

Cine-Journal

Ruminations of a working film critic

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It's Not How Long You Make It

Long time between drinks, as the joke goes. I wish I had some plausible explanation for this long silence, something medical or work-related, preferably involving a secret mission overseas. Unfortunately, the simple fact is I'm a lazy SOB and just couldn't drag myself to the keyboard. (Or something like that.)

One of the most unfortunate by-products of that long silence is that one of the best programs of films that I have seen in this already excellent year may evade your glance. I'm referring to "*L'Origine de la Tendresse*" and *Other Tales*, a program of recent French short films that played all too briefly at the Cinema Village here in New York City. For once, you are in better shape if you're outside the (Baked) Apple, because The World According to Shorts, the good people who distribute this program, have numerous dates planned elsewhere (which can be found [here](#)). As to the films themselves, there are a half-dozen films, all by directors whose names are new to me:

- "Penpusher" by Guillaume Martinez is a smart, cute quickie (8 minutes) that pulls off a nice little meet-cute on the Metro. It's just as long as it needs to be and gives a great argument in favor of reading books during your commute.
- "My Mother: The Story of an Immigration," directed by Felipe Canales, using the photographs and narration of Farida Hamak, is a quietly understated black-and-white study of Hamak's family, particularly her mother, and the trials of emigration from Algeria to France. Her mother's final triumph is particularly satisfying as we move into an election season in which it looks to be open season on immigrants.
- "One Voice, One Vote" by Jeanne Paturle and Cecile Rousset, is certainly timely viewing here in the States (speaking of election season). Based on a series of interviews with ordinary voters during last year's French elections, this charming animated short offers a look at two contrasting people-in-the-streets, a gentle activist and a disillusioned non-participant, both of whom allow, at the end, that they could learn something from one another.
- "The Last Day" by Olivier Bourbeillon is a 12-minute glimpse of the last day at a Brest shipbuilding company, as experienced by the only remaining employees. It is at once lyrical and incisive, a paean to the old industrial world and an analysis of the ongoing ill-effects of globalization.
- "L'Origine de la Tendresse" by Alain-Paul Mallard is the centerpiece of the collection, a half-hour-long study of Elise, a museum attendant to whom nothing much happens. Mallard uses a dryly humorous deadpan, somewhere between Tati and Bresson but even less demonstrative, to construct a sweetly, gently goofy portrait of loneliness and the resourcefulness of at least one person who suffers from it.
- "Kitchen" by Alice Winocour is the only film in the package with an identifiably familiar face, actress Elina Lowensohn; she plays the ungrudging but put-upon wife of an upper middle-class professional, who is confronted with his request for a fancy lobster dish for dinner. The film quickly turns into a superb variation on the age-old struggle between woman and crustaceans,

with a nod to Joe Dante's *Gremlins* and a climactic gag that is the single funniest thing I've seen all year.

Each of these films is a small gem. Even the weakest (I would say, "My Mother," although it stands up quite nicely) is well worth a look. In short, the entire program is a vivid reminder that you don't have to make a three-hour film to say something intelligent. And the folks at The World According to Shorts are to be applauded and thanked for trying to get audiences to take the short film more seriously.

I promise, I swear, I affirm that it won't be three weeks before I post again. In fact, I can tell you right now, that in the next day or two I'll have some things to say about the great Japanese actor Tatsuya Nakadai, the subject of a long-overdue retrospective at Film Forum, a wonderful if somewhat baffling new film by Pere Portabella at MoMA, and the latest from Fatih Akin, one of the several rising talents coming out of the Turkish film industry. (And I'll probably throw in some random observations about Euro 2008 -- Go Holland!!!)