendship between Tomo, a troubled young man from the British Midlands, and Marek, a Polish immigrant who lives with his construction worker dad. The tensions of puberty and the dynamics of the "new England of immigrants" merge into a provocative story that won its lead actors the Best Actor prize at the Festival. A similar attraction of opposites occurs in the feature film **WORLDS APART** by Niels Arden Oplev. In this enigmatic drama, the world of a dutiful daughter and Jehovah's Witness unravels when she falls for a nonbeliever.

In fact, sexual politics was another recurring theme in a number of excellent films at this year's Festival. In **FINDING AMANDA** by director Peter Tolan, a successful television writer (played by Matthew Broderick) struggles with addictions to gambling and drugs, and finds himself traveling to Las Vegas to convince his troubled niece (Brittany Snow) to go to rehab. The mix of irreverent behavior and family issues skirts the tension between the genders over what is acceptable in a man that is considered unacceptable in a woman. Similar meditation over what are the traditional roles of men and women is just one of the sub-texts of **GUEST OF CINDY SHERMAN**, a dishy documentary about a public access videographer who must confront his own ego and identity when he becomes the partner of the successful photographer Cindy Sherman. Aside from offering an entertaining and revealing look at the art world, the film makes clear that role reversals between men and women can be the ticking bomb to destabilize a relationship, even when one's anxieties about it are not completely "politically correct".

Lines are definitely crossed in the daring narrative film **SAVAGE GRACE**, which represents a comeback from innovative "new queer cinema" director Tom Kalin. Based on a true story, a young man and his manic-depressive mother (played with divine despair by Julianne Moore)

form an unusual frank and frankly erotic bond that is tragically dysfunctional. When love and commitment overstep traditional boundaries of behavior, the results are perversely tragic if fascinating to watch. The thin line between pain and pleasure is also explored in the short documentary **TALE OF TWO BONDAGE MODELS**, where Lorelei Lee and Princess Donna (not their real names, I am sure) reveal the erotic pleasures of submission (for a fee, natch).

In the enigmatic and sensual **LOVE, PAIN & VICE VERSA**, Mexican director Alfonso Pineda-Ulloa looks at the twin sides of erotic dreams. A man and a woman are inextricably linked when their recurring dreams (that range from mutual pleasure to violent death) begin to topple their reality. The woman becomes obsessed with literally finding the "man of her dreams", while the same man is haunted by a nightmare where he is stalked and eventually murdered...by this same woman. This cat-and-mouse game features strong performances by the sizzling Bárbara Mori and the leonine Leonardo Sbaraglia.

What usually follows eroticism in film is explicit violence. This year, the **Tribeca Film Festival** did not shy away from depictions that represent the violence gone amuck on the world stage. In **DYING BREED**, director Jody Dwyer spins a macabre tale inspired by the legends of a 19th-century cannibal and an extinct tiger. In this brutal horror-thriller, four friends find out that something--or someone--more murderous than a tiger lurks in the rain-slogged Australian bush. Violence also takes on a supernatural bent in the thriller **FROM WITHIN** by director Phedon Papamichael. Set in a small extremist evangelical town, a series of serial suicides sets the stage for paranoia run amuck, where evil is everywhere but also impossible to be found. In **THE WILD MAN OF THE NAVIDAD**, co-directors Justin Meeks and Duane Graves offer a claustrophobic thriller based on real-life memoirs. This retelling of an old urban legend, shot in a '70s-style B movie aesthetic, focuses on a Texas community terrified by a mysterious creature inhabiting the nearby woods. Horror mixes with comedy in the satirical **KILLER MOVIE** by Jeff Fisher. In this slasher satire, a reality television director copes with a spoiled celebute and a show gone haywire when a masked killer starts bumping off the crew.

The violence is more serious and viscerally real in **ELITE SQUAD**, the Berlin Film Festival hit by Brazilian director José Padilha. One of the most controversial films in a long time, **ELITE SQUAD** takes a searing look at the corrupt practices of the special police force in the slums of Rio. The film is gritty and harrowing, ending in a crescendo of transgressive violence that is difficult to watch (and impossible to turn away from). This same realism underpins the violent story in the feature film **SEVEN DAYS SUNDAY**, based on actual events. In this arresting film, German director Niels Laupert tells the tale of two teenage dropouts who pass their days hanging out and drinking. As the grinding boredom combines with a mix of security and latent sadism, the two young men make a bet that plunges them into violence.

The above only touches the surface of the many kinds of films that were featured in the past ten days of the **Tribeca Film Festival**. With luck, many of them will find full-on distribution and be available for audiences to discover at their local multiplexes. If that doesn't happen, look for many of the above titles on cutting-edge cable networks like the **Independent Film Channel** or the **Sundance Channel**, or seek out your local "alternative" video store that prides itself on discovering "lost films that fall between the cracks". That is the great gift that a wide-ranging festival such as Tribeca offers....a chance to catch quirky and individualistic films that bend the genres and launch careers. Hats off, Tribeca programmers.....you were courageous in your program choices and offered images and stories that continue to haunt days after they've been

seen.

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