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NFESTIVAL
INTERNATIONAL
DU FILMN
E
S72^e FESTIVAL DE CANNES
14 – 25 MAI 2019

CANNES

THIS CANNES THAT WAS

LATHA MENON REMINISCES THE TRIUMPH OF WOMEN FILMMAKERS AT THE RECENTLY CONCLUDED **72ND CANNES FILM FESTIVAL** AND GIVES US A FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNT OF THE MUCH-CELEBRATED FILM FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE...

*Until the lion learns how to write,
every story will glorify the hunter...*

I might tweak this proverb to read 'direct' rather than 'write' and 'lioness' instead of 'lion'.

At the 72nd edition of the *Cannes Film Festival*, female directors were showcased in the main competition. These include *Atlantique* by Mati Diop, *Little Joe* by Jessica Hausner, *Sibyl* by Justine Triet, *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* by Céline Sciamma. Out of the 47 official films selected, 13 were by female directors, a record previously set in 2011. It's been long overdue, but it's taken over seven decades for the Cannes Film festival to finally highlight female directors.

A year ago, 82 women protested about the lack of representation of female filmmakers. Cannes, the premier film festival, trails behind in female representation, as opposed to the *Sundance Film Festival*, where women directed 46% of the competitive films, or the *Berlin Film Festival* where they directed 40% of the competition titles.

Thierry Fremaux, artistic director of the *Cannes Film Festival*, while addressing reporters on the eve of the *72nd Cannes Film Festival*, lauded the festival's progress in gender equality. He was also fatigued that *Cannes* is expected to be 'perfect'. The legend of *Cannes*, he added, was about universal artists and about the world and not only about French or American cinema.

The official poster for the festival pays tribute to the French filmmaker, Agnes Varda, who was the only woman amongst a group of male pioneers that led the French new wave film movement. The poster features Agnes Varda on the shoulders of

THIERRY FREMAUX



a film technician; totally immersed in the shot she's taking for her film, *La Pointe Courte*. Agnes, who often repeated, "I am not a female director, I am a woman and I am a director," believed a film should never be picked up because a woman directed it, but because it earned the right to be there.

This is my third year of attending the festival, but when I first attended it in 2017, Agnes Varda was alive and I had the privilege of watching her documentary that premiered at *Cannes*. The documentary *Faces Places* at the age of 88 was about her partnership with the photographer and installation artist JR, who was present this year at the premier of his longtime collaborator Ladj Ly's debut feature *Les Misérables*. *Faces Places* also earned an Oscar nomination. It was an enchanting documentary, which like the rest of her work, was full of creativity and openness.

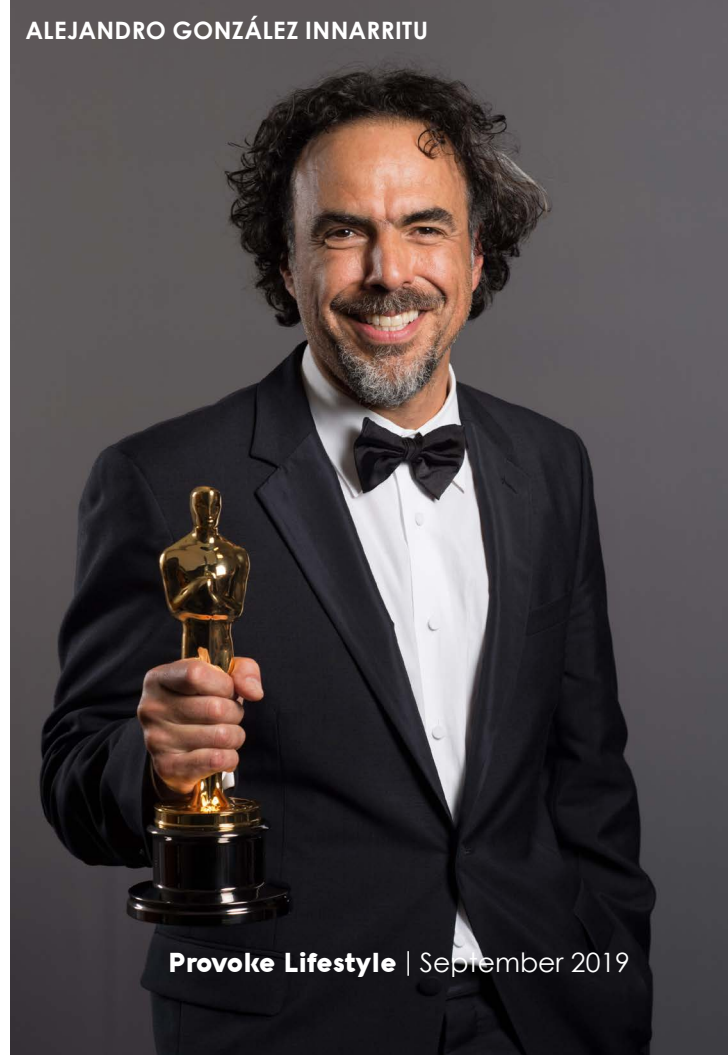
The invitation-only film festival had Mexican filmmaker Alejandro González Innarritu as jury president. I was secretly hoping I'd bump into him on the road, as I was walking down the city's yacht-lined harbor. It was a possibility, as this festival has an intimate setting, even though it is bustling with glamour, red carpets, photo-ops, journalists et al. The air of the festival is what you breathe, eat and deliberate about, for 10 days. This year's line up revealed an inclusive climate for filmmakers and technicians of different genders, races, creeds and sexualities. The festival staged a comeback of sorts, going by the whispers around, as the 'unparalleled place' in the world to celebrate cinema.

Social realism was a theme of many of the selections; the language of the narrative though were multiple. From Ken Loach's *Sorry, We Missed You* in the style of his previous 2016, film *I, Daniel Blake* to *Atlantique* a debut directorial feature from Mati Diop (the first black female director accepted in the competition line-up) which won the *Grand Prix* for her imaginative use of the supernatural to deal with real issues of poverty and social injustice. Another film I had the opportunity to watch was *Bacurau* directed by Kleber Mendonca Filho and Juliano Dornelles, that won the *Cannes* jury prize (which they shared with *Les Misérables*), for portraying a bloody commentary on Brazil's unscrupulous affairs of state using sci-fi imagery, a troop of armed foreign mercenaries, and a village under siege. *Les Misérables* was a drama that gives a deep insight into one of France's socially deprived areas, Montfermeil, the place that inspired Victor Hugo's 19th century classic, where a century later the same social misery continues to exist.

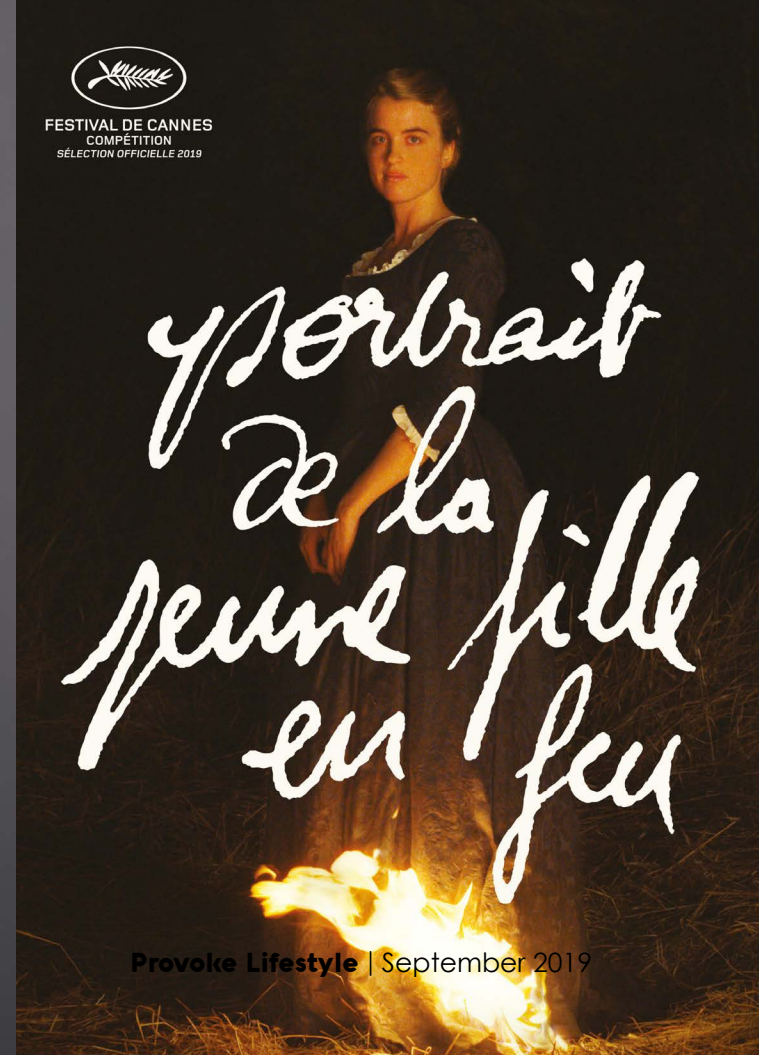
Exciting new filmmakers like Céline Sciamma, whose tender film *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* a historical romantic drama set in 18th century Brittany, where the protagonist plays a reluctant bride-to-be who develops a relationship with the female artist commissioned to paint her portrait for matrimonial alliances, won the Queer Palm at *Cannes*, becoming the first female director to win this award. She also won the screenplay award at *Cannes*. She is known for her keen gender explorations, gender equity in the film industry, and calls this film a love story as epic as *Titanic*. I vividly recall the protagonist say at one point in the film, "the pleasurable feeling of equality," as to why she stayed on in the girls' convent.

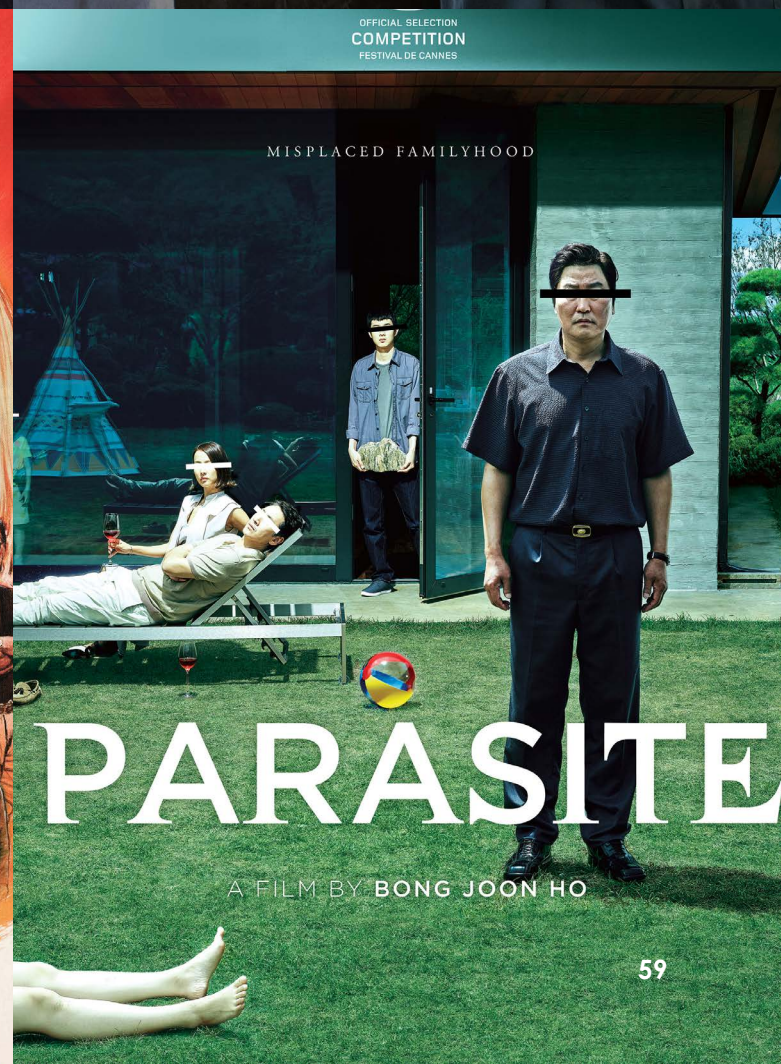
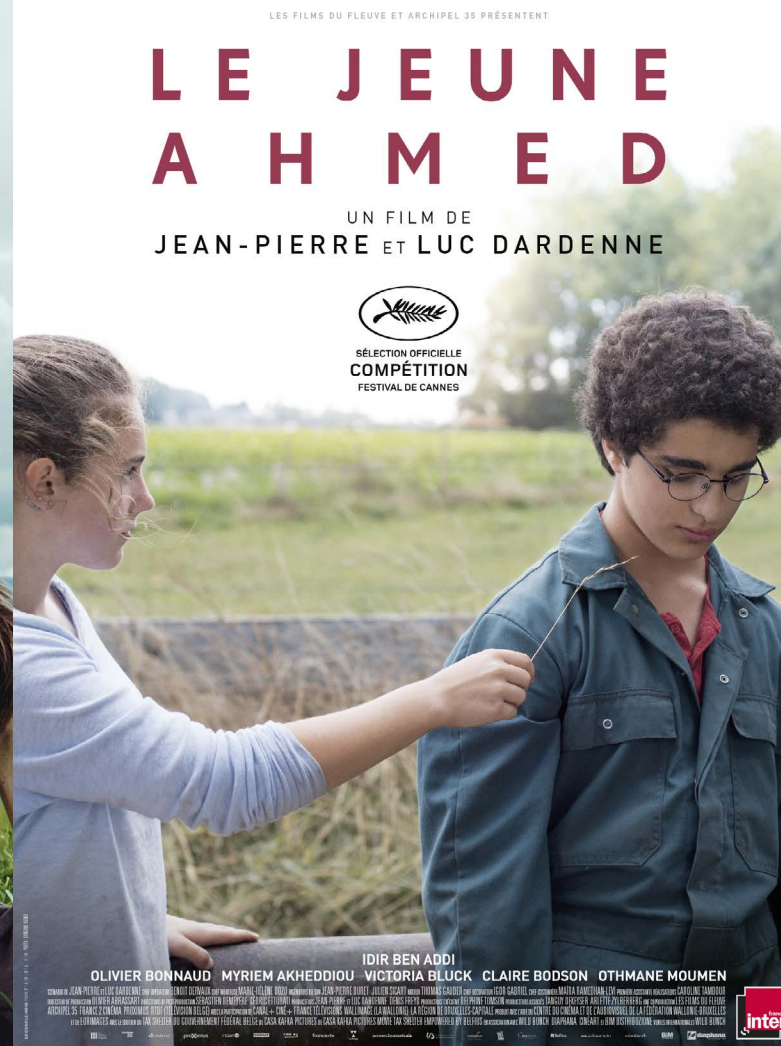
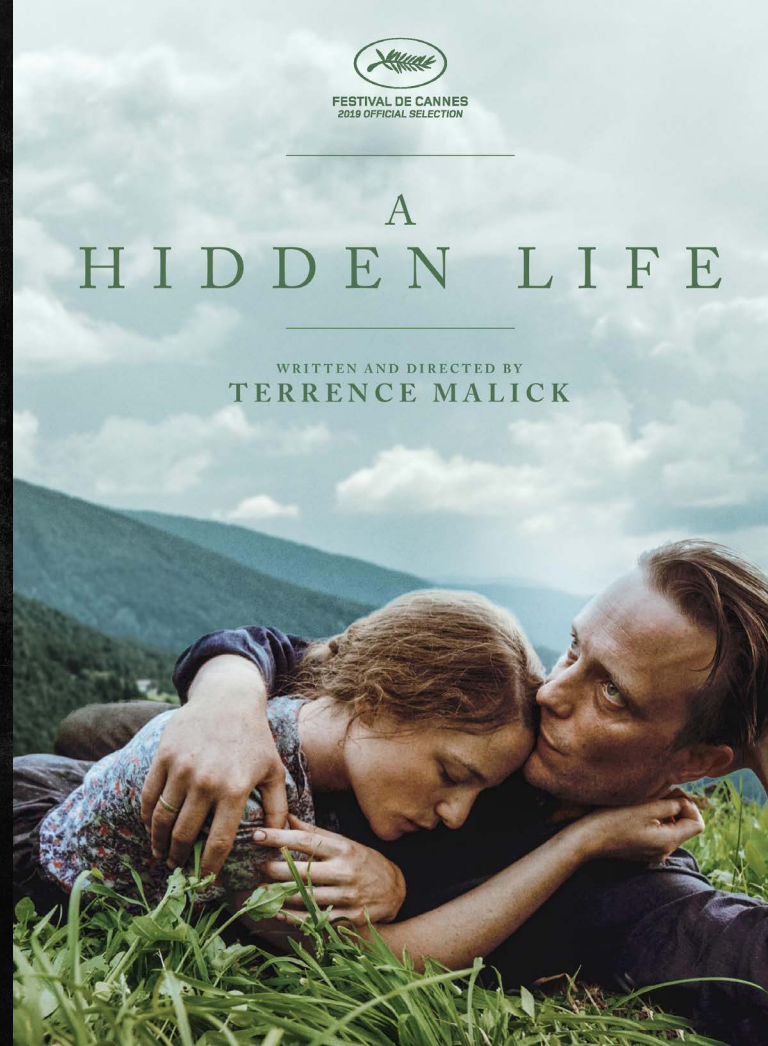


AGNES VARDA



ALEJANDRO GONZÁLEZ INNARRITU






Apart from the fact that women directed both *Atlantique* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* the other common feature the films shared was the presence of French cinematographer Claire Mathon. These were arguably among the best-shot films at *Cannes* this year and one couldn't believe that it was the same cinematographer. Her visuals evoked contrasting emotions from each of the films, and her versatility is awe-inspiring.

Of course, there were also the Hollywood directors, from Jim Jarmusch's opening film, a zombie comedy *The Dead Don't Die* as well as Terence Malik's three-hour film *A Hidden Life* to Quentin Tarantino's highly anticipated *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*. Not to forget Spanish director Pedro Almodovar's intensely personal film *Dolor y Gloria* (Pain & Glory) which won the *Cannes* Best Actor award for its charismatic leading man, Antonio Banderas, who essayed the role of an ageing filmmaker, caught between his realistic and fictional worlds. The *Cannes* Best Actress award went to English actress Emily Beecham (best known for her work in *Hail Caesar!*) for her role as a scientist that breeds a genetically engineered plant whose seeds when scattered causes astonishing changes on human beings in the film *Little Joe*. The Belgian filmmaking duo, the Dardennes brothers, known for their emotional dramas (mostly) about the working class, took home the *Cannes* Best Director award for their work in *Le Jeune Ahmed* a coming of age tale of a teenage terrorist. Special mention was made to Palestinian director Elia Suleiman's *It Must Be Heaven* a series of snapshots that capture the absurdities of the protagonist's daily life both at home and abroad.

Of course, I'm yet to share the experience of the film that won everyone's heart unanimously. The social satire, woven like a black comedy that touches upon aspirations, class, senses and desperation. A film that made the 2,300 strong audience at Grand Lumiere break into laughter at the darkly comic scenes, and that was unique. Bong Joon Ho succeeded in the merging of art house sensibilities with a well-designed story. His *Parasite* won the Palm d'Or the highest prize awarded at *Cannes*, making him the first Korean to win it. There were no hums and haws as everyone agreed it was the 'one.' (This follows last year's win that was awarded to the moving drama *Shoplifters* from Japan.). The jury president Alejandro Innarritu spoke at the post-ceremony press conference, and I roughly quote him, "Art can sometimes see the future... I think that now cinema has an urgency of social consciousness expressed by different people around the world."

Before I signed off, I kept cheering on for the three female filmmakers, (whom I mentioned earlier in the article), whose films were in the competition, and had won big. 

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CLAIRE MATHON



RAJIV & LATHA MENON AT CANNES



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