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45th International Film Festival Rotterdam
Rotterdam, Netherlands, 27 January–7 February 2016

A Report by Emre Çağlayan, University of Brighton and University for the Creative Arts

The 45th edition of International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) featured more than 250 films, with nearly half of that number being premieres, and hosted 299 visiting filmmakers. Although not as high profile as Cannes, Berlin or Venice, Rotterdam is home to one of the richest film cultures in Europe, with an emphasis on emerging art-house talent and world cinema. The festival takes place in tandem with CineMart, an international coproduction market where industry professionals rub shoulders with sales agents to establish networking connections, distribution channels and cofinancing ventures. However, Rotterdam has experienced a crisis in programming and a dip in attendance numbers, especially since Sandra den Hamer, who was involved with the festival in various capacities over decades, and who directed it since 2000, decided to take on a new position as Director of the Amsterdam EYE Film Museum in 2007. Rutger Wolfson took over as festival Director in 2008, but his 2014 edition was scathingly criticised by *Indiewire*'s Neil Young, who highlighted Rotterdam's inability to compete with giants such as Sundance and Berlin, both in terms of programming strategies and on account of their relatively close sheduling within the annual film festival calendar. 2015 was the final year with Wolfson at the helm and a detailed coverage of that year's programme and activities was published in *NECSUS* journal (de Valck). The 2016 edition, with Bero Beyer newly appointed as its Artistic Director, promised a revitalised festival dedicated to diversity in arthouse cinema. Beyer's previous experience as a film consultant at the Netherlands Film Fund and as an award-winning independent producer was put to use in broadening the scope of programmes at the festival. This report aims to explore such diversity by providing an admittedly partial overview of the films presented from a range of programme sections.

IFFR's reputation as a beacon of experimental and independent cinema was evident in its "Deep Focus" retrospective featuring the elusive Spanish filmmaker Pere Portabella. Portabella's double role as an experimental filmmaker and an active politician (he was first elected as a Senator in Spain's 1977 elections) is crucial, and symbolic of Rotterdam's commitment to uncovering unconventional figures in film history and encouraging conversation on the relationships between independent cinema, aesthetics and politics. The second part of the programme showcased the works of *Escuela de Barcelona*, a varied group of oppositional Catalan filmmakers that made films across the 1960s, ranging from *cinéma-vérité* documentaries to fiction mixing surrealist and pop-art imagery. This dedication to experimental and underground cinema was further extended by the inclusion of Masao Adachi's radical films of the late 1960s and of his latest feature *Artist of Fasting* (*Danjiki geinin*, 2015).

At the other end of the spectrum, IFFR featured semi-independent anglophone productions such as *Demolition* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2015) and *High-Rise* (Ben Wheatley, 2015), both of which attracted large audiences while still maintaining the offbeat spirit of the festival. Among the most crowded press screenings was the international premiere of Philippe Grandrieux's *Malgré la nuit* (2015). Grandrieux is one of the most unique voices recently emerging from European cinema, whose films explore and extend the experiential

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possibilities of cinema through calculated structures of startling images and sounds. The plot is not immediately important, as Grandrieux is clearly more invested in the visceral and sensual experience we draw from the situations than what they represent, but it vaguely concerns a Frenchman's return to Paris in search of his beloved, a search that quickly turns into a Lynchian descent into the depths of our most secretive, intimate and disturbingly transgressive desires. Grandrieux is confrontational in his portrayal of the human body; the visual style, comprising intense close-ups and loosely edited images of grotesque body textures, makes of the film almost a field day for film scholars working on corporeal cinema and the haptic experience of film viewing. Despite its unique aesthetics, *Malgré la nuit* does not quite come together as a coherent film, though it probably is not intended as such. Perhaps one way to come to terms with the film would be to think of it as a product of a particularly French way of abstraction: a thought experiment or a proposition about what the cinema of the twenty-first century will be like—although this argument already seems to give too much credit to Grandrieux.



Figure 1: Superimposition is one method amongst many, through which Grandrieux creates a rich and multilayered sensory experience. *Malgré la nuit* (Philippe Grandrieux, 2015). Films Boutique, 2015. Publicity still.

A running trend across the festival's many sections was the essay film and the ways in which it accommodates multiple styles and perspectives. One of the audience favourites was *Heart of a Dog* (2015), Laurie Anderson's personal, essayistic recollections about death, friendship, politics and the ways in which we grow to accept life as it is, all portrayed through the lens of her relationship with her canine friend Lolabelle. Anderson's mourning process for the passing of Lolabelle is no doubt a touching aspect of the film, but I found her observations of post-9/11 America too impressionistic and unmotivated in their connection to the personal narrative. *Le Moulin* (*Ri yao ri shi san bu zhe*, Huang Ya-li, 2015) is about a group of Taiwanese young poets who, influenced by the Parisian Surrealists, founded a literary magazine in 1930s Taipei. Although the subject is of historical significance, the film's third-person narrator and disjunctive editing are too anti-immersive even for essay film

standards. José Luis Guerín's *The Academy of the Muses* (*La academia de las musas*, 2015) is an erudite and detached discussion about the nature of love and its relationship to classic beauty in art. Despite its philosophical complexity, the film's excessive dialogue is uncinematic and dispassionate to the degree that it contradicts the filmmaker's earlier works.

Three essay films stood out from the crowd. Grant Gee's *Innocence of Memories* (2015) was perhaps one of the most unclassifiable films in the programme: it is simultaneously an audiovisual companion piece to Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* (*Masumiyet Müzesi*, 2008, which is in itself both an experimental novel and a museum based around it), a muted yet free-flowing city symphony about İstanbul's underbelly, and a genuinely tragic story of unrequited love, all captured through the sensibility of *hüzün*, the Turkish word for melancholy and gloominess that, to date, has inspired Pamuk's oeuvre. Very few films can traverse the boundaries between fiction and memory as subtly as *Innocence of Memories*, and yet still retain an extraordinary wealth of references to an overlooked cultural history. *The Amazed Spectator* (*O spectador espantado*, Edgar Pêra, 2016), a 3D cine-essay about film spectatorship, features interviews with critics: Laura Mulvey, Henry Jenkins, André Gaudreault, Olaf Möller, Laura Rascaroli and Toby Miller, amongst others. Pêra's film is not only a visually stimulating exercise on the ontology of cinema, but is also thought-provoking in the way in which it explores pressing and urgent questions about cinema's future. Visual artist Fiona Tan's debut feature *History's Future* (2016) was yet another essayistic reflection on subjectivity and memory, and included film critic Jonathan Romney in its screenwriting credits. The film fits to a long trajectory of art films, from *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) to *The Man Without a Past* (*Mies vailla menneisyyttä*, Aki Kaurismäki, 2002), that similarly explored the role in which memory plays in the shaping of our identities, and follows a character suffering from amnesia in search of his own self across contemporary Europe.

As in any other festival, there were promising and intriguing films that turned out to be either mediocre or forgettable. *Sixty Six* (Lewis Klahr, 2015) is a compilation of shorts that can best be described as a cinematic bricolage; while its superimposition of comics cut-outs, pop imagery and urban soundscapes is astonishing at the outset, it quickly becomes repetitive and dull. *Endorphine* (André Turpin, 2015) was self-described as an unsolvable puzzle film that promised a dreamy, hypnotic compendium of undecipherable events, but it could simply be interpreted as a young woman's coming to terms with her mother's death, a story told through devices already familiar to puzzle films. *Animal Político* (Tião, 2016) is based on a remarkably bizarre premise, where an ordinary cow with a human voiceover begins to experience an existential crisis despite her life as an unsuspecting and content living being. Although hilarious to begin with, this absurdist version of Robert Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966) ultimately does not say much about the current condition of existential anxiety. A similar lack of substance and intellectual depth can be felt in films such as *We Are the Flesh* (*Tenemos la carne*, Emiliano Rocha Minter, 2016), which essentially portrays an orgiastic party held by homeless outsiders at an uninhabited warehouse in downtown Mexico City. It evokes some of Amat Escalante's ultraviolent films, but in this case there is no purpose or logic to the film's excessive display of violence or graphic sexuality—or, perhaps, the taboo-breaking content is precisely the film's motivation in challenging and confronting its audiences.

While it is unlikely that all these films will be seen in other festivals, some will certainly continue their journey on the international film festival circuit. *The Clan* (*El Clan*, 2015), a true-crime drama that previously won its director Pablo Trapero a Silver Lion prize

at Venice, is the thrilling story of the Puccia family, infamous for their celebrity kidnapping operations during the early days of Argentina's transformation from a military dictatorship to a democratic government. The film's stylistic bravura and incessant use of pop music nearly cripples its investigation of the moral corruption in Argentinean political history and the ways in which the culture of corruption underpinned the effects the military junta had over daily life. Another film reflecting on national history was Özcan Alper's *Memories of the Wind* (*Rüzgarın Hatıraları*, 2015), a daring attempt at confronting Turkey's unspoken political past. The narrative is set in the final days of the Second World War and follows a Walter Benjamin–like author and publisher who flees İstanbul when mob riots threaten his safety. He relocates to a remote village in the Black Sea region and is haunted by the memories of the Armenian genocide, at which point the film nods to some of the best films by Theo Angelopoulos. *Memories of the Wind* is unique in its multilevel evocation of three traumatic, yet unarticulated episodes in Turkish political history: the 1915 Armenian genocide and the public inability to come to terms with it, the political sympathies held by Turkish institutions towards European fascism (most evident in the series of pogroms that climaxed with the events of 6–7 September 1955), and the current inhumane treatment of non-Turkish ethnic minorities. Another film about Turkey's political past was the documentary *The Ballad of Exiles Yılmaz Güney* (İlker Savaşkurt, 2016), a compassionate and informative, if technically troubling, portrayal of Yılmaz Güney's exile in Paris and the various collaborations he established in the making of his *The Wall* (*Duvar*, 1983). More films, as well as academic studies, of this type are needed to uncover the ways in which Turkish cultural figures operated in exile and interacted with European cultural institutions.



Figure 2: Stanislas Mehrar and Clotilde Courau in Philippe Garrel's *In the Shadow of Women* (*L'Ombre des femmes*, 2015). Wild Bunch, 2015. Publicity still.

Of all the films in the festival, my experience as a whole was enriched by three in particular—or, more precisely, there were three very different films that I think best summarise some of the current artistic trends in world cinema. Philippe Garrel's *In the Shadow of Women* (*L'Ombre des femmes*, 2015) is an absolute masterpiece in dramaturgy

and a masterclass in directing actors. Garrel might be seen as old guard, but his minimalist take in understanding human nature feels more relevant than ever. Just as the director's other works, the film examines a turbulent relationship, in this instance one between documentary filmmakers Pierre (Stanislas Merhar) and Manon (Clotilde Courau), whose romance stumbles when the former begins his affair with Elisabeth (Lena Paugam), an American archival intern, who further complicates things by accidentally discovering another affair in which Manon is involved. What follows is a comedy of manners *à la* Éric Rohmer, but also an astute inspection of petty male narcissism, jealousy and hypocrisy. More important and admirable are Garrel's working methods: as Courau conveyed in the film's Q&A, Garrel spent about six months rehearsing and rewriting the script with the actors, and relied on single takes during production to integrate spontaneity and serendipity as essential elements of the film's fabric—a strategy that is felt in the strikingly natural acting.

On the other hand, *The Plague at the Karatas Village* (2016), the second feature by Kazakh director Adilkhan Yerzhanov, is far from all things natural. In the film, a newly appointed mayor arrives at an isolated village, where he discovers a mysterious illness afflicting the entire population, but one which the authorities refuse to identify other than ordinary flu. Clearly indebted to German Expressionism in terms of its visual design, the film functions as a parable about the kinds of political corruption tormenting the country, where social ills are fiercely ignored in favour of maintaining the status quo. However, the film's tone is not all doom and gloom; it exhibits what Yerzhanov identified in the Q&A as a distinctively Kazakh sense of humour, which brings to my mind the absurdist, deadpan humour characteristic of Roy Andersson and Tsai Ming-liang, where comedy, typically developed through rhythm and pacing, emerges slowly (or, perhaps, glacially) and is expressed in tandem with subtle changes in the deep-focus arrangement of its mise en scène. Yerzhanov's film will inevitably invite comparisons with the work of his compatriot Darezhan Omirbayev (who receives a special thanks at the end of the film's credits), but there is enough originality and singular vision here to warrant attention from other film festivals. Indeed, the film received the NETPAC Award for the best Asian feature film for its "totally unique universe, somewhere between Ionesco, Kafka and David Lynch" ("The Winners").

The final highlight of IFFR was *The Last Land* (*La Última Tierra,* Pablo Lamar, 2016), a film that is particularly emblematic of the Hubert Bals Fund, Rotterdam's in-house funding scheme directed towards emerging filmmakers based in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Eastern Europe. To date, more than a thousand projects have been supported by the fund, and each year the festival displays a harvest of films in honour of its charismatic founder Hubert Bals, who passed away in 1988, a year before the funding scheme was established. *The Last Land* sits well with a long list of films commissioned by the fund for its formal audacity and its austere, dialogue-free and almost ascetic take on what is frequently labelled as "slow cinema". The film concerns an old man coming to terms with the death of his wife in a secluded forest hut, with meditative vistas of Latin American landscapes filling in for what might be lacking in narrative progression. In addition to its stunning and calculated photography, the film features what is perhaps the most meticulous and immersive sound design in all of slow cinema—for which the film was rewarded with a special accolade (Special Jury Award for exceptional artistic achievement in sound design), and a reason why the film should be seen in a proper theatre with state-of-the-art audio equipment (and also why the Paraguayan director excluded its entry from the festival's video library). This is slow cinema in its purest form and its contemplative narration encourages a newer way of looking at the world. With mortality as its main subject, the film can create an

engrossing experience for anyone who is courageous enough to face it. Evoking the works of Carlos Reygadas and Lisandro Alonso, Pablo Lamar has put together an assured and ambitious debut, if as elusive and obscure as those of the preceding luminaries. Lamar is surely a talent to watch for in the future.



Figure 3: Man contemplates mortality. *The Last Land* (*La Última Tierra,* Pablo Lamar, 2016). Sapukai Cine, 2016. Publicity still.

As in each and every film festival, scheduling and timing limitations are main obstacles, and IFFR is no exception. Given their outstanding quality, one could all too easily have wished to see most, if not all, of the films presented this year. Regrettably, I was unable to see major award winners: *Radio Dreams* (Babak Jalali, 2016) for the Hivos Tiger Award, *Embrace of the Serpent* (*El abrazo de la serpiente*, Ciro Guerrera, 2015) for the Hubert Bals Diophrate Award, and *Les Ogres* (Léa Fehner, 2015) for the VPRO Big Screen Award. Some might argue that Rotterdam's legacy as the bastion of avant-garde cinema is waning, but its new artistic director Bero Beyer has clearly passed the first test and has placed the festival back on the map as a significant breeding ground for emerging talent.

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