

“IN CANNES”

**A Reported Essay In Five Parts From
The 64th Cannes Film Festival**

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Part One: DE NIRO

A light, expensive breeze drifted over the sea and into the private invite-only beach front bar.

The cocktail waitress in the Little Black Dress handed me another Perfectly Poured Stella Artois™, the only beverage on offer in this branded promotional venue but welcome all the same, and I adjusted my black bow tie and shook the sand from my Paul Smith shoes.

I considered the scene, with its fake living-room aesthetic, its vintage leather lounge chairs, its Variety magazine interview stage and the wooden floor drenched in Belgian beer.

Press agents, journalists, competition winners and actors milled around with a visible attitude of self-defiant aggression. Theirs was the same exact expression as my own, in fact. I had just dined with Rob Lowe and Angelica Huston – or at least in the same restaurant as them, which is basically the same thing, and yet my stomach was still nowhere near as full as my bravado.

Whatever. Turning to the sea I shielded myself from the sun and drank in the sight of the Cannes waterfront stretching away to the Palais, the home of the festival, where in a few hours I was due to stride down the red carpet to attend a premiere of a new French drama – and hopefully find Woody Allen and give that guy a piece of my mind.

He had it coming.

They all had it coming.

My nose began to itch as I considered all the little people who had conspired to wrong me that day. The 5AM drunks at Terminal 5. The driver who dropped my bag. The concierge at the Carlton (Cannes' finest hotel, and my home for two nights) who had dared give me a private suite on the lowly first floor and not the fourth or above, as I had requested. They would all pay for their indiscretions.

I had already started to get a handle on Cannes. The massed and frankly indiscriminate paparazzi randomly harassing actors, journalists, members of the public and eventually even each other for a head-to-toe photograph. The gawping tourists. The giant promotional posters for trash films like The Smurfs and Cars 2, and the talk about films like Midnight In Paris, which everyone was only pretending to like. I had seen the Bentleys and Rolls Royces outside the lobby of my hotel and I had drunk more free Stella than was strictly necessary, and now I was raging. Internally, of course. But internal rage is what Cannes does best.

Suddenly a hush fell over the room, and my internal monologue. A name began to fizzle on

people's lips. It had been rumoured he was on his way, but nobody had really believed it.

Then a flurry of flash bulbs proved otherwise. He was here: Travis, the Don, to a lesser extent the guy from *Meet The Fockers*, and for the festival only, *Monsieur President*.

Robert De Niro.

I scoffed. De Niro? He hadn't made a good film since the eighties. What did I care about this A-list nobody? I loudly protested my ambivalence and strode off to the bar. Realising I was already there I turned again and saw the man himself walk into the room, barely eight feet from where I was slumped. He glanced around and said something to an aide. Eventually he just stood there. Just being Robert De Niro. Like that was okay.

Robert De Niro!

I felt sick. I dropped my beer and spilled it all down my M&S tuxedo. I sent a text to my mum and tried (and failed) to take a photo on my iPhone. Somebody shoved me out of the way and I wandered off back to the beach. I sank another beer. Twenty five minutes later De Niro was gone.

Fame is, by definition, relative. But in Cannes it's something else altogether. Here fame comprises the most intricate, detailed and pointless caste system ever devised. There is always another party to which you're not invited. Another premiere you missed. Another level of press accreditation you could have, or another VIP inner sanctum that you will never see. Nobody – except perhaps De Niro, Depp and Jolie, is famous. Least of all, I noticed as the last strains of De Niro's charisma evaporated away, a journalist with a fifth-rate press pass, a cushy hotel room booked by a brewery and a tuxedo last worn at a graduation in 2005.

It was only then I realised I was having a great time.

I drank another beer and headed off to the premiere.

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Part 2: PREMIERE

The Palais des Festivals at Cannes is a sprawling lump where most of the festival screenings, press conferences and fights between French film journalists with no sense of humour take place.

The Palais is also where you'll find the famous red carpet, upon which, up to twice per day, about 2,000 celebrities, production executives and jammy Asylum correspondents with the right connections stroll to watch a film for the first official time anywhere in the world – and then boo loudly once it ends.

The hoopla begins around 90 minutes before the show, when the ranks of snappers and bored tourists with nothing better to do line the barriers and wait for the famous people to arrive.

(Well, we say 90 minutes. In reality this mass gathering can begin any time at all, because in Cannes all it takes is for one person to stop and gawk before everybody else follows their example. Here a mob of several hundred can coalesce immediately to demand autographs from a bewildered backpacker from Geneva. This is, of course, vastly entertaining.)

Anyway, the first men in bow ties and women in elegant gowns begin to make their way down the Great Red Way about an hour before the scheduled show time. Once at the foot of the stairs (also red) they then have to climb to the top while maintaining an air of nonchalance perfectly judged to be simultaneously dismissive and attractive.

When Asylum strode purposefully onto the same red carpet, clutching an invitation to the premiere of *Polisse*, a French film about the Parisian police force, which we received courtesy of our hosts Stella Artois, the atmosphere was decidedly muted.

We refuse to take this personally, however. The atmosphere on the Cannes red carpet is always underwhelming. Imagine 4,000 people waiting an hour to see Johnny Depp arrive at an event he isn't attending. Now imagine they get to see us instead. Now imagine doing that in the rain. Yeah.

Whatever, despite our best attempts to bring a sense of occasion to the event – we'd worn our best Ben Sherman suit, and even forgone our Spongebob socks for a more sombre pair of Paul Smith formals – we soon embarrassed ourselves by tripping on a fold in the crimson rug and stumbling on the first step of the stairway. It was as if the Palais itself wanted to let us know we were not welcome. On cue, we were shuffled to one side, and then hurriedly shoved into the theatre. We didn't even get to wave theatrically to the cameras and do our best Charlie Chaplin impression. Boo.

Once inside the cinema, which is an imposing and impressive space, although more functional than grand and with a smaller-than-average screen, we found a seat between a snooty French woman and another snooty French woman. They were not pleased to see us, and requested a seat change.

At once the lights began to dim and the women were left ignored. Savouring this moment of victory we took advantage of the lowering lights to loosen our bow-tie. Rebellion. Then we listened to the cheers from the Cannes audience, which rang out for everything from the director's name to the logo of the distributor, and more loudly than for anything in the ensuing movie. For all that people talk about film at Cannes, they don't seem to enjoy it very much.

Admittedly, the film itself was a struggle. *Polisse* is indeed a movie about the French police, but since it focuses basically exclusively on the anti-child abuse squad it is a bleak and unrelenting ordeal. If you want a pithy review, and I know you do, imagine replacing all the characters in *The Wire* with angry, emotional French stereotypes, removing all sense of narrative, whipping in a few horrific shots of child abuse and wrapping it all up with a double-suicide. Get the idea?

Once the film eventually ended we were surprised to learn that everybody else apparently loved it, despite all the blood and whatnot. Six-and-a-half minutes of standing applause ensued, as did tears, hugs and over-emoting from the volatile cast. Needless to say *Asylum* escaped as soon as the lights went up, and stepped out back into the Cannes late-evening with an air of freedom and exhilaration. Escape. These were not our people.

Looking around we noticed that the photographers had gone, that the tourists – save for a drunk British couple and a stumbling man in a trilby hat – had left, and that the red carpet itself was strewn with debris and plastic cups. The film had debuted, but the world was still the same as it was before.

Well, that's alright then.

The sound of the applause inside the Palais pinged around the empty streets as we strode back towards the Carlton Hotel for a drink, bow tie trailing from our not-famous fingers.

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Part 3: PRESS SCREENING

Like lions stalking an ailing gazelle, but unwilling to make the final push lest another pack of lions swoop in and steal the prize, the journalists at the press screening watch each other, and wait.

We are gathered, or at least collected, on the fifth floor of the Palais Des Festivals at the Cannes Film Festival. Ten film writers and myself. As a men's lifestyle editor I am a generalist, and thus at Cannes one of the least important journalists in attendance. My opponents are film bloggers, entertainment nerds and celebrity marksmen. I am out of my depth.

In about 90 minutes the doors of the Debussy theatre will open for a press screening of the much-heralded martial arts epic Wu Xia, but the line itself has not yet formed.

There are a very limited number of seats inside, and not all of the journalists who want to see the show will be able to. Nervously I glare at my enemies and make my plans.

We are waiting to begin waiting. In line to get in line.

And yet, for now, I do not move. The stakes are, as yet, too high. For now, we wait...

To understand the brinkmanship on show here, you have to understand the super-structure of Cannes press accreditation. Having a press pass at Cannes is not enough to guarantee entry into anything. There are many different levels of access, defined by the colour of the card around your neck.

White is at the top. The whites are the masters of Cannes. They are the kings. They are the exalted few, with the ability to stroll past queues and lines and spit in the face of the underlings. There is a rumour that only Robert De Niro actually has a white pass, and even he has never held it. I would not be surprised.

Below the White Pass Emperors you will find those clutching passes of Light Pink and Rose. Those at this level of access are strong, powerful figures. They are prefects, lieutenants, wielding real power and honour. Do not be deceived by this authority, however – you cannot trust these second-tier Party Men. They may have to queue for a screening, but they will always find a seat. And they will throw you out of yours with glee.

Underneath the Pinks are the Blues. The blues are troubled. They have enough authority to feel important, but not enough to actually do anything very exciting. They can get in line for screenings, but they may not make it inside. They can request a spot at a Press Conference, but

they will not be able to ask a question. They will never see an A-lister fact to face. They will strive and strive, but they may never find victory. Their lives are uncertain. They are fragile.

I am a blue.

Below me are the Yellows, and below even them the Oranges. Can you imagine the shame? No. These are the bottom feeders of Cannes. They are to be pitied.

Back to the waiting room. There is now an hour to go, and yet the line has not yet formed. The reason for this is that if all the journalists present on the fifth floor, who are currently all Blues and Yellows, join the queue at once, that will greatly increase the chance of Whites and Pinks to join the line themselves.

If they do there is a chance that no Blues or Yellows will get in to the screening at all.

"Merde."

Somebody breaks! A French Blue, with a laptop and trainers! The panic ripples around the room. Over-excited, I bolt and join the queue behind him. I am wearing a full suit, having overshot the dress code and am now slumped on the floor. My suit is crumpled, but I don't care. I have made my move and it has worked. For now.

I turn, expecting a stampede, anticipating rows and rows of Blues, Yellows, Pinks, Purples and whoever else to join the rumble and run at me with axes waving.

Nobody moves.

Is it possible this was all in my head?

Fear, paranoia and angst are as much a part of Cannes as the movies. I have learned on the job.

Take my trip to see Belgian coming-of-age drugs and rivers tales *The Giants*, in which I was shunted out of the queue twice – twice! – because of the colour of my pass, only to eventually make it inside the 100-seat cinema and find just 20 seats occupied. Take my experience at a Red Carpet Premiere, which ended with two separate requests to have me moved to another seat. Take the looks of disgust and snide disrespect from the Whites, and the spiteful aggression of the Yellows, that I have endured since my arrival. Take it all. I don't want it.

Back finally to the line for Wu Xia, one last time.

There is now 10 minutes to go until show time. Both queues – the White/Pink and the Blue/Yellow have filled to the brim. Now all I can do is watch, and pray to Mark Kermode that I make it inside.

Suddenly the White/Pink queue is opened, and the hungry Masters stream into the cinema for their fill. I watch them swamp pass, internally shortening the odds of my getting a seat. 50 pass. 60. Have I really wasted 2 hours of my life for nothing?

And then... The White/Pink queue ends. The attendant goes to open the Blue queue, just as another 2 whites pass through the door. Slowly, the attendant checks the area. And then he lifts the rope.

I am inside. The movie begins. I breathe.

The movie was quite good.

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Part 4: PARTY

You step out of the lobby of the Carlton Hotel, where celebrities of varying status jostle for the right to be seen with a cocktail next to Uma Thurman and fight with the concierge about how that status translates into discounts on room service.

Leaving with a hop you walk out onto the Boulevard De La Croisette, a sea front dual carriageway where you can turn and witness how the dignity of that great old hotel has been undermined this year by a poster for Smurfs: The Movie and a conspicuous model of a submarine. It is the early evening. Cannes smells like salt, vodka and dry cleaning.

The sun is going down somewhere over by the Palais, and the pools of water from a short, sharp rainstorm are covered over, deceptively, with ticket stubs and promotional posters for a film about pirates.

You cross the road, avoiding both a million-Euro Ferrari and a taxicab with a dented fender, and slip through various groups of lost tourists, men with expensive cameras and no sense of direction, and somebody handing out copies of Variety. On the other side of the road is the beach-side pavement, and beyond that a line of 60 tall women in black and red catsuits guarding a red carpet.

This is the place.

You follow the line of catsuited security with your eyes to the entrance of the Carlton's beach-front party venue, co-sponsored this year by Stella Artois, whom you have to thank for your attendance. Now you've found the entrance to the party you have to work out how to get inside. For that you turn 180 degrees and walk alongside the carpet until an obvious entrance presents itself. It takes a couple of minutes, but you get there. You push past a crowd of hangers-on and show your pass.

Now you are on the red carpet, flanked by catsuits, and you are suddenly aware of the photographers and celeb-spotters watching your every mood. They are trying to work out if you're famous. Are you that bloke from Transformers or the guitarist from Coldplay? Well, you think. I have a webcomic and blog about The Beano. But they probably don't care about that.

You begin to walk, head bowed in both recognition of your lack of fame, and in the hope that by acting this way you might look famous.

Once inside the party, you note immediately that the number of guests is much lower than the hubbub outside suggests. There are probably more people guarding this party than attending it. Still, the food is good, and the drinks are many, and soon enough you've found a few other non-famous people to hang around with.

You start to loosen up. You take another drink, and nod your head in time with the Europop remixes of Motown hits currently blaring out from the hands of the DJ. You take a walk down the pier, and start to hold yourself in what you consider to be a rakish fashion. You spill something. You don't care. You laugh loudly at something you didn't hear. You own this shit.

It's approaching midnight, and the rumour is that something is about to happen on the stage inside the marquee. You wander in, just in time to witness a man with a laptop pick up a microphone and start saying things like "yeah, come on! Let's do this!" in time with some funky beats. A little while later he calls up "the ladies" onto the stage, and dances with them a bit, before returning to his laptop to queue up another number. When he is bent over the laptop on stage like this he looks like a blogger undertaking some kind of performance art. Eventually he leaves.

"Who was that?" / "Pharrel."

There is a little mob gathering off to one side of the stage. You peer at it and notice that it counts Leonardo DiCaprio, Jamie Foxx, Bradley Cooper and the CEO of Google among its members. Huh. It's only after really looking that you notice the ring of security surrounding them. The illusion that they are at the same party as you is really rather good, even though it is totally false.

A few minutes later Kanye West takes to the stage, dressed in his customary white and disappointingly-rubbish trainers, and gets this party started right, right, gets this party started. You have another drink and begin to dance, which no journalist should ever do. You see actress Rosario Dawson in the crowd. She was in that film, right, the Kevin Smith one or something? Yeah! This is happening!

Kanye does his thing, and does it well. And loud. For respite you retreat back to the bar, and talk to a red-eyed French man who it turns out is the producer of some film that you've seen, and hated. Yeah, yeah. Cool man. Yeah! Somebody else taps you on the shoulder. Let's do shots! You pour yours out on the floor. Yeah!

Kanye finishes up, and so do you. Your taxi is coming in 45 minutes to take you to the airport. You climb the stairs and look out at the party. Everyone seems to be having fun. You can't begrudge them that.

You cross back to the Carlton and stroll through the lobby. You see the French producer, who is having an argument with his wife. Nobody is bothering the concierge, which is the closest thing he gets to sleep.

The elevator arrives with a rhythmic tick, tick, bing, as if it's hoping that Kanye will notice.

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Part 5: REVIEWS

While it is true that most of our recent trip to Cannes was taken up by imbibing Belgian beer, we did also find some time to watch some films. In fact we made it to four movies during our weekend at Cannes, and we thought it would be worthwhile to dedicate our last Cannes diary to a few short reviews.

They range from French dramas, Belgian coming-of-age tales, martial arts epics and something too awful to describe in three words. Needless to say, most of these films are unlikely to arrive on these shores outside of BitTorrent or a few pretentious arthouse cinemas in Shoreditch, so we're really your only chance to discover if they're worth seeking out.

Polisse – *dir. by Maïwenn Le Besco, France*

For your average Asylum reader, who is more interested in Pac Man and bacon than social realism or the dark underbelly of the human soul, Polisse is a tough sell. A hard-hitting drama focused on the members of a grizzled vice unit in northern Paris who specialise in child abuse, and those characters' various affairs, secrets and flirtations with suicide, Polisse doesn't pull its punches.

In fact at times the purposefully disjointed narrative style, which flits from case to case without resolution or even a chance to catch your breath, makes it feel like you're the psychotherapist and the film is lying on your couch, unloading its soul with no purpose other than to hear the words out loud.

It's a mess, is what we're saying. And an upsetting one. We went in wearing black tie. We came out in despair.

The Giants (*Les Geants*) *dir. by Bouli Lanners, Belgium*

Two young brothers and their friend are left alone in a summer house by their chronically-absent parents. With nowhere to go, and no money, they spend their time breaking into houses, stealing, smoking weed and going off on Huckleberry Finn-style adventures on the local river.

All seems pleasant in a bleak, pastoral sort of way, until they sell the house to a bunch of drug-dealers, as you do, and are forced to confront the world on its own terms. This is a sweet, gentle film for the most part, and its characters have enough sharp edges to stay believable. At times it is also quite beautiful, with a rural European landscape that looks like the end of the

world and some genuinely touching emotion.

We doubt it will make much impact internationally - the film is too old-fashioned for that, we suspect - but if it does then it's worth bringing your younger brother to, before pointing him in the direction of the river.

Wu Xia, aka *Dragon*, dir. by Peter Ho-Sun Chan, China

Combining detective film-noir with a classic Hong Kong martial arts epic, Wu Xia is a slow-burning but exciting and action-packed film that should easily find an audience in the UK, if given the chance.

With a plot that resembles David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence* with a Chinese twist - a mild-mannered family man in rural 1900s China is attacked at his place of work, only to discover (or reveal) that he might in fact be a trained killer of the most dastardly sort - the set-up is clean enough to let small details shine through. The film's highlight, for instance, comes when a detective, who is sent to investigate the attack, replays the dramatic events from literally inside the scene, not least because it gives you a second chance to see a deliciously horrible ear-slicing slow-mo. Nastylicious.

As is the case for these sorts of films, things get a bit formulaic and melodramatic at the end, but it doesn't matter - you'll enjoy the ride. And the bit with the ear-slicing. Did we mention that?

Bonsai, dir. by Cristian Jimenez, Chile

Do you have a mate who broke up with some girl years ago and just doesn't shut up about it? Who mopes around writing semi-novels about his lost love, listening to Joy Division and dreaming about what she looks like now, who she's dating, and what if what if what if? Yeah, tedious isn't it?

Well imagine your mate's most dribly diatribes translated to the screen, with a bunch of references to Proust thrown in, and you have some idea of the nightmare that is Bonsai.

Essentially a tale of doomed romance played out 8 years after the event through the medium of creative fiction, ugh, this film meanders around its own sense of cool before deciding to kill off its most interesting character, which isn't saying much, before leaving the heartbroken chap at the film's heart to simply spiral around and around the city of Sandiago in a car, going nowhere. Like the film itself, in fact.

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