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FEBRUARY 1, 2015 *by* KEITH UHLICH

# The Single Take: Playing Catch-Up

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## □ THE SINGLE TAKE

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□ A MOST VIOLENT YEAR, ADITYA VIKRAM SENGUPTA, J.C. CHANDO, JESSICA CHASTAIN, KEITH UHLICH, LABOUR OF LOVE, MARRAKECH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, OSCAR ISAAC

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First, readers, an apology. I'd planned to take some time off from "The Single Take" during the holidays. Only a week, maybe two. But in the midst of that annual rush (on Christmas Day, to be exact), I ended up in the emergency room. Prognosis—a rancid gallbladder, quickly extracted. There were no complications, and my recovery was relatively swift, but the operation and recuperation still threw a number of things off schedule-wise. I've spent most of the latter half of January righting the ship. Everything is more or less back on track; still, I did want to explain why the column went silent for longer than I would have liked. It's never my intention to go this long without an article, and I can only hope, for the foreseeable future, that life will spare me another curveball.

So then, let's play catch-up on this last month and change: I never jotted down my final thoughts on the 14th Marrakech International Film Festival, which ended on December 13th. I left wishing that I saw more movies, but life intervened more often than not—mostly in the form of tight deadlines for other assignments and the temptations of a locale that I figured I should make the most of whenever I had the opportunity. In my previous column, I wrote about my day trip to Ouarzazate. But Marrakech itself had plenty to offer. There were the food tents of the Medina, where the proprietors would effusively ambush prospective clients, dragging them over to inspect a delectable selection of fish and

meats on ice. And there was the Jardin Majorelle, a verdant oasis of exotic plants and cobalt blue structures first owned by French expatriate artist Jacques Majorelle and eventually renovated, in the 1980s, by fashion designer Yves Saint-Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé. (I was so taken with the beauty of this historical landmark, and its excellent on-site café, that I visited twice.)

The greatest temptation of all, though, was just to walk around this unfamiliar locale, to get “lost” whenever possible. It was on these excursions that I happened upon everything from a long, covered alleyway where merchants sold piquant spices and freshly butchered produce to an endearingly ramshackle cinema showing new releases from America (the *Sin City* sequel) and India (Farah Khan’s Bollywood blockbuster *Happy New Year*). I doubt I could find either of these places again intentionally, which, I’d wager, is a large part of the reason they stand out in memory.

Despite my cinematic dereliction, I still ended up seeing half of the films awarded prizes by this year's Isabelle Huppert-led jury. The closing ceremony took place on the ostentatious main stage of the Palais des Festivals et des Congrès, with each member of the jury announcing, alone or in pairs, who won what. Alan Rickman again stole the show when he prefaced the Best Actress award by reciting a line from Shakespeare's 18th Sonnet in a tone halfway between malevolence and indifference. It was Clotilde Hesme who took home that particular prize, for her tough-hearted portrayal of a cancer-stricken mother in Alix Delaporte's *The Last Hammer Blow* (covered in the first dispatch). I did not see the Swiss film *Chrieg*, a reportedly gritty tale of teen outcasts, which won both the Best Actor and Jury awards, nor did I catch the top prizewinner, *Corrections Class*, from Russia, an apparently bleak tale of special-needs students trapped in an abusive environment.

I was delighted, however, that Indian filmmaker Aditya Vikram Sengupta won the directing prize for his near-wordless romance *Labour of Love*, which captivated me from its opening images. It's set in the weathered metropolis of Calcutta, which is in the midst of a recession (agitated radio broadcasts and sounds of offscreen protests make up the majority of the dialogue). The characters are a nameless man (Ritwick Chakraborty) and woman (Basabdutta Chatterjee) who seem, initially, to lead entirely separate lives. As she goes off to work in a city sweatshop, he ambles around a cramped apartment that, despite its clutter, has the feel of a meticulously ritualized space. We come to know both of these people through their actions—how they walk, how they sleep, the way they prepare food (one of my favorite sequences is a series of extreme close-ups of dry spices being poured into jars). Eventually, the duo switch places—he goes off to work and she returns to the apartment—and their very Wong Kar-wai-ish connection to each other becomes clear. In retrospect, I'm uncertain if Sengupta overreaches in the tale's final passages, embracing sentiment a little too strongly when the power of the movie is primarily in the chilly, poetic distance created between the characters. But in the moment,

I found the rush of emotion—an impassioned crescendo after an hour plus of measured, mesmeric inquiry—truly rapturous.

### LABOUR OF LOVE

I was captivated in a different way by Marrakech's closing night offering, *A Most Violent Year*, which had me thinking back to the withering lede of my friend and colleague Godfrey Cheshire's review of a certain 1998 John Travolta legal thriller: "*A Civil Action* is damn near the dullest movie I have ever seen." I'd actually been bored senseless by J.C. Chandor's plodding, Lumet-lite period feature (set in 1981 Manhattan) a month before, though in a way that intrigued me. There was something about the movie's scrupulous commitment to keeping every narrative, visual and aural hair in place that intrigued. So much lifeless predetermination—which actually mimics the aura that the movie's slick protagonist, up-and-coming NYC oil magnate Abel Morales (Oscar Isaac), attempts to project. Sitting through the film again, I was bored afresh, and amazed that Chandor could so thoroughly waste a cast including ubiquitous starlet Jessica Chastain (as Abel's treacherous spouse), that great wit Albert Brooks (as Abel's manipulative counsel) and a bevy of reliable character actors, many of them HBO series alumni, like Peter Gerety, Jerry Adler and Glenn Fleshler, who do their best in weak tea supporting roles.

The key scene is the one in which Abel teaches three new sales recruits how to smooth-talk gullible customers; like his lead character, Chandor is attempting to sell watered-down goods as gold. There's never a moment when the sick-soul-of-America metaphors don't land with a thud (a shot of freshly trickling blood mixing with oil is especially egregious). And every image (the funereal cinematography is by Bradford Young of *Selma* and *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*) seems calculated to impress savvy cinephiles with an archaic seriousness of purpose. (This might be the ultimate example of ersatz '70s

cinema.) I didn't believe a bloody second of any of it, yet what fascinates me still is Chandor's dogged commitment to his inert bauble. He's like a humorless child playing with an animate corpse, and that, I suppose, has its own allure.

Finally, the year that was. Once again, I teamed up with Peter Labuza for a stimulating two-part installment of his *Cinephiliacs* podcast in which we discussed our favorite movies of 2014. You can find Part 1 (our #10-#6 picks) [here](#) and Part 2 (our #5-#1 picks) [here](#). My list, counting down from #10-#1, is below. Give a listen to the podcast to hear my justifications.

10. *Alexander: The Ultimate Cut* (Oliver Stone, 2004/2014)
9. *Mr. Turner* (Mike Leigh) and *National Gallery* (Frederick Wiseman)
8. *Nightcrawler* (Dan Gilroy)
7. "Get The Rope" from *The Knick* (Steven Soderbergh)
6. *Level Five* (Chris Marker, 1997/2014) and *The Congress* (Ari Folman)
5. *Fifi Howls from Happiness* (Mitra Farahani)
4. *BoJack Horseman* (Raphael Bob-Waksberg)
3. *Nymphomaniac* (Lars Von Trier)
2. *Godzilla* (Gareth Edwards)
1. *Love Is Strange* (Ira Sachs)

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