

PREFACE

CINEMA NOW

by **Andy Bailey**

One of the great ‘movie’ movies of the last decade is Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-Liang’s *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003). A romantic rumination on the dying art of moviegoing, it is set on the closing night of a cavernous old Taipei movie palace where the 1966 King Hu swordplay classic *Dragon Inn* unspools to a smattering of patrons. Ghosts and the living alike prowl the aisles and restrooms in search of human connection. Hu’s *Dragon Inn* remains immortal thanks to the likes of Quentin Tarantino and Ang Lee, who have fetishized it for international audiences in the form of *Kill Bill* Volumes 1 and 2 (2003, 2004), and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). These latter movies briefly enchanted audiences on multiplex screens, before quickly settling into permanent residency on cable and DVD, to be enjoyed anew in the digital home.

As for Tsai’s haunting gem, finding an audience in this day and age isn’t so simple. I was lucky to see *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* on a screen in the cavernous basement multiplex of a Pasadena shopping mall on the last day of its Los Angeles theatrical engagement, with a midweek matinee audience of myself and a pair of dowagers (who were asleep at the twenty-minute mark). I don’t think I could have enjoyed it any more than I did, not that this bodes well for the future exhibition of Tsai’s films in my country. One year later, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*’s North American distributor, Wellspring, shuttered its New York-based theatrical division, ending an era of art films in America.

The truth is that when it comes to territories and distribution rights, the only profitable outlet for a small company releasing foreign and art films lies in ancillary markets like DVD — which is how most people in the world will discover the majority of the works described in this book, including *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*.

The experience of seeing films on the home screen is not altogether a bad thing. It is easier to be intimate with a movie on one’s own, like reading a book, which is why the emergence of the so-called “fourth screen,” bringing together the once-separate worlds of movies, television, and personal computers, is transforming the entertainment business. Today’s affordable high-definition television sets with state-of-the-art surround sound mean picture quality at home is sharp and clear, and sound is often better because you are not disturbed by crunching popcorn, nattering patrons, and mobile phones.

With competition for discretionary income at its most frenzied, with Internet surfing, video games (increasingly cinematic and narrative-driven) and other media competing with theatrical motion pictures for the global attention span, with the online blogosphere diluting the value of film criticism via egalitarian prognostication by rank amateur critics, how does the discriminating cineaste determine whether or not a film is worth seeing?

Film culture has always promoted the beautiful and talented celebrity faces on the screen. But up until the mid-1970s the print media also gave space to the budding auteurs *behind* the camera, making mavericks like Terrence Malick and the late, great Robert Altman as celebrated as their films. Since then, celebrity gossip, box-office figures for the latest blockbuster film and awards-season prognostication have driven movie news, regardless of the quality of

the films or their place in society. The auteurs have had to find alternative means of promotion, embracing the digital datastream of the Internet, where the next wave of film culture thrives.

Some serious academic film magazines survive, including *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Sight and Sound* and *Film Comment*. Each of these publications now routinely features major celebrities on its covers, which still pushing an art-house agenda. Youthful upstarts made in their image, like Canada's quarterly *CinemaScope* — the print publication du jour that best represents the aims of the *Cahiers* generation — struggle to compete with frequently updated movie blogs organized like magazines, containing in-depth features and late-breaking news within the same publication. Who wants to wait for a Cannes recap in *Film Comment* when you can get your information instantly?

More than ever (and for better or worse) it is Internet bloggers who drive film culture, breaking new names and heralding hot titles months in advance of their film festival premieres or theatrical and DVD releases. Bloggers like Todd Brown, at his *Twitch* website, cultivate instant word of mouth for new films and filmmakers in every corner of the world. *Twitch* introduced Russian upstart Pavel Ruminov to film fanatics in their living rooms. Ruminov's brilliant Internet marketing campaign for his baroque Russian horror film *Dead Daughters* (2006) includes a series of web-only teasers that created an eerie mythology for the film months before it entered post-production.

What today's cinephile requires is a filter system to help distill the valuable from the passable and the downright useless. In *Cinema Now* we present the recent works of international filmmakers we think are among the most exciting in the world today. Enamored as we are of the art of film and its contribution to film culture over the years, we've made a selection that speaks both to the general moviegoer and the discerning cinephile. We love a decent genre movie like Neil Marshall's *The Descent* (2005) — and *The Descent* is as artful as popular filmmaking gets — as much as we admire the latest uncompromising work of an auteur working with Hollywood money, like Alexander Payne, Spike Jonze and David O. Russell, the heirs to the maverick American filmmakers of the 1970s.

We also have a soft spot for the international underdog whose primary means of discovery remains film festival premieres and the DVD market, which is why we're pleased to include in *Cinema Now* a few names you've probably never heard of before, including Portugal's João Pedro Rodrigues, Hungary's György Pálfi, Thailand's Apichatpong Weerasethakul and the aforementioned Tsai Ming-liang, whose follow-ups to *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, the outrageously inventive comedy-musical *The Wayward Cloud* (2004) and *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006) were both criminally undistributed in many parts of the world, including North America.

One drawback in putting together a book like this is that no matter how many people you want to include, there are always another hundred or more terrific directors who we couldn't reach, or were too busy filming, or were separated from us by language barriers. If you think you belong in future editions of the book, email us at cinemanow@taschen.com and we'll see if Mr. Taschen will be kind enough to let us do another volume.

Until then, dive in and enjoy the myriad works of sixty great directors working around the world right now.

— Andrew Bailey, January 8, 2006, San Francisco, California.