

Cannes 2015: Son of Saul (László Nemes, 2015)



There are birds singing beneath gunfire in *Son of Saul*. No orchestrated sound; but a primal mix of nature, machines and the cries of human beings. It's a harrowing, grim concoction – one that seeps through the directorial debut of Hungary's László Nemes. One so good, that he has surpassed those fellow filmmakers sharpening (rather than cutting) their teeth in the 'Un Certain Regard' category – instantly becoming part of the Official Selection.

The days of WWII are slowly drawing to an end. A Hungarian prisoner in Auschwitz has been given the role of a Sonderkommando – an assistant in the mass execution of fellow victims of the regime. Whilst gathering the bodies from the aftermath of a mass cull; he comes across a still breathing but barely living boy. Discovering the boy is his estranged son, he feels that he must seek a proper burial in a final attempt towards redemption.

Son of Saul pulsates with such all round ferocity that it could be suggested that the idea of the burial is a grounding, vague plot to a coarse, heavier portrait of mass genocide. It works, essentially, as the story of a man and his people as they fight from different corners over their own objectification. They live a life encased in death and degradation; one that Nemes brings to the screen with an uncompromising, often miasmic view.

As Saul searches the camp for solace, it becomes harrowing and labyrinthian; entrapping and evermore tense. There's a gorgeous intimacy to the camerawork; always focusing on a

figure in the foreground, following them as they search for escape. Its use of 35mm and a stunningly framed aspect ratio watches Saul confront things we can only see in a blurred haze. At times, the edges feel as though they have been singed by the embers that engulf the screen; a work of artistic intricacy that is brilliantly realised.

It may be early days but Saul is a fair, justified suggestion for picking up the Palme d'Or. It has all those desirable qualities; innovative and breathtaking in one fell swoop. There's still a lot more to come before the decision is made but, outwith the Cannes as a competition, Son of Saul will stand stead as one of the most riveting war films of recent years.



Son of Saul has its world premiere at the Festival de Cannes on Friday 15th May