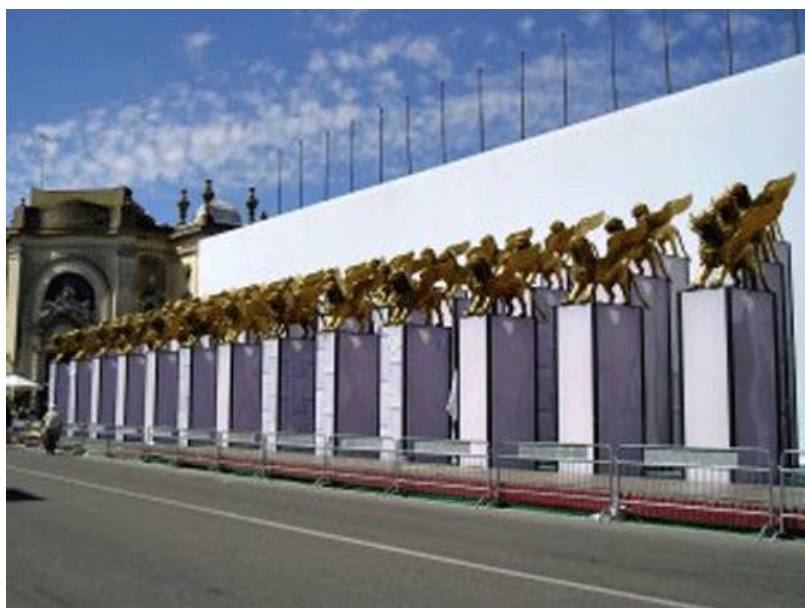


## Religious Themes Dominate “Venice Film Festival”



If you have been keeping up with the “Venice Film Festival,” then you should be aware of winners and losers from best picture to best director. But it’s fittingly for a festival where about half the titles in the official competition had religious themes, the 69th Venice Film Festival awarded its top prize, the Golden Lion, to “Pieta,” a religious mother-and-son drama with a sadistic streak from the prolific Korean director Kim Ki-duk.

The film sharply divided critics — as do most of Mr. Kim’s confrontational movies — but it was deemed the best of the 18 competitors by a jury led by the filmmaker Michael Mann. Other members of the jury included the actress Samantha Morton, the filmmakers Matteo Garrone and Pablo Trapero and the artist Marina Abramovic.

There was some confusion at the awards ceremony Saturday evening, at which the special jury prize and the Silver Lion for best director were apparently presented in the wrong order — and to the wrong people. A festival press release confirmed that the best director prize went to Paul Thomas Anderson for his hotly anticipated new film, “The Master.” The film’s leads, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Joaquin Phoenix, shared the best actor prize. (Mr. Seymour Hoffman accepted both awards, his collaborators having already made their way to Toronto, the next stop on the festival circuit.)

“The Master” was the only American winner this year, despite a competition stacked with American names; Terrence Malick, Brian DePalma, Harmony Korine and Ramin Bahrani were all shut out. According to a report in *The Hollywood Reporter*, “The Master” would have won the Golden Lion but for a rule that prohibits any title from winning more than two major awards, requiring the jury to deliberate a second time.

The special jury prize went to “Paradise: Faith,” the Austrian director Ulrich Seidl’s darkly comic drama about a self-flagellating Roman Catholic woman married to a paraplegic Muslim. The film made headlines in Italy earlier this week when a Catholic organization accused the festival and the filmmakers of blasphemy — which has been decriminalized in Italy but is still punishable with a fine — citing a scene in which the protagonist masturbates with a crucifix. “Faith” is the second installment in Mr. Seidl’s “Paradise” trilogy on Christian virtues (and their perversions). The first, subtitled “Love” and about a sex tourist in Africa, had its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival; the concluding part, “Hope,” about an overweight teenager at a weight-loss camp, is expected to be shown at the Berlin Film Festival next year.

Continuing the religious motif, the best actress prize went to Hadas Yaron, who plays a Hasidic teenager struggling with a difficult decision in the Israeli film “Fill the Void.” The French filmmaker Olivier Assayas picked up best screenplay for his autobiographical coming-of-age drama, “Something in the Air.”

Still *Pieta* outshined them all. This bleak morality tale of a diabolical loan shark who prowls the alleys and clapped-out workshops of a district of Seoul that is being redeveloped captivated the judges.

Kim said that his film was intended to be a denunciation of “extreme capitalism”, adding that money was the “third protagonist” in the movie.

The director, whose personality seems far from the darkness of his protagonists, surprised and delighted the audience at the awards ceremony by belting out the Korean folk song “Arirang” on stage to thank the jury headed by Michael Mann.

The loan shark in the film is played with skin-crawling intensity by Lee Jung-jin and the woman is a haunting presence played by Cho Min-soo.

The film’s title was inspired by Michelangelo’s famous “*Pieta*” statue in the Vatican of the Virgin Mary holding the corpse of her son Jesus Christ.

“I’ve been to the Vatican twice to admire this masterpiece by Michelangelo. The image of this embrace has stayed with me for many years. For me it is an embrace of humanity,” the pony-tailed director told reporters earlier.

Actor Lee spoke of his apprehension when taking the part of the loan shark, saying: “I was a bit afraid because he works with darkness, with difficulty but it all went very well... I was not asked to play beautiful scenes but to play true scenes.”

The 51-year-old Kim is no stranger to the Venice film festival, where he won the best director award in 2004 for his “Bin-jip” (“3-iron”) about the relationship between a young drifter and an abused housewife.

Hollywood producer and director Michael Mann who presided at this year’s jury said all the 18 films in competition had been “stunning”, “diverse” and “innovative” but that “Pieta” in particular

The fact that “The Master” scored multiple prizes, suggests it was the subject of complex negotiations among jurors, as Mann indirectly confirmed.

During the closing ceremony Mann first praised Ki-duk’s “Pieta,” saying it stood out in particular because it “seduced you viscerally.”

He then said the jury tried to “cast the right picture to the right award,” without considering the prizes a strict hierarchy.

Mann further elaborated at the post-awards presser noting that Venice fest rules do not allow a pic to win the Golden Lion and also score acting prizes.

“So we decided that a good way to give ‘The Master’ its fullest recognition was, according to a non-hierarchical principle, to give it the prize for best director and also for the actors,” Mann said.

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