CAL Global Film Series Offers Diverse Features

As part of the 50th Anniversary celebration during the winter/spring term, The College of Arts & Letters created a Global Film Series comprising three films recommended for the series by faculty, one each from Germany, Italy and Taiwan. They included in order of screening schedule:

ABENDLAND – A German documentary observing Europe at night, “Abendland” literally translates as “evening land.” Under the cover of darkness, the film’s Austrian director, Nikolaus Geyrhalter, shows us that people not only sleep, they work, play, are born and die. Professor Elizabeth Mittman, Department of Linguistics, and Germanic, Slavic, Asian and African Languages, hosted an audience question-and-answer session following the film.

Geyrhalter recorded 170 hours of material over a 14-month period showing scenes that document what is happening while most people sleep. A few examples: an undertaker’s staff sorts metal urns after cremation; a nurse attends to a premature baby in an incubator; security staff watch a city’s citizenry via closed-circuit street cameras; police use video as they practice shooting in dangerous situations; attendees at the Munich Bierfest dance and drink; and we join a Guardia Civil patrol of the shining, brightly lit triple fence around Ceuta, Spain. The film concludes at a rave in a stadium.

MEDITERRANEO – (Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, 1991) Location: the Mediterranean Sea, World War II. A handful of Italian soldiers are put ashore on a small Greek island. Their mission is to spot enemy ships and hold the island in case of attack. The island’s village seems largely abandoned and there isn’t an enemy in sight, so the soldiers begin to relax a little. But, the atmosphere changes when they see their ship hit and destroyed by the enemy, and the soldiers realize they are abandoned on the island. Soon, the soldiers also discover that the island isn’t deserted, and when the Greek inhabitants of the island realize that the Italians are harmless, they come out of their hiding places in the mountains and resume their peaceful lives. Soon, the soldiers begin interacting with the townspeople and come to realize that being left behind by the war isn’t such a bad thing. The closing scene of the island men’s return after the war is both poignant and humorous.

Prior to the screening of “Mediterraneo,” College of Arts & Letters Professor of Italian Joseph Francese addressed the audience, and helped set the scene for the film. The next day, Vincenzo A. Binetti, Professor of Italian at the University of Michigan, spoke about the film at Wells Hall.

The screening of “Mediterraneo” was co-sponsored by the Department of Romance and Classical Studies, Global Studies in the Arts & Humanities, CASID, CERES, the Department of English, and the CAL Film Studies Program.

RETURNING SOULS – This third film in the series is a Taiwanese documentary on how human negotiation and collaboration lead to preservation and revitalization of carved pillars holding the souls of Taiwanese aboriginal ancestors. “Returning Souls” was the most well attended of the three films, leading to a standing-room-only crowd for the screening.

An intimate family story within a politically charged historical framework, “Returning Souls” tells the story of the most famous ancestral house of Taiwan’s matrilineal Amis tribe, where carved pillars tell the community’s most cherished legends. Some 40 years ago, a strong typhoon toppled the house, after which the pillars were moved to the Institute of Ethnology Museum.

Recently, young villagers, with assistance from female shamans, challenged tribal members and village representatives to communicate with the ancestors residing in the pillars. They eventually brought those souls back—rather than the pillars themselves—and began reconstructing the house.

The documentary “Returning Souls,” depicts this fascinating story. In an environment highly influenced by Western religions, national land policy, and local politics, the dream of the young for cultural revitalization speaks to people around the globe who work to connect past and present, old and new.

Prior to the screening, visiting Julliard first-chair violinist Joseph Lin performed three selections from the film by Shih-hui Chen, the film’s musical composer. Lin, Chen, and Tai-li Hu, the film’s director, held a lively 20-minute, post-film audience question-and-answer session to conclude the series.

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