



More from Tribeca: Jia Zhangke's breathtaking "Still Life"; a serial killer in Beirut; a tender look back at '80s England (and its racist skinheads)

Most of the attention devoted to the [Tribeca Film Festival](#), mine included, tends to focus on its air of Manhattanite insiderism and its array of quasi-glitzy premieres. This makes for lots of celeb sightings and moderately juicy copy, but also for evenings spent sitting through some profoundly mediocre motion pictures. But Tribeca also programs a passel of outstanding foreign films from all over the globe, and for some of them it'll be the one and only chance for paying American customers to see them on the big screen. I mean, I certainly hope that "The Optimists," the newest film from the great Serbian director Goran Paskaljevic, finds American distribution. But I'm not planning to go on a hunger strike while we're waiting.

I haven't seen "The Optimists" yet, or "Two in One," the film-within-a-film by the supremely mean Russian filmmaker Kira Muratova, or "Born and Bred" by Pablo Trapero, one of the hottest young Argentine directors. They're on my list as Tribeca winds down, and God knows if or when they'll ever be seen again after that (yes, even on Netflix or GreenCine). With the market for non-European films as weak as it is right now, I can't even be sure we'll get to see "Still Life," the stark and beautiful new drama from China's Jia Zhangke, one of the world's most celebrated directors. (It premiered at Tribeca on Wednesday night.)

Jia has always been interested in the dislocation of contemporary Chinese existence (his last film was "[The World](#)," set at a theme park outside Beijing), but as his movies have gradually broadened in scope they've also developed a current of wry comedy and even tenderness. "Still Life" is set in the extraordinary landscape around Fengjie, a small city on the Yangtze River that's being demolished and moved to make way for the rising waters of the Three Gorges dam, the largest such project in the world. In this end-of-the-world setting, life goes on after its fashion; in two parallel narratives Jia follows a working-class man and middle-class woman who have come to Fengjie to find their respective missing spouses.

One critic friend of mine has suggested that "Still Life" is a comedy of sorts, and he may be right. The missing husband and wife are found, after much effort, but their presence doesn't really resolve anything. Instead, the story moves forward as a series of remarkable images and tiny human encounters, almost meaningless in themselves. A man and woman dance on a riverfront promenade that will soon be submerged; another man does bad impressions of Chow Yun-Fat movie dialogue. In between workdays spent destroying their own city, demolition crews drink, stage fights with each other, wax rhapsodic about the beautiful Chinese scenery (as seen on banknotes).

It would be too easy to describe Jia's tone as ironic; it can be wistful or whimsical or deliberately obscure (I'm not sure what the spaceships are doing in this otherwise naturalistic film, frankly). One thing I'm confident about is that one viewing is not enough to absorb "Still Life." It strikes me as Jia's finest film yet, both a docudrama with obvious social and historical relevance and a subtle, slow, quietly powerful chronicle of human loss. It never seems inaccessible or willfully arty, but it won't yield all its secrets on the first date.

My favorite film of the whole festival so far, Ghassan Salhab's "The Last Man," is also composed of a myriad of small and enigmatic moments, but undoubtedly would strike some viewers as unbearably pretentious. If I tell you it's a serial-killer movie set in Beirut, that's accurate but conveys entirely the wrong impression. It's not a thriller but rather a slow, intimate psychological-nightmare film, both allegorical and symbolic.

Khalil, an upper-middle-class Lebanese doctor (played by the great Arab actor Carlos Chahine), feels some strange, unexplained connection to the serial murders; in fact his personality seems to be melting down. He has blackouts, seizures, spells of temporary deafness. He sees troubling things while scuba diving in the brilliant blue sea. His lovely city seems to be inhabited by ghosts and shadows, and Khalil himself may be among them. It's definitely not coincidental that Beirut is being bombed daily by Israeli planes and boats (during the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah), and life in the elegant Mediterranean metropolis feels once again on the brink of chaos.

If you have the patience to feel completely haunted and bewildered -- but haunted and bewildered in the hands of a master filmmaker, albeit one almost unknown in the West -- then "The Last Man" is an exhilarating cinematic experience. Much cozier, but nearly as potent a portrait of a society in decay, is Shane Meadows' "[This Is England](#)," an intimate memory film about a lonely, undersized boy who finds a home amid an ominous group of skinheads in the grimy, underemployed north of England, circa 1983.

Meadows ("Once Upon a Time in the Midlands") is a self-taught filmmaker in the working-class mode that produced Mike Leigh and Ken Loach, but with his own late-Thatcher worldview and an intimate, insider's understanding of post-punk British culture. Even the scariest, most thuggish of these skins, the racist ex-convict named Combo (marvelously played by Stephen Graham), is not a caricature. He's a wounded man on the edge of middle age who feels abandoned by his country and his family, with a tender side he opens only to 12-year-old Shaun (Thomas Turgoose). Combo's surrogate-dad love for Shaun is genuine, even if his expressions of it -- like joint outings to terrorize Pakistani shopkeepers -- leave something to be desired.