



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Aren't we blessed to be middle class, well fed and, hopefully, not complacent? FISH is a wonderful vehicle for self-examination...I refer to our attitudes for our recent Scandi Noir, the Danish film *Sons*. This film has provoked much discussion about parenting, the intransigence (a favourite word, Ross!) of evil, and crime/punishment. The acting was splendid and the colour palette depressing. The last scene was true.

On a mercenary note, the Empire has offered FISH members a discount (upon showing of FISH pink membership card) for films from 1st November until 24th December, excluding the first night of the Italian Film Festival and any Palace specials.

Best wishes to all from your committee,

Roz Garwen



FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC

President: Roz Garwen 4886 4142 & 0414 820 890

Guest Enquiries: Deborah Blay : 0400 411 004

TEXT ONLY minimum 24hours notice

Website: www.fish.org.au

Email: fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com

Membership: Fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com

Membership is closed

Enquiries: fishfilmsadmin@gmail.com

We are grateful to our sponsors : EMPIRE CINEMA ACE

INTERNET SERVICES HIGHLAND CREATIVE

FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC

10.00 am Sunday 16th November 2025

8.15 pm Tuesday 18th November 2025

AN UNFINISHED FILM

Synopsis:

Fact and fiction interweave in this self-referential docufiction film. Director Xiaouri convinces his cast & crew to resume shooting of a film halted ten years earlier. In January 2020, with the shoot almost complete, rumours regarding a mysterious illness begin to circulate.

Review: Sonia Nair

This film is likely to repel those of us who refuse to be catapulted back to the strange, surreal and terrifying year of 2020. But what differentiates Lou Ye's docufiction film — beyond its layer upon layer of constructed meaning — is that it comes to us from the eye of the storm: a town near Wuhan.

As the severity of a new virus is making itself known, a film's cast and crew — a microcosm of millions of Chinese citizens — grapple with authoritarian dictates, enforced separations from their loved ones, and mounting pandemonium as billions of people around the world continue their lives unscathed, unaware things are about to indelibly change.

The film doesn't start in this place, however. It opens in mid-2019 with a crew, led by director Xiaorui (Mao Xiaorui), unearthing a 10-year-old computer with footage of the director's aborted queer film. This half-finished film is cobbled together from real-life outtakes and b-roll captured for Lou's own previous films, but the conceit surrounding its rediscovery is fictional — the first of many instances throughout the film where fact and fiction are interweaved and the boundary between pretence and reality is muddled.

The unfinished film is an intimate one, centred on a queer man desiring someone who's already in a relationship, with actor Jiang Cheng (Qin Hao, who did play a gay man in a Lou film) the lead.

Filming was suspended due to creative differences with the funders — gesturing towards China's strict censorship laws — but Xiaorui wants to resume shooting it — partly out of a guilt he feels towards the cast and crew, partly due to a deep-seated desire to see it realised as a fully formed thing.

In a thoughtful debate between the introspective director Xiaorui and the frank Jiang Cheng — with the former trying to convince the latter to come back on board to finish the film — Lou raises interesting questions. What's the point of making art? Assuming the film doesn't pass the censorship board and make it into cinemas, who's the film in service of? The same questions could be asked of *An Unfinished Film*, which can't be shown in China to the very people who lived through what it's documenting.

Fast forward to February 2019 and it's clear Jiang Cheng has relented to reshooting the film. Fresh off the birth of his baby son, Paopao, he's staying in a hotel near Wuhan with cast and crew as they finish shooting the film's last few scenes. But providence has other plans for them. .

A mysterious illness is taking hold of Wuhan, and the authorities act swiftly and decisively, cordoning off the hotel to anyone entering or leaving after a crew member collapses from what is later confirmed to be COVID.

Cue an imposed lockdown for all the cast and crew left behind, including Jiang Cheng, who becomes the eyes through which we witness the early stages of the pandemic unfold. Confined to his room after a thwarted attempt to escape the hotel, he occupies himself by filming goings-on from his window and engaging in the Chinese equivalent of FaceTime with his emotionally frayed wife Sang Qi (Qi Xi) as their lives transpire in parallel — he under hotel arrest, she under house arrest caring for their infant son.

With most of the film confined to the four walls of Jiang Cheng's hotel room, it necessarily loses the momentum of the frenzied scenes that accompanied the rollout of the hotel's lockdown and veers into something far more mundane and repetitious — befitting the new rhythm of Jiang Cheng's days.

A particularly memorable montage ensues when quarantined cast and crew jump on a group call to celebrate the eve of Lunar New Year, their giddy delirium at celebrating together in isolation capturing something highly distinct and unforgettable about those early moments of connection in the pandemic.

The effect of the film disperses slightly when it moves from its fly-on-the-wall approach to the swift documenting of various events of the time through the framing of a mobile phone.

The February 2020 death of Dr. Li Wenliang, the "whistleblower" doctor who first alerted the world to COVID and later succumbed to it. The November 2022 Ürümqi fire, where Beijing authorities were accused of enforcing a zero-COVID policy at all costs and preventing residents from leaving the building. The ensuing unrest and protests.

At a time when the broader world has erroneously moved on from safeguarding against a life-threatening virus, it's striking to be transported back to a time and place so unlike the West: where walls were scrubbed clean to prevent contamination, hotels were locked down due to a single positive case of COVID, and people were quarantined without an end in sight.

A sort of undeniable truth emerges from a film too fictive to be considered a documentary but too factual to be considered a feature. And within it, perhaps there is some hope of collective catharsis for China.

Source: www.abc.net.au ~ Sonia Nair 5/5/2025 Edited extracts accessed 24/6/25

Note: *An Unfinished Film* has not been approved for screening in China. Its director was banned from filmmaking for five years in 2006 after screening a film without censor permission. (Supplied: Sharmill)

~~

COMING UP:

December

The Movie Teller [Chile/Spain]

Sunday 14th & Tuesday 16th

Some thoughts on: *Sons*

Well, there's no doubt at all about those talented and passionate Scandinavians. Surely, they are the masters of Bleak. Where does it come from? A violent Viking past perhaps, or maybe a gripping tale of danger, mystery and dark acts of depravity, is used to get the heart pumping in lands of perpetual cold and extremely long periods of icy darkness. Who knows, but they do it so well.

I found *Sons* to be a very well constructed piece that took us to such a powerful setting, full of so many emotional components. The director and cast were so very effective at creating that mood or atmosphere where fear, anger, isolation, loneliness, resentment, discipline, routine and sheer boredom were a potent mix that was ready to explode into violence at any time. The tension this created, drove this absorbing moral dilemma of a tale along relentlessly.

I really found the film 'working' for me as my empathy and sympathy for both Eva and Mikkel, changed at various moments. Eva's initial passive nature understandably became one of aggression and revenge, but my empathy for her waned when she actually planted incriminating evidence. Mikkel too, wavered in my feelings about him as he swung between violence and aggression and then appeared to settle and change before reverting to his old ways once more. The backgrounds of both lead characters provided so much insight into their unstable and troubled lives.

Overall, I felt this a very effective and engaging piece, but I did have a couple of qualms to deal with. I know there's an element of 'poetic license' and the 'suspension of disbelief' in most films, stories and plays, but firstly, I couldn't believe that Eva had her request to move into the high security wing granted so easily, especially as her son's murderer has just taken up residence there.

Secondly, despite being told to NEVER be alone with these dangerous and volatile inmates, Eva, having just bashed him senseless, is now sharing a cigarette or doing yoga with Mikkel in one to one visitations in confined spaces.

And thirdly, day release for a psychotic murderer with minimal supervision? Surely, pushing the envelope just a tad too far.

A real pity, because up until these moments I was holding my breath in fear of what may happen next, and then find myself thinking 'you've got to be joking'. Tension broken. Apart from that, this was a very solid and absorbing experience, effectively enhanced by a dramatic, almost creepy, music score and the palette of the drab, gloomy gaol cells and endless corridor walls.

The final words in the film from Eva's colleague, "some people will never change", applies, I felt, equally to both Eva and Mikkel. Their future lives look likely to be very bleak indeed.

Thank you, FISH for such a contrast in genre, but I can't wait to see the sun and blue skies make a most welcome return.

Ross Armfield [Reviewer in Chief]

Ps. The title that has recently been appearing after my name, is being placed there by others. I don't mind it, but it does remind me of the time when, after the committee kindly bestowed the label upon me, I had my reasonable and appropriate, (not to mention deserving), request for a modest financial retainer, flatly refused. Enquiring as to why I was turned down, I was curtly informed by our glorious President that the title was only an 'Honorary' one. Such is life. (Tongue firmly in cheek).

[RA]

~~