

## Film studies Newer German cinema Clarence Tsui



Actress Sibel Kekilli seen in a scene from Feo Aladag's *When We Leave* – being screened as part of the Kino festival

As in recent years, the latest edition of Goethe-Institut Hongkong's annual Kino film festival offers a wide range of films across a variety of genres and topics.

There are historical dramas such as *Pope Joan* (which revolves around the story of a young woman elected to the papacy in the 9th century) and *Berlin 36* (about the real-life story of a Jewish high-jumper who competed in the Nazi-overseen Olympics in 1936).

Then there's art-house films such as *What You Don't See* (in which a young man finds sexual enlightenment through his friendship with a strange couple), light comedies like *Men in the City* (five gym-frequenting men, numerous affairs) and sci-fi in *The Door* (where a painter gets to relive the past through a portal).

"It mirrors the diversity of German filmmaking these days – the days when German filmmakers gathered themselves under the umbrella of one angle are long over," says Goethe-Institut Hongkong director Michael Mueller-Verweyen.

"Sure, the result is more random, it lacks a topic [which gives the festival a] rationale... But we take this as an advantage: German filmmaking is no longer that brain-driven heavy stuff like it was in the 1970s. Instead, the diversity has the

potential to attract Hong Kong audiences who are not used to watching European, especially German, films."

Despite Mueller-Verweyen's insistence about Kino's deliberate avoidance of a unifying theme, a few entries in this year's programme are anchored to the issue of migration and cultural integration. It's an issue which the Goethe director regards as of utmost importance in Germany and across Europe today.

Among the films which broach the subject are the festival's opener, Fatih Akin's *Soul Kitchen*, in which a Greek-German restaurateur's life spirals into crisis as his girlfriend relocates to Shanghai, and Feo Aladag's *When We Leave*, which follows a woman as she flees from an ill-fated marriage in Istanbul to start anew in Berlin, only to find her family adhering to the same oppressive norms she escaped from in Turkey.

While aesthetically different, both films have secured critical garlands on release. *Soul Kitchen* was awarded a Special Jury prize at Venice last year, while *When We Leave* won prizes at the Berlin and Tribeca festivals earlier this year and is now in line to become Germany's entry for best foreign language film at next year's Academy Awards. Along with Matthias Glasner's *This Is*

*Love* – a film about a German man who sets out to buy Vietnamese child prostitutes out of their misery, only to fall in love with one of his charges – these films exemplify how German filmmakers have shown "a higher awareness of cultural differences", according to Mueller-Verweyen.

He pins a lot of hope on Kino bridging these divides between Germany and Hong Kong. "Hong Kong is an international place, and we see it as a hub in East Asia – otherwise why did the Asian premiere of the newly restored *Metropolis* take place in Hong Kong and not in Pusan or Tokyo?" he says, referring to the screening of Fritz Lang's classic here just two months after its international launch in Berlin in February.

Plans are afoot to launch showcases on films about politically motivated violence in Germany, Italy and Japan in the 1970s and 80s, and also about outsiders in society. "As a [branch] of Goethe-Institut we can do a lot, we can challenge people with new topics and we can entertain," says Mueller-Verweyen. "But a visitor who comes to us should never be bored."

*Kino film festival begins on Oct 21 and runs until November 1; details at [www.goethe.de/hongkong](http://www.goethe.de/hongkong)*

## Virtual cinema Real-life puppetry Jake Coyle

Seth Green promises his new Web series, *Control TV*, isn't a Dr. Evil kind of thing. Launched on Wednesday and billed as a "real-life *Truman Show*", the series will have cameras following actor Tristan Couvares all day long, but with viewers voting to make his decisions.

It may sound slightly dystopic, but Green, who is producing the show with Matthew Senreich, says *Control TV* is "part entertainment and part vicarious improvement of another human being".

Instead, Green sees the show as a chance for an uncertain, 25-year-old man to be propelled by the Web-watching masses. In his view, the internet can be a benevolent god.

"We're going to guide it so that none of the decisions are really detrimental to him," says Green. "It could be as simple as putting him in funny clothes when he goes to a job interview or insisting that he has a hidden agenda when he speaks to a girl for the first time, or whether he's going to eat oatmeal or an English muffin to start his day."



Viewers, who can follow at [controlTV.com](http://controlTV.com) and sign up for cellphone alerts, will get the opportunity to decide things for Couvares 10 to 15 times a day. Voting will be for multiple choice options, which means Couvares won't be forced to do anything the show's producers haven't already prepared.

Couvares, who was chosen from many applicants, will be streamed live 24 hours a day. A webisode will also run daily summarising each day's events.

"At the end of the day, if I'm in a situation, I'm going to know what makes good TV," he says. "I'm going to know what's going to be funny,

what people are going to want to see. That's what I bring to the table."

Though many have experimented in streaming their lives live on the internet, *Control TV* hopes the interactivity with the audience will set the show apart. There are also clear parallels to *Big Brother*, which also includes live webcasts and viewer multiple choice voting options for certain aspects of the show.

Green acknowledges he has some concerns about how such an experiment might play out. "Strangers. Crazy people," he says. "We're going to be out there, he's going to have a camera following. People can react bizarrely when they see cameras out in public. So we're hoping no one is going to go out of their way to hurt our guy."

But Green maintains his optimism in the wisdom of the crowd. "We're just testing the boundaries of it," says Green. "There are things that are exclusive to this medium and we want to play around." AP

## Postcard Kavita Daswani

### San Francisco

For many, the ease of availability of movies today is a godsend: downloaded new releases that can be watched on a PC or iPod, or streamed directly onto television. But for a clutch of movie buffs in San Francisco, the increasingly isolated nature of movie-watching, as well as the anonymity of big-city multiplexes, was impetus enough to put together a book on the fading glory of old movie houses.

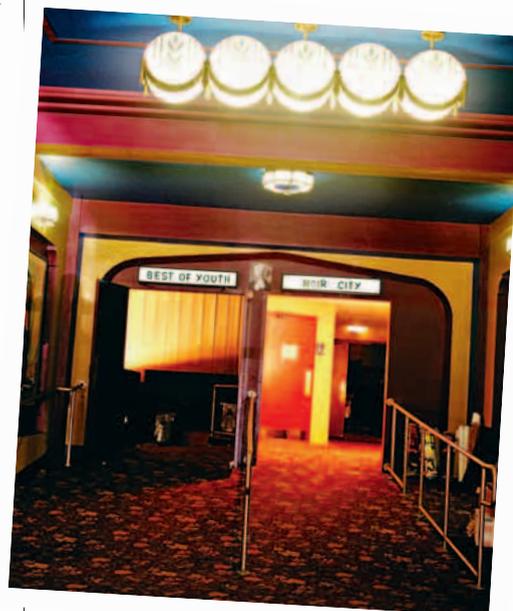
*Left in the Dark: Portraits of San Francisco Movie Theatres*, which was published last month, is one of those literary endeavours that is far less niche than most people might think. It is for anyone who mourns the loss of a simpler, more connected way of life, who harbours fond memories of gathering with friends and families in a high-ceilinged theatre with deep red curtains, the crunch of popcorn replacing the incessant ring of mobile phones.

"In our technological development, with people turning towards personal entertainment technology, there is the loss of beautiful architectural buildings, but also a concern over the loss of communal cultural experiences," says Julie Lindow, the San Francisco-based editor of the book, her collaboration with photojournalist R.A. McBride and several contributors.

When she was younger, Lindow worked at the Castro Theatre, which, built in 1922, is one of the city's most historic theatres. It retains its old world charm, and is still showing decades-old movies. Lindow's work experience at the Castro instilled in her a love for old theatres and connected her with people with similar tastes and interests.

"I realised that I knew all these amazing people who are perfectly poised to write about these histories that are in danger of slipping away," she says. "I saw a great need to capture the stories of the theatres, in particular to examine the movie houses and the roles they played within the culture of the city."

The 168-page book, which contains 59 lush colour photographs, is essentially a series of essays penned by contributors – a mix of academics, film festival directors and culture critics, people who have an affinity with the art of film, and of film-watching.



The entrance to the Balboa cinema in San Francisco. Photo: R.A.McBride

One of the contributors, Yang Chi-hui, was until recently the director of the San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival, the largest showcase of Asian and Asian American cinema in the US. (The city is noted for its love of festivals, hosting more than 50 across the Bay area every year.)

Yang delved into a discovery dating back more than a decade, when the Hong Kong-raised but now Beijing-based filmmaker and exhibitor Lambert Yam, who then ran the Great Star Theatre in San Francisco's Chinatown, discovered a cache of Chinese American films from the 1930s and 40s in a dumpster. "This was the starting point for a rediscovery of a great history of film production and exhibition in San Francisco Chinatown," says Yang. "Most of the films which were found were eventually donated to the Hong Kong Film Archive." Yang's essay focuses on Chinatown theatres.

Yang says said he was drawn to the project because of his interest in "the changing way in which we interact with urban space... how our built environment shapes who we are. Theatres are gathering points and places which can allow diverse individuals to meet and share ideas."

Given the visual nature of the book, capturing the right look was essential. McBride, who also once worked in the ticket booth of a Chicago theatre, came from the perspective of being connected to cultures "beyond my backyard and to possibilities I had not yet known".

"The experience of watching movies with a room filled with strangers is like nothing else," says the photographer. "The energy in a movie theatre undeniably affects the experience. It can be magical."

That sensibility was translated via her photography, highlighting both the grandeur of the theatres as well as the nooks and crannies. "Behind the ticket booth, the projection room, even the bathrooms – I think they have a cinematic quality, almost as if a character is about to walk through the frame," she says.

Lindow says there is much stock to be placed in returning to a more personal and intimate space. At one San Francisco theatre, the Balboa, the manager plays the role of a host, greeting people, giving an introduction to the film, offering a list of restaurants in the area.

"Even though they don't have the latest technological projection system, all these personal touches make it valuable," she says. "For those who read the book, I want them to be inspired to seek out communal cinematic experiences, and maybe even create some of their own by putting up a digital projector in a neighbourhood park. I was surprised that I ended up being so hopeful about the future."