

HITCHCOCK TRUFFAUT

A FILM BY KENT JONES

Monday, February 22, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Kenneth Turan - LA Times *Rated PG* *88 Mins.*

Opinions about film are thick on the ground these days, but intelligent discussion is, as always, at a premium. Which is why it's such a joy to welcome "Hitchcock/Truffaut" to the screen.

Smart, thoughtful and elegantly done, "Hitchcock/Truffaut" is more than an authoritative look at the careers and interpersonal dynamics of directors Alfred Hitchcock and Francois Truffaut, a pair of unlikely soul mates; it's also, as director Kent Jones intended, a love letter to film itself, to the value and lure of the cinematic experience.

"Hitchcock/Truffaut" is based on a book of the same name, an unusual collaboration that is generally considered one of the few indispensable works on the movies.

The project began in 1962, when Truffaut, who'd been a critic for the seminal French journal Cahiers du Cinema before he became an acclaimed director, wrote a long letter to Hitchcock suggesting a weeklong interview about his films.

Hitchcock, not known to be a sentimentalist, wrote back that Truffaut's letter "brought tears to my eyes." Despite the decades of difference in their ages and experience levels — Truffaut had done three films while Hitchcock was then finishing his 48th, "The Birds," he readily agreed to a talk that ended up lasting 27 hours.

One reason this interview proved so special was that, as French director Olivier Assayas says, to Truffaut this was no peripheral project, it was "an essential part of his body of work," something he put as much time and preparation into as one of his films.

The goal of all this, as Jones said when the film debuted at Cannes, was to change America and the world's perception of Hitchcock.

"He wanted to correct the American image of Hitchcock as a light entertainer, but he also wanted to correct overly abstract French formulations that removed Hitchcock from the circumstances in which the films were made. Truffaut felt Hitchcock didn't need help, he didn't need to be compared to Racine, he just needed to be described accurately."

Still, good as this book is, that it would make an excellent documentary is hardly a foregone conclusion. Working from a script he co-wrote with Serge Toubiana, director Jones — whose previous work includes films on directors Val Lewton and Elia Kazan — has adroitly used a trio of approaches to make that happen.

First, he's employed a wide selection of well-chosen Hitchcock clips, including but not limited to classic sequences like the shower scene in "Psycho" (which required 70 setups) and the notoriously long kiss in "Notorious" between Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant. The actors hated it, but, the director frankly told them, "I don't care how you feel, I only care about what it looks like on screen."

Jones has also gotten use of the original audio tapes made by Hitchcock, Truffaut and translator Helen Scott for those 1962 interviews, and these voices, especially Hitchcock's, are unexpectedly effective.

For the veteran director, who seemed to enjoy projecting a droll and disinterested public persona, is revealed in the tone of voice in these recordings to be engaged, passionate and deeply connected to his work. And then there are those tantalizing moments when we hear Hitchcock begin a juicy anecdote only to instruct the technician to "shut the machine off."

Perhaps unexpectedly, Hitchcock seems especially pleased with what he achieved with "Psycho." "My main satisfaction," he says, "was that it was film that did something to an audience. It wasn't a message, a novel or some great performance. It was pure film."



Finally, Jones has employed interviews with 10 well-known contemporary directors, thoughtful individuals (they ended up all being men) who are considered and articulate in their responses to both the book and the men who made it.

Three of the filmmakers — Assayas, fellow French director Arnaud Desplechin, and Japan's Kiyoshi Kurosawa — work overseas while the seven Americans range from expected choices like Martin Scorsese, Peter Bogdanovich and Paul Schrader to James Gray, Richard Linklater and Wes Anderson, who says his copy of "Hitchcock/Truffaut" is so well used it's "not even a book anymore, it's a stack of papers with a rubber band around it."

Of all the directors who talk about Hitchcock, perhaps the most articulate is a man who might be viewed as his modern successor, David Fincher, who, for instance, describes cinema as editing behavior over time, making moments that should be fast slow and those that should be slow fast.

But, as it should be, the biggest surprises overall are the things this film reveals about Hitchcock himself. "Should I have experimented more with character and narrative?" he wonders in a surprising moment of self-doubt in a letter to Truffaut. "Did I become a prisoner of my own form?" A film that provides questions like this is a welcome film indeed.

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mustang

Monday, March 7, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Bilge Ebiri

Rated PG-13

97 Mins.

Mustang, directed by Deniz Gamze Ergüven, could be called a coming-of-age nightmare. It follows five orphaned teenage sisters who live with their grandmother (Nihal Koldaş) and uncle in a remote Turkish village along the Black Sea. An uncontrollable, collective whirlwind of hair and laughter and movement, the girls spend their days playing by the sea, running through the woods, stealing apples from a nearby orchard. Their loyalty to each other is vibrant, and fierce. When their grandmother beats them as punishment for being seen frolicking with boys, they put up a united front of resistance. An offense to one means an offense to all. Even as their house slowly becomes a prison — as walls are heightened and windows barred to keep the girls from running away at night — they retain their free-spiritedness. And Ergüven shoots them like a force of nature, because of course they are.



The film is narrated by Lale (Güneş Şensoy), the youngest of the sisters, but she could easily speak for the whole group. When she slams the “shit-colored” clothes that grandma makes them wear in order to reassert their modesty around town, we know the girls all feel this way. As the youngest, she also gets to watch in terror as her sisters are married off, one by one. The families of young men around town come by for the traditional proposal, during which the girl in question serves coffee and candy and the male head of one household asks the other to give her away. In Turkish, we call this “asking for the girl,” a phrase that always crept the hell out of me. To be fair, the ritual has different meanings in different parts of the country; in much of Turkey, it’s just a quaint formality, a more elaborate equivalent to a man getting down on one knee. But in the world of Mustang, it means something very real and often very dangerous.

The marriages rush along, but there is variation among them: The oldest, Sonay (Ilayda Akdoğan), actually gets to marry her high-school sweetheart after she brusquely rejects one suitor; that scorned young man gets Selma (Tuğba Sunguroğlu), the second-oldest, instead, with grandma exchanging the girls backstage as if they were carpets of slightly differing patterns. (“She’s one of a kind,” the matriarch, ever the saleswoman, says to each incoming family as she presents her wares.) Along the way, we get a hint that the older woman is simply reenacting a tragedy that also once happened

to her. While preparing to marry off one of the youngest girls, she notes that she was the same age when she wed. “There were special circumstances then,” she says, leaving us to imagine what they were.

There were times in Mustang, particularly the first half, when I wished we got to know these girls better, and that they were a bit more differentiated in their boisterousness. But that’s also the point. They’re being whisked away from us before they’ve had a chance to develop and become fully realized people. “The house became a bride factory,” Lale bemoans at one point, as the girls are taught how to cook and clean and behave. A factory, and maybe also a slaughterhouse: As each girl is consumed by tradition, as each new suitor family shows up, Ergüven plays up the gnawing sense of doom, as in a thriller where the characters are picked off in succession.

The broad outlines of this story aren’t particularly new. Turkish cinema is filled with female characters who long to escape unwanted arranged marriages, so much so that it’s become cliché even as parody at this point. But Mustang breathes new life into the old trope by reconnecting it with the elemental horror that drives it. These aren’t just body-snatchers; they take your soul, too. And it’s a further testament to Ergüven’s filmmaking that other common motifs of Turkish melodrama that she’s reimagined here — everything from the liberated Western teacher in a small town, to the kindly truck driver, to the wedding that becomes a daring getaway — feel thoroughly new, even to these tired, jaded eyes.

But there’s something else here, too: Beyond the expertly tense tick-tock-tick-tock of her narrative, Ergüven demonstrates an understanding of what drives these traditions and mores. For Mustang is one of the few films I’ve seen that also grasps the perverted idealism that lies behind all this forced modesty. When Lale asks her uncle if she can go to a soccer match with him, he dismisses her with talk of all the gruesome, foulmouthed men who come to games and start fights. He claims to be protecting her. Grandma, too, believes she’s thinking of their best interests — their future in a land that will always judge them as wives, mothers, and homemakers. So much of what’s done to these girls is done for what others perceive will be their own good. The debilitating paternalism of this world denies its victims agency in an attempt to coddle and protect and preserve. That’s the cold, hard truth at the heart of this beautiful, harrowing film.

In Turkish, with English subtitles.



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FLOWERS

(LOREAK)

Monday, March 21, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Rene Rodriguez - Miami Herald Not Rated 99 Mins.

Ane (Nagore Aranburu) is a pretty, somewhat timid woman who is diagnosed with early-onset menopause and is stranded in a marriage in which the fire burnt out long ago. Then she starts receiving a bouquet of flowers every day, each different but all of them beautiful, colorful, lively. Ane has no idea who is sending them — at first she assumes it's her husband, but no — but she's so pleased by the attention that she starts looking forward to their arrival, placing them in vases in different spots around her home.

Lourdes (Itziar Ituño) is a tollbooth operator who gets along fine with her second husband, Beñat (Josean Bengoetxea). But she resents him for not standing up to his mother Tere (Itziar Aizpuru), who regards the world through disapproving eyes and clucks her disapproval at the couple's failure to give her a proper grandchild. Tere is the sort of person whose soul has aged into vinegar — she's bitter, critical, set in her ways and unwilling to consider the world through anyone else's perspective.



In Loreak (Flowers), co-directors Jon Garaño and Jose Mari Goenaga follow these three women after an unexpected tragedy ties them together — if not physically, at least spiritually. The film spans several years, giving the story enough time and sweep to show the different ways people gradually adjust to a life-changing event. Shot in Spain's Basque region (the movie is in Euskara with English subtitles), Flowers has a vague political undertone that comments on how that country has dealt with its post-Franco reality. Some chose to pretend it never existed; others make sure to remember and never forget.

But the primary focus here is on people, these three women in particular, all of them strong but vulnerable, resourceful but damaged. Garaño and Goenaga, who also co-wrote the subtle script with Aitor Arregi, have said they were aiming for a cross between Hitchcock and Kieslowski, which is a perfect way to describe the film's enthralling pull. There is an undercurrent of suspense surrounding Ane and Lourdes, who don't know each other but are connected in a way only the audience is privy to. There is an eloquent profundity, too, in the way Flowers explores human nature and our tumultuous range of emotions — hope, resignation, grief, love — by observing and showing rather than telling.

Lourdes' distracted, restless persona reflects the silent rage she feels toward her mother-in-law and her husband's refusal to address it. Tere's constant disapproval of everything and everyone around her — her seeming incapacity for happiness — feels like an integral part of her soul, not a character tic. And Ane, who is innocently oblivious of her unhappiness (or chooses not to succumb to it), is the embodiment of a person who takes delight in the slightest bit of joy: For her, the flowers she's receiving infuse her drab existence with a jolt of beauty and color.



Flowers, which was filmed using longish takes, precise compositions and a spare but effective score, rewards careful attention (in one shot, Beñat does a quick, seemingly trivial thing at the edge of the frame that reveals a big twist long before the story does). The performances are superb, keeping the movie from spilling over into melodrama despite the considerable potential, and the emphasis on the three female protagonists allows the filmmakers to turn the picture into a symphonic exploration of love and loss told primarily through a feminine point of view. Flowers is a quiet, eloquent movie about big, overwhelming emotions, and the constant presence of its eponymous plants, in all kinds of colors and shapes, is a metaphor for the ways in which we respond to what life throws at us, be it a sudden trauma, a perpetual state of melancholy or an unexpected opportunity for romance. Some people blossom and bloom; others wither and give up.

In Euskara with English subtitles.

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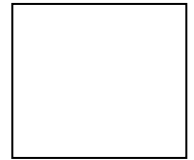
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Hollywood Reporter

Monday, February 22 at 7:30 pm

"Ergüven's film, beautifully shot and beautifully performed, cuts its storybook tone with starker, more brutal truths."

Steven Rea - Philadelphia Inquirer

Monday, March 7 at 7:30 pm

mustang



"Enthralling...a symphonic exploration of love and loss."

Rene Rodriguez, Miami Herald

Monday, March 21 at 7:30 pm