

SHORT TAKES

Black Sun

The German filmmaker Rüdiger Sünner often traveled to Ireland and Scotland, impressed not only by timeless landscapes, but more importantly by the “relaxed” attitudes of the natives toward the traces of pre-Christian Celtic mythology scattered about them. Wholly missing was the historical “disgrace” and attending taboos that encumber pre-Christian Germanic mythological interest in the post-Nazi era. On one such trip to Ireland he discovered the Englishman Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s 1985 book *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, the only extant serious historical account on the topic. Why is it that German historians seem so little interested in this field, he asks. Thus, before the opening title and credits roll, a fresh take on a perennially interesting issue seems at hand: the ongoing influence that Nazism has in rendering a subject taboo for German domestic discussion. Disappointingly, the film’s ambitions turn out to be far more limited—interesting still, but not truly fresh. Some oddly ruminative commentary on the Western millennial condition aside, Sünner has to a large extent followed the script detailed in Goodrick-Clarke’s book. From the mystical revelations of the origin of the Aryan race, to the runic wonderments of the *völkisch* Thule Society, to the later role of Social Darwinism in the thinking of the racist right, Sünner has done a faithful job in distilling the mythological elements and derived racial interpretations that Nazism manifested. His 1997 film, however, is not without competition. In 1998, Madacy Entertainment released a 150-minute, three-DVD set titled *The Occult History of the Third Reich*, which covers much the same material with more archival footage, often going into greater depth and, a big plus, providing broader historical context. (Distributed by Icarus Films, 32 Court Street, 21st Floor, Brooklyn, New York 11201, telephone (718) 488-8900, www.IcarusFilms.com)—**Mark Hennessey**

The Heretics

Joan Braderman’s documentary combines found footage, interviews, and animation to chronicle *Heresies*, a feminist art journal, and the collective of women who published it during the height of second-wave feminism. Braderman, a former Heretic herself, also reconnects with twenty-four of the founding members to explore the continuing impact of their magazine; this includes a conversation with third-wave feminist activists *LTTR*, who heartily acknowledge the influence of *Heresies* on their gender queer art journal. Braderman’s “radical collage” aesthetic is a neat metaphor for the diverse makeup of the original art collective, which was composed of artists and scholars such as Emma Amos, Su Friedrich, and Harmony Hammond; contributors also included Alice Walker and Adrienne Rich. Though widely divergent in terms of political beliefs, sexual orientation, backgrounds, and artistic approaches, this cooperative created a model for the way feminists and artists—traditionally marginalized groups—could transform grassroots consciousness into large-scale, organized expression. A viewer need only remember the time before *Heresies*’ existence—when, as Lucy Lippard recalls, a woman could be routinely told she was “too cute to be an art critic”—to

gauge the impact of their work. Although the director’s version of *Heresies*’ past is rosy-eyed at times, the film does more than wax nostalgic for a lost moment of history. The former Heretics’ joyful enthusiasm for activism is the film’s defining quality and core strength. A common concern of the interviewees is how many young women currently resist applying the term “feminist” to themselves, mistakenly associating the label with crankiness or an already-won battle. In presenting a passionately engaged group of women and the persistent relevance of their efforts, however, *The Heretics* is an irreverent challenge to backlash against the term. (Distributed by www.heresiesfilmproject.org, telephone (413) 584-6012, e-mail juanitavid@gmail.com)—**Sarah Leventer**

A History of Israeli Cinema

Several recent Israeli films such as *Beaufort*, *Waltz with Bashir*, and *Lebanon* have won major film festival awards, but the history of Israeli cinema remains barely known in this country. Raphael Nadjari’s documentary is a penetrating personal take on Israel’s film history rather than a conventional historical compilation. The film provides no narrative. It is built around clips from a wide range of films and features talking-head interviews with directors, critics, and scholars who are analytic and articulate. Their discussion eschews a definitive analysis for a variety of interpretations of a cinema that is constantly changing. The first part spans the years 1933 to 1978, starting with Zionist films that resembled Stalinist Socialist Realism in their polemical commitment to creating a “new man” and national unity out of the ashes of the Diaspora. By the 1960s the films shifted from Zionist agit-prop to broad escapist “*bourekas*”—comedies that depicted the struggles of ethnic groups—and elite-oriented films dubbed the “New Sensitivity” that were beholden to European art cinema. The documentary’s second part covers the years 1978 to 2005 and examines the wave of films dealing with the Arab-Israeli conflict, and others offering a more personal approach to cinema, including films dealing with ignored groups like the ultra-Orthodox, women, gays, and Georgian immigrants. Many of these films criticize Israeli society without being didactic. They also pose the question, in a nation where social and political reality is inescapable, what the function of cinema as a national narrative is. Nadjari’s film spills over with suggestive ideas that provide a window into a cinema that needs to be further studied and seen. (Distributed by Kino International, 333 West 39th Street, New York, New York 10018, telephone (212) 629-6880, www.kino.com)—**Leonard Quart**

The September Issue

Catering to contemporary culture’s twin obsessions with celebrities and record-breaking achievements, R. J. Cutler tracks the production of the September 2007 issue of *Vogue* magazine, whose 840 pages and nearly four-pound weight have made it the biggest in vanity land’s publishing history. Predictably, Cutler ignores the deeper dynamics between fashion and magazine publishing in favor of the widely publicized dynamic between *Vogue*’s legendary editor in chief, Anna Wintour, and her staff. The film will disappoint

anyone who expects Wintour’s reputation as imperious ice queen to be debunked as a myth. But neither does it confirm *The Devil Wears Prada*’s burlesque binary construction of the high-powered but personally unfulfilled working woman. Calm, calculating, and abounding with creativity, Wintour skirts the rules of good behavior, but that’s because she is a pragmatist who has learned to survive in a cutthroat business. Casualties seem to tally up higher on the female than the male side, but it would be specious to claim that it is patriarchy that keeps Wintour from promoting the interests of other women. One woman desperately trying to avoid becoming a casualty—or, at least, to exercise damage control—of whatever promotional impulses Wintour may have is her daughter, whose fledgling struggle for autonomy the film briefly but incisively captures. Then again, Wintour’s closest collaborator and frequent creative sparring partner is not a man, not even a gay one, but another woman, the enduringly antipodal Grace Coddington, whom Wintour respects deeply. Ultimately, the film resists easy appropriation both by traditional feminists likely to blame patriarchy for what made Wintour into who she is and by neoliberal postfeminists who see a woman’s gender-blind elbowing power as her most important asset. (Distributed by Roadside Attractions, www.roadsideattractions.com)—**Roy Grundmann**

William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe

In *William Kunstler: Disturbing the Universe*, Emily and Sarah Kunstler offer a portrait of their father that is both celebratory and sober. For those who know the radical attorney primarily as the defense counsel in the Chicago Seven conspiracy trial, the film gives dimension to a man at the center of some of the most significant events of his time—Freedom Rider civil disobedience, the trial of the Catonsville Nine, the riots at Attica Prison, the standoff at Wounded Knee. And for those familiar with these events, the film delivers a personal sketch, Kunstler as father, a man whose public decisions toward the end of his career had a perplexing, sometimes frightening effect on his daughters. In fact, as gripping as archival footage of Attica or Wounded Knee can still be, the heart of this thoughtful, well-crafted documentary beats in the home-movie footage and family photos that offer glimpses of Kunstler as suburban homeowner, then Greenwich Village bohemian, then middle-aged father of two young girls. *Disturbing the Universe* persuasively argues that for a public figure whose identity is indelibly linked to a particular era, the single principle of fighting injustice in a biased world motivated Kunstler’s work, no matter whether it was the Sixties or the Eighties. As the filmmakers suggest with recurrent shots of Michelangelo’s *David*, both as photograph over their father’s desk and as animated image, it was, for William Kunstler, a principle that transcended his historical moment. The Kunstlers make it clear that for all his rhetorical skills, their father was an activist, for whom social justice and social action were inseparable. (Distributed by Off Center Media, 115 South Oxford Street, Suite 520, Brooklyn, New York 11217, phone (718) 636-0988, www.off-center.com)—**Art Simon**