

THE YEAR IN... OBAMA ERA CINEMA

The closing stages of Barack Obama's tenure have witnessed a new confidence within black film culture, both in the range of subjects being tackled and in a growing refusal to compromise on behalf of white sensibilities. **By Ashley Clark**

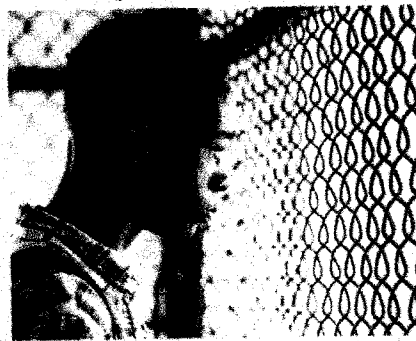
The intoxicating feeling of national progress felt by many over the presence of Barack Obama as America's first black president, emboldened liberal-minded filmmakers to engage with traumatic material from a safe remove. Consider the subjects of these backward-looking epics: the failure of post-civil war reconstruction in *The Hateful Eight* (2015); slavery in *Lincoln* (2012), *Django Unchained* (2012) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013); the civil rights movement in *Selma* (2014); the whole shebang in Lee Daniels's expansive *The Butler* (2013), a fictionalised biopic of Eugene Allen, the White House butler who retired after 34 years in 1986, and was present at Obama's inauguration in 2009.

At Sundance 2016, in the early stages of Obama's last year, this trend reached its apotheosis, but felt different. Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* was a spirited reimagining of Nat Turner's slave uprising of 1831, its title cribbed from the racist D.W. Griffith epic, which screened at the White House in 1915. Parker's film, emerging at a time of Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and economic inequality, sparked a feeding frenzy among distributors, secured a huge deal and won the Grand Jury prize.

Its juggernaut slowed amid lurid revelations about a rape allegation in

the director's past, and a second wave of lukewarm reviews upon release. And yet, though Parker originated the concept in 2009, it's difficult to imagine *The Birth of a Nation* being realised without, in part, the confidence and national conversations inspired by two terms of a black president, not to mention the palpable backlash against him. (The same might be said for the runaway Broadway smash hit *Hamilton*, which features a cast of black and Latino performers playing white American historical figures.)

'Moonlight' is a subjective look at a black experience, with no hand-holding to court the wallets of white audiences



Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight*

performers playing white American historical figures.)

The closing stretch of Obama's tenure appears to have infused black-authored and -focused work with a reflective streak that can be seen both narratively and aesthetically. With its story of a driven young black man remaking himself in a new city, Ryan Coogler's stirring, Philadelphia-set *Creed*, released late in 2015, felt like an elegiac riff on Obama's political birth in Chicago. Another clear example is Barry Jenkins's second feature *Moonlight*, a Miami-set triptych about a young gay black man. (Interestingly, Jenkins's debut, the gorgeous romantic drama *Medicine for Melancholy*, was released on January 30 2009, ten days after Obama's inauguration.)

Speaking at the BFI London Film Festival in October, Jenkins conveyed his feeling that, consciously or not, living through the Obama age had emboldened him to make a film with an uncompromisingly subjective look at a black experience, with no hand-holding or code-switching in order to court the eyes (and wallets) of white audiences – it paid off: the film was a critical smash, and drew the biggest per-screen opening average in the US in 2016. *Moonlight* also inspired a fount of beautiful, insightful writing, particularly from black critics. "Did



RYAN GILBEY

Critic, *New Statesman*, UK

Further Beyond *Joe Lawlor*
& *Christine Molloy*
Little Men *Ira Sachs*
Ghostbusters *Paul Feig*
Love & Friendship *Whit Stillman*
Embrace of the Serpent *Ciro Guerra*

JANE GILES

Head of BFI Content, UK

American Honey *Andrea Arnold*
Embrace of the Serpent *Ciro Guerra*
Evolution *Lucille Hadzihailovic*
Julietta *Pedro Almodóvar*
The Witch *Robert Eggers*

● I've only chosen films released in the calendar year, and what struck me again was how many films are on UK release to what feels like no great gain. Do we really need so many subject-driven documentaries on cinema screens occupying much-needed slots for holdovers, word-of-mouth slow burns or great rep programming, and taking up review space?

My two favourite film events both

happened in London in November: John Carpenter playing his scores live at the Troxy and Carl Davis conducting the BFI's digital restoration of *Napoleon* live at the Royal Festival Hall.

ROBERT GREENE

Filmmaker, USA

Cameraperson *Kirsten Johnson*
Fire at Sea *Gianfranco Rosi*
HyperNormalisation *Adam Curtis*
Under the Sun *Vitaly Mansky*
Starless Dreams *Mehrdad Oskoui*

MOLLY HASKELL

Author/critic, USA

20th Century Women *Mike Mills*
Toni Erdmann *Maren Ade*
A Quiet Passion *Trefce Davies*
Hell or High Water *David Mackenzie*
Things to Come *Mia Hansen-Løve*
● I've restricted my five to 2016, and there are a lot I haven't yet seen. Revelations from the past were two silent films by Frank Borzage: *Back Pay* and *The Pride of Palomar* (both 1922). They make you

understand once again why those who'd known only silent cinema resisted the coming of sound.

J. HOBERMAN

Critic, USA

O.J.: Made in America *Ezra Edelman*
Toni Erdmann *Maren Ade*
Kaili Blues *Bi Gan*
The Death of Louis XIV *Albert Serra*
Neruda *Pablo Larrain*

JOANNA HOGG

Filmmaker/curator, UK

Toni Erdmann *Maren Ade*
Certain Women *Kelly Reichardt*
Personal Shopper *Olivier Assayas*
La La Land *Damien Chazelle*
But Elsewhere Is Always
Better *Vivian Ostrousky*

ALEXANDER HORWATH

Director, Austrian Film Museum, Austria

Toni Erdmann *Maren Ade*
Neruda *Pablo Larrain*
The Woman Who Left *Lav Diaz*
Things to Come *Mia Hansen-Løve*

Elle Paul Verhoeven

The Dreamed Ones *Ruth Beckermann*

● Strangely, the title of one film on my list seems to encapsulate all five: *The Dreamed Ones*. It speaks about the ways in which some great filmmakers have become acutely sensitive to a central condition of life today: a sort of pulsating unreality in which the forces of fantasy, imaginative (and often stressful) self-design and 'self-improvement', apocalyptic fears and a deep social unease (or social-networked unease) all condense toward the only form of reality we have at our disposal. The 'we' in question being mainly the Western liberal bourgeoisie, but also, to a degree, that of our unfortunate victims and brethren in less 'enlightened' circumstances. In this group of films, Pablo Larrain's poet/activist Neruda and the police inspector on his trail, as well as Ruth Beckermann's poets in love (Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan), figure as the historical, circa 1948, avatars of our own present condition.