16th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival
17 September—11 October 2020
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A very warm welcome to the 16th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival. I’ll spare you all any hot take on 2020 but myself and my colleagues have had to reimagine what the Festival might be. Not just for now, but for the future too. As ever, that is a work in progress.

As I write, the Festival’s pilot Emerging Critics workshop kicked off this morning with some exceptional young people from Berwick, the North East of England and South of Scotland receiving mentorship from Dessane Lopez Cassell (Black-Star Film Festival) and Dennis Vetter (Berlin Critics Week).

The workshops are led and facilitated by Tendai John Mutambu, who was awarded BFMAF’s Programming Fellowship in 2019. In March this year, Christina Demetriou and Myriam Mouflih took up where Tendai left off and joined new Associate Programmer Ana David, Programmer Herb Shellenberger and myself online, from their homes in Lisbon, Berlin, Glasgow, London and Berwick to begin programming.

We still have not met in person! Nonetheless, their dedicated work, supported by my brilliant colleagues in the virtual BFMAF office has produced our debut online Festival, taking place from 17 September—11 October 2020. I am forever indebted to this team of people. Their patience, kindness and expertise has enabled us to present these 53 films over a period of three weeks. SDH captions, essays, podcasts and video introductions have been added too. Hopefully this will give opportunities for you to take your time, to watch and rewatch artists and filmmakers work, in whatever way you are able.

Returning very literally to a theme of Works in Progress, many thanks to Fern Silva and Tim Leyendekker who will share the paths to production of their debut feature films. Remarkably Ayo Akingbade, Angelo Madsen Minax and Payal Kapdia, three of this year’s Filmmakers in Focus are also currently working on their first features.

I am excited to unveil two newly commissioned artists’ films as part of the programme this year. Spike Island, Bristol and Transmission, Glasgow joined BFMAF to produce the third iteration of Zinzi Minott’s Fi Dem and Daddy’s Boy is a fresh new work from recent graduate Renée Heléna Browne. Many thanks to Hospitalfield, Arbroath for creating an opportunity to first encounter Renée’s work.

The new-for-2020 Berwick Young Filmmakers group have been in online video workshops, perfecting their lo-fi mobile-phone-filmmaking skills with added horror and fantasy to produce Everyday Apocalypse with artist Kimberley O’Neill.

The 16th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival wouldn’t be possible without key funders Arts Council England, The BFI, Community Foundation, Northumberland County Council, Berwick Town Council and Simpsons Malt. Although we cannot all be in Berwick this year, BFMAF opens with a live broadcast by sound recordist Chris Watson. He will remix and reimagine sound recordings from the town which like the rest of the Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival, I hope you will be able to enjoy wherever you are.

Peter Taylor,
Berwick-upon-Tweed, 14 September 2020
For the first time, Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival’s New Cinema Competition includes Short, Medium and Feature length films. The strand encompasses the Festival’s view of some of the most distinctive works of new cinema and artists’ moving image being made around the world today.

All selected filmmakers will share the Berwick New Cinema Award. This year, it is a non-competitive prize created by reallocating funds that would have ordinarily supported filmmakers’ travel and accommodation at the Festival.

These are vital works, imbued with a sense of liveness and agency in their resolute visions—they will surprise, entertain and provoke, opening up further questions and considerations.
Hybrid in form, this work from Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme wrestles with the problematics of representing a people displaced and disappeared. An avatar generating software and images of the people who participated in the Great March of Return demonstrations create figures that sing a sad lament. Voiced by the artists themselves yet digitally altered, they are, at once, human and non-human.

In this film, missing data in the figures’ faces are replaced with scars and glitches—an inscription of trauma onto the body. This act of flattening people is central to the real impossibility of representing faces and bodies that have been coded as illegal. Text taken from Edward Said’s book *After the Last Sky* is repurposed to create a new script which reflects on what it means today to be constructed as an “illegal” person, body, or entity.

The work also makes reference to “languages not fully formed”—how does one find the words to describe the ongoing effects of forced displacement? An attempt is made to represent this through “broken narratives, fragmentary compositions, self-consciously staged testimonials where the narrative voice keeps stumbling over itself, its obligations, its limitations”—an articulation of the contradictions inherent in this kind of documentation.

In consultation with Abbas and Abou-Rahme, *Only the Beloved Keeps Our Secrets*—a second work—was chosen to accompany *At Those Terrifying Frontiers Where the Existence and Disappearance of People Fade Into Each Other*. Taking the opportunity given by an online Festival, it was felt that this strategy might better simulate the artists’ performance, installation and exhibition making practice for viewers.

— Myriam Mouflih

**Filmography**

- **At Those Terrifying Frontiers Where the Existence and Disappearance of People Fade Into Each Other** (2019), 11 mins, Arabic with English subtitles
- **Oh Shining Star Testify** (2019), 5 mins
- **And Yet My Mask is Powerful, Part 1** (2016-2018)
- **Only the Beloved Keeps Our Secrets** (2016)
- **The Incidental Insurgents: Unforgiving Years, Part 2** (2012-2015)
- **The Zone (2011)**
- **Lost Objects of Desire (2010)**
- **Collapse (2009)**

Acknowledging that Abbas and Abou-Rahme often show their work in conversation—with other works and with the artists themselves—we are delighted to use the opportunity of an online festival to be able to present a second work by them alongside their film in the Berwick New Cinema Competition.
Only the Beloved Keeps Our Secrets
Basel Abbas & Ruanne Abou-Rahme

Only the Beloved Keeps Our Secrets invites us to consider the forms of entanglement between the destruction of bodies and the erasure of images, and the conditions under which these same bodies and images might once again reappear. Utilising military surveillance footage, the artists create a multi-layered and shifting work.

Like much of Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s work, the film is concerned with notions of fragmentation, disappearance and reappearance. Grainy footage is taken from an Israeli military surveillance in the foreground, whilst in the background a hand is holding a flower, freshly picked. After a court injunction, images were widely circulated online depicting a day in March 2014, where 14 year-old Yusuf Shawamreh crossed the “separation fence” erected by the Israeli military near Hebron. The teenage boy had been going to pick a flower, short in season and a delicacy in Palestinian cuisine, when he was shot dead by Israeli military forces.

Layers upon layers build on top of each other in a density of images. As the artists note, the function of this is “obscuring what came before in an accumulation of constant testament and constant erasure.” Another layer: red text in English capital letters, in Arabic script flashes up on top.

Using online recordings of song and dance to create a fragmented script, Abbas and Abou-Rahme use images of ambiguous and abandoned landscapes collected over a five year period. Shot mostly in Palestine, the images have the power to act as a testament but to invalidate themselves too. It’s the tension between opposing forces that the artists are able to convey in their work.

In consultation with Abbas and Abou-Rahme, Only the Beloved Keeps Our Secrets was chosen as an accompanying work for At Those Terrifying Frontiers Where the Existence and Disappearance. Taking the opportunity given by an online Festival, it was felt that this strategy might better simulate the artists’ performance, installation and exhibition making practice for viewers.

— Myriam Mouflih

Acknowledging that Abbas and Abou-Rahme often show their work in conversation—with other works and with the artists themselves—we are delighted to use the opportunity of an online festival to be able to present a second work by them alongside their film in the Berwick New Cinema Competition.
Way My It Did I
Maria Anastassiou

United Kingdom | 2020 | 36 mins | English, Romanian

In the Port of Tilbury—a place which historically was the point of entry for migrants to the UK—filmmaker Maria Anastassiou worked collaboratively with a group of people who had recently arrived in the town to paint a portrait of life in the transient space of the Thames Estuary.

Aboard a commercial vessel docked in the Port of Tilbury, Filipino migrant workers sing karaoke. This port town, on the Thames Estuary, has historically been a point of entry for migrants into the UK as well as a major commercial port. Set against the transient landscape of the Thames Estuary, this is a place laden with traces of the ever-shifting global narratives of empire, commerce and migrations.

Filmmaker Maria Anastassiou spent a year working with refugee and migrant groups in Tilbury—including Romanian workers, west-African asylum seekers and Filipino seafarers—to explore shared experiences of citizenship and belonging. Documenting the everyday realities of life for this community, Anastassiou intersperses seemingly natural moments of community with scenes of constructed testimony. With a slippery relationship between sound and image, the film draws attention to its own making in an attempt to challenge the production of “truths” or “facts” in our current “post-truth” media environment. In the process, this film reaffirms our relationship to the “real” as experienced and captured through the chosen technology with its limitations and potentials a conscious part of the film’s aesthetic.

While the harsh bureaucracy of the UK immigration system is made evident, the film also documents living and working in a port town in a post-Brexit landscape. Through shipping containers and windmills, signifiers of industry float in constant motion in the background of shots and the presence of the border is made visible—a black border patrol boat docked by the shore.

Shot on a hand-cranked 16mm film camera with the participants actively involved in the film’s production, the film aims to question official narratives and histories within the UK’s current political context. Commissioned by New Geographies—a three-year project which highlights overlooked or unexpected places across East Anglia—the film redraws the map of the region with places important to those living here.

— Myriam Mouflih

Maria Anastassiou (1982, Cyprus) is an artist and filmmaker based in London. She uses analogue and digital media in moving image, social practice and curatorial projects. Her work is informed by experimental ethnographic approaches to documentary and structuralist film traditions. Many of her projects are collaborative and defined by an exchange with other artists and the public, across disciplines and presentational platforms. Between 2014-2017 she took part in ‘Corners’, a collaboration with artists and audiences from the peripheries of Europe. In 2013 she co-founded collective-iz, a curatorial initiative creating expanded and immersive cinema events that examine new critical contexts for contemporary and historical avant-garde film. In 2010 she co-founded the film project ‘Unravel: The longest hand-painted film in Britain’ that won the Deutsche Bank Award for Art and involved more than 5000 people across the UK in creating a 16-hour long 16mm film. She is the recipient of an Acme Artists’ Studio Residency (2017-2023) at Highhouse Production Park. Her work has screened and exhibited at Courtisane Festival (Ghent), LUX (London), Whitney Museum of American Art and Microscope Gallery (New York), among others.

Filmography
“Give me fuel, give me fire, give me that which I desire.” Yu Araki’s enticing short film is a measured double portrait, firstly of a place—the Kushiro Robata restaurant in Hokkaido, northern Japan—as well as a person, the expert griller who slow cooks food at the centre of the restaurant over a bed of glowing orange charcoal.

Without dialogue or narration, Araki’s film sumptuously captures all manner of delectable foodstuffs in the slow, focused state of their preparation as well as their consumption. The griller works with patience and tenacity, with liquids lightly simmering on the tops of seashells or within the caps of upward-turned mushrooms. A dull, constant din of low noise is punctuated by the occasional pop of charcoal. While most of Fuel is framed in close-up and mid shots, Araki filmed the images with maximal social distance from the far corners of the restaurant with a long telephone lens, preferring to capture its atmosphere and the performance of the chef observationally, with as little intrusion as possible.

Fuel skilfully reflects the motif of this central hearth and the sustaining importance of fire to humans, both in the specific case of this restaurant and as a symbol to be found across cultures and histories. The film progressively builds towards a key scene wherein its second prominent character, the Sapporo-based artist Satoshi Hata, devours the food set before him following a hand gesture deriving from the Ainu worship known as onkami. Hata’s onkami is partial and incomplete, signifying the loss of this culture across generations of Ainu culture—as the artist’s matrilineal ancestors may have Ainu roots. Rather than representing this indigenous culture as an outsider himself, Araki wishes to point to the limits of what he might be able to understand as a Waijin—rather than an Ainu—himself.

— Herb Shellenberger
Though one could argue that all the work of artistic duo Mariana Caló & Francisco Queimadela has been invested in bending and folding reality into something unreal, *The Cypress Dance* stands as their furthest descent into narrative filmmaking and cinéma fantastique. While several hallmarks of the duo’s previous films are present—a transfixed focus on potent objects; a syncretic visual logic that unites diverse images without narration; and the visual and communicative importance of drawing and mark-making—the film pushes towards territory that feels new and surprising.

Beginning among the strident strains of baroque harpsichord and strings, the first images of *The Cypress Dance* are wild yellow daisies, their lush beauty disturbed by the traipsing of jet-black beetles, harbingers of the darkness soon to come. Daylight soon fades into a dusky, atmospherically dense dreamland, ushering in the oneiric register that will remain throughout the film. Images upon images flow together with little demarcation or explanation; the film operates as something a viewer feels rather than understands.

The film follows four actors—artist Mariana Barrote, her husband Henrique and their children Artur and Rafael—as they perform wordless, stoic and simplistic gestures, interacting with each other or with the coastal landscape through which they traverse. This rocky, cragg-filled seaside environment, which reflects the local ecology of Berwick-upon-Tweed itself, becomes a site of mystery and wonder, as sea anemones, shells, starfish and a diverse array of wondrous creatures are shown in cinematic glory to rival Jean Painlevé’s films of the natural world. The figures of the four characters are raised to the mythological register, resonant with Paul Valéry’s text on Calypso delivered as spoken narration. While this text is read, Barrote draws primitive-looking mythological figures on a rock, reminiscent of cave drawings, and aside from the otherworldly atmosphere of the film it also functions as a portrait of an artist and her family. Later in the film, a text by Georges Bataille ruminates on love, eroticism and death, as swirling symbols of each of these recur throughout the film.

A century after its earliest flourishing of Surrealism in European avant-garde cinema of the 1920s, *The Cypress Dance* stands as a contemporary flowering of it. Sequences of the film were derived from Barrote’s recordings of her dreams, and the multiple invocations of the mythological also lend weight to this comparison. The film’s landscape is, as Caló & Queimadela describe, an “emotional geography”, which reveals its concomitant “daydreams and projections”. Perhaps no projection is more elucidating than the title’s invocation of trees gently swaying in the wind, which the filmmakers call “a symbol of passage, resurrection, and eternal life.”

— Herb Shellenberger
An auto-fiction under the eyes of a female Christ, a marriage as a step into the forbidden land of the holy, a lesbian poem in the language of the divine, a paean to the color red, the world’s slowest rave.

— Jessica Dunn Rovinelli

Domesticity, intimacy, togetherness, performativity, nakedness, eroticism and sex have been faithful and constant presences in all of Jessica Dunn Rovinelli’s films, and this one is no exception. Best known for her Brooklyn-set feature So Pretty (2019), Rovinelli’s third short Marriage Story is an ode to the ecstatic energy that connects two souls and bodies in love.

Filmed digitally, intended to be screened on 35mm, and composed of three distinct parts taking place under the same roof, Marriage Story places a naked couple at the center of its stripped and poetic plot. The pair is the filmmaker herself and her partner, Anika Kash. They offer their bodies to each other and to the camera to embody a morning ritual, an act of pleasure, and a poetic performance. Powered by the robust energy of an introductory and concluding techno track, and by the sensuality of pulsating movements of the colour red, the film culminates in an earnest recitation of a poem written and voiced by Kash herself.

That a powerful and meaningful piece of cinema can be crafted solely by making use of a camera, a flat, a coffee maker, two queer souls and words of passion is of no surprise to anyone, but it sure is a remarkable and moving gift to receive from Jessica Dunn Rovinelli. Barbara Hammer would surely approve of it.

— Ana David

Jessica Dunn Rovinelli (1988) is a film director, editor, colourist and critic based in New York. Her second feature film So Pretty (2019), a literary translation/transposition focusing on gender and the utopian imagination, was screened at numerous international film festivals including Berlinale, IndieLisboa and Anthology Film Archives (New York) and awarded Best International Feature from FIC Valdivia. Her first feature, the performative documentary Empathy (2016), premiered at FID Marseille and follows a heroin-addicted escort across the USA. Rovinelli is also a recipient of the Development Funding Award from Centre national des arts plastiques (Paris) and New York Foundation for the Arts. In 2019, she was selected as one of Filmmaker Magazine’s 25 New Faces of Independent Film.
A day that could also be a life. A young man who could also be an older woman. A nightmare that could also be a dream. In Tunisia, while it could also be somewhere else: on the border between the necessity and the fear to make a film, the necessity and the fear for the revolution, This day won’t last is a cooperation with a distance. That is how this self-portrait turns into a group portrait. Clandestine, but straight from the heart: an end that could also lead to a new beginning.

— Mouaad el Salem

This day won’t last presents the visceral urgency of image-making within conditions of oppression. The stakes are high: Article 230—a law created in Tunisia during the French colonial period—criminalises homosexuality in the country and is actively enforced to abuse, imprison and harshly discriminate against LGBTQ people living in the country.

Against this context, Mouaad el Salem’s debut film is a vital and breathing claim to existence. In the words of the film, “still, I will continue to record and send materials to my friends who will help me to get my message across”. These materials—collected since 2017—result in a film which is not only a record of life lived and living, but also an act of passing on, to friends; an act of care and support between a community.

Both a personal portrait and a collective one, it is not clear who speaks and who is being filmed, where the account of one life ends and another begins. Close-ups on bodies, gestures, clothing, jewellery and domestic spaces express and document moments of freedom lived secretly in daily life. The subjects are seen, yet individually unidentifiable. Their safety is vitally important. The danger of recording and defining these images of joy and freedom, as well as the risk of being caught claiming this existence, is poignantly present throughout the film.

Weaving together video fragments and still black and white images, both intimate and diaristic, and collective and public, This day won’t last is a poetic and intuitive documentary. Footage of a fig tree being uprooted resonates with the complex question of what it means to leave Tunisia for the country’s young LGBTQ people. A cat is lovingly held and photographed, looking calmly into the flash of the camera; a trusted witness. Curtains and domestic textiles hang and breathe in the breeze as lungs, the ocean gives and pulls back. Life can’t be crushed, there is space here to live, to dance, to record, be seen and to dream.

— Christina Demetriou
Laura and Israël are a couple in their mid-thirties who are almost entirely linked to life and each other by their five-year-old son, Lucas. As the days go by, they fulfil their roles as partners, parents and adults in contemporary Brazil. But is there a way out of alienation?

Divided into three acts, Desterro is at once a film with and without a narrative. We witness the characters going about their lives, fulfilling concrete actions, and yet we are left without the sense that these actions lead into particular results. Laura and Israël have breakfast together, throw an anniversary party for their son, Laura visits her family and sees a friend. Described as such, the course of action in the film is as mundane as daily life itself can be. The excellence of Maria Clara Escobar’s first fiction feature, though, lies especially in its capacity to translate into cinema the uncanny feeling of life leading into stagnation.

As free and as assertive as a poem can be, the film unfolds its chapters in the narrative order of 1, 3, 2. Its tone, however, follows a linear crescendo of intensity and darkness: we follow Israël dealing with an abrupt loss whilst delivering what is expected of his role as an adult, just as we follow Laura’s struggle with being who she is supposed to be in society—and her way of breaking free from it. Throughout, the topics of class, race, modern life bureaucracy and the role of women in society are tackled. Everything is politics.

Blessed with solid and impactful interpretations from its actors, Desterro inhabits a physicality that is almost always quiet, powerful and contained, but what’s more, it is hinting at imminent change, at imminent rage. As Brazil descends into the unknown in real life, so does the family in this fictional plot. Exile can also be a state of mind—and setting fire to it might be the only way out.

— Ana David

Maria Clara Escobar (1988, Brazil) is a filmmaker and poet based in São Paulo. She is a graduate from the School of Cinema Darcy Ribeiro and her documentary feature film The Days with Him (2013) was screened at IBAFF – Murcia International Film Festival (Spain), Directors Week (Brazil) and the International Festival of Nuevo Habana Latin American Cine (Cuba) and was awarded by Tiradentes (Brazil), DocLisboa (Portugal), and Cachoeira Doc (Brazil). She co-wrote Found Memories (Julia Murat, 2011) which premiered at Venice Film Festival and won over 30 awards after participating in over 40 festivals. In 2019, Escobar released her first book of poems entitled “Medo, Medo, Medo”.

Filmography
Three young men—two brothers and their cousin—meet on a dense summer night to feel the “high” of a dozen “Hasiklidika” songs; Rebetiko songs from the beginning of the 20th century which celebrate the effects of Hashish. But beyond the pleasures of drugs, it is here a question of love, of joy and sadness, a search for freedom and political commitment... Little by little, yesterday’s counterculture, made out of poverty and violence, and built on the pains of exile, reverberates the one of today.

— Elise Florenty & Marcel Türkowsky

On a warm summer’s night in Greece, in a dimly lit room, Don’t Rush joins a pirate radio show whose host has dedicated a programme to old Rebetiko songs. Two others join him in listening; they sing, sleep and smoke. The atmosphere is casual and heartfelt—an invitation to shed the distractions of the world, to slow down and sit with the music.

The radio host—who may or may not have listeners on the other side of the airwaves—plays his favourite records. He sings along with the lyrics and talks of his life against the backdrop of the music’s context and history: created by immigrants, shaped by marginalisation and the desire for freedom. The result is a film that captures the experience of simply getting lost in music and the capacity of music to resonate across time and place.

Lyrics about hashish, love, loss and belonging imbue this hazy room, connecting a past time to the present. Words here are both heavy and tender. The host translates the meaning and context of the lyrics, where “berries” speak of bullets and “clothes” of prisoners, as well as their echoes of contemporary Greek life. For him, the music is also a political engagement, a call to responsibility for the hostility and violence of Europe’s land and sea borders.

In the 1920s, Rebetiko emerged in the settlements, on the edge of Athens, Piraeus and other Greek cities, where refugees from Asia Minor resettled and lived alongside poor, working class Greeks, sharing their culture, musical ideas and instruments. Looked down on by the upper and middle classes in Greece at the time, who favoured a classical European style of music, Rebetiko was defined by migration and a countercultural exchange of culture and ideas.

The three listeners are filmed in fragments—through mirrors and shadows—alongside the domestic details of the room. The image is sometimes obscured, non-linear perhaps, but connected through the music: the radio programme is heard in real time. Another time is brought into the current moment, not as nostalgia, but as a way of locating and listening to the present.

— Christina Demetriou

Elise Florenty & Marcel Türkowsky (1978, Bordeaux & Berlin) are an artist/film director duo based in Berlin and Paris. They’ve directed together several short and mid-length films exploring specific social-political situations through the prism of altered states of consciousness, delirium and ecstasy. Combining their interests in cinema and sonic anthropology, their films investigate the multiplicity of the self through a spiral of metamorphoses that interrogate our power relation—always shifting—to the ‘Other’ (the enemy, the plant, the animal, the spirit, the dead). Their work has been presented at numerous international film festivals and art institutions including International Film Festival Rotterdam, FID Marseille, DocLisboa, CCCB Barcelona and Centre Pompidou (Paris). They have received the European Media Art Festival award for their film works: The Sun Experiment (Ether Echoes) (2014) and Conversation with a Cactus (2017). Bom Dia Books recently published their first monograph entitled One Head Too Many.

Filmography:
"Patrick is made entirely from 16mm film and sound recordings produced during a residency at Headlands Centre for the arts, Marin County. The film focuses on the life and work of Patrick Cowley; a singular producer of dance music who pioneered the hi-NRG "San Francisco Sound" in the late 1970s."

— Luke Fowler

Some people’s favourite literary genres are biographies. Here at BFMAF, one of our favourite film genres are Luke Fowler’s portraits of cultural figures. Following studies on English musician Xentos "Fray Bentos" Jones, English composer Cornelius Cardew, Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing, Canadian composer Martin Bartlett and Scottish filmmaker and poet Margaret Tait, Fowler turns his faithful 16mm camera to the legacy of electronic music innovator Patrick Cowley.

A musician himself, Fowler draws on the audacious and experimental spirit of Cowley’s sound to throw an affectionate cinematic parade celebrating the life, work and memory of the music producer who we lost too early to AIDS in 1982, at the age of 32. Not preoccupied with constructing a neat and Wikipedia-like “classic” profile, Patrick instead lingers through the places and spaces in San Francisco that Cowley inhabited and mixes them with the gentle testimonies of Maurice Tani, former classmate, musical collaborator and friend. The result is a visually and sonically joyful and textured elegy to a creative spirit who was both of his time and ahead of it. More commonly known for his audacious remix of Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love” and his disco-infused, legendary and prolific partnership with Sylvester—Cowley’s visionary and talented creative skills led him to launch two solo albums as well as numerous artistic collaborations within the immensely rich gay cultural scene of the late 70s and early 80s, including creating gay porn soundtracks.

In line with BFMAF’s tradition to throw screenings in unorthodox and seemingly non-cinematic spaces, we can only hope to one day make justice to both Patrick Cowley and Luke Fowler by projecting Patrick in a bathhouse or disco dance floor. So what’s next for Fowler: Arthur Russell? Wendy Carlos? Whoever and whatever, we’ll be so grateful.

— Ana David

Luke Fowler (1978) is an artist, filmmaker and musician based in Glasgow. His work explores the limits and conventions of biographical and documentary filmmaking, and has often been compared to the British Free Cinema of the 1950s. Working with archival footage, photography and sound, Fowler’s filmic montages create portraits of intriguing, counter cultural figures, including Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing and English composer Cornelius Cardew. He received the inaugural Jarman Award in 2008 and was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2012. Fowler’s films have been presented widely, with screenings at ICA London, Glasgow Film Festival, Birtinale and Anthology Film Archives (New York), among others. His works have also been exhibited at Harvard Film Archive (Cambridge), Whitechapel (London), Taka Ishii Gallery (Tokyo), Barbican Art Gallery (London) and Tate Modern (London).

Filmography

The feature film debut of prolific Ho-Chunk filmmaker Sky Hopinka, *maɬni – towards the ocean, towards the shore* extends the promise of his meticulously crafted, short form experimental documentaries, while at the same time pushing towards new ideas, expressions and forms. A bifurcated portrait of the filmmaker’s two friends—Sweetwater Sahme and Jordan Mercier—the film weaves together their individual subjectivities while also purposefully never fully bringing them together.

BFMAF regulars will be familiar with Hopinka’s work, shown in three previous editions of the festival. His 2017 short *Dislocation Blues*—“an incomplete and imperfect portrait of reflections from Standing Rock”—won that year’s Berwick New Cinema Award, leading to a Propositions presentation with Hopinka’s short films, reading and conversation in 2018. His dextrous work extends across writing, visual art, photography and cinema, each of which provides some bearing on the other results. The result is a versatile experimental aesthetic that shifts and transforms across media, though as he succinctly summarises the central theme of his work, “personal positions of Indigenous homeland and landscape” come to the fore.

*maɬni – towards the ocean, towards the shore* locates this personal positioning in the third person, with the filmmaker’s embodied perspective aiming to relate the experience, philosophy and thinking of Sahme and Mercier, who never meet at any point. The film foregoes much of the abstractions found in Hopinka’s short form works in favour of a more direct, literal, photographic and legible document of his interactions and experiences with the film’s two subjects. Language, an ever-present theme in Hopinka’s films, plays a major part; the film is mostly spoken in the indigenous Chinuk Wawa language, including the filmmaker’s creative and poetic narration.

While perhaps less abstract and essayistic in style than Hopinka’s short filmmaking, the continuity remains in the method of the film’s production. The filmmaker shot and edited the film mostly on his own, with some assistance in the sound recording as well as the soundtrack composition. But this remains an individual, artisanal film without crew, script or the many trappings of a typical feature production. Instead, *maɬni* transmits to the viewer a sense of the immediacy with which the images were captured and the beauty of not knowing exactly how things might unfold. That the film’s extended topic of discussion is based around the Chinookan origin of death myth (*Imał*)—and the circular space between beginning and end, death and rebirth, life and the afterlife—makes this unfolding and not knowing all the more poignant.

— Herb Shellenberger

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**Filmography**

- *Maɬni – towards the ocean, towards the shore* (2020)
- *Cloudless Blue Egress of Summer* (2019)
- *When you’re lost in the rain* (2018)
- *Painting Spells* (2018)
- *Dislocation Blues* (2017)
- *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* (2017)
- *I’ll Remember You as You Were, Not as What You’ll Become* (2016)
- *Visions of an Island* (2016)
- Kunįkaga Remembers Red Banks, Kunįkaga Remembers the Welcome Song (2014)
- *wawa* (2014)
The Year of the Discovery (El año del descubrimiento)
Luis López Carrasco

In 1992, the Barcelona Olympic Games and the Seville Expo were held in Spain. However, in the south-eastern town Cartagena, the protests sparked by the industrial crisis became increasingly violent and resulted in a mass uprising that culminated in the burning of the Autonomous Community’s parliament.

Luis López Carrasco was 11 years old when he saw the Spanish town Cartagena’s parliament burn on TV. A significant fact is that, now, those around him in his adulthood don’t seem to remember. With his second feature, The Year of Discovery—a split-screen epic of 200 minutes and 45 characters—he tries to understand the economic, social and political events that led to it. Drawing on the testimonies by those who remember it, the film travels back in time to present workers and unemployed people, of all different ages, discussing at a café the various political and personal concerns of that time.

Individual memories thus become grouped in a film-document for present and future generations, atoning for a collective pact of forgetfulness as recent as not even 30 years ago. What happened on an economical and political level is not foreign to many other countries: the Spanish liberal government pushed for an accelerated process of de-industrialisation in the name of a supposed economical progress, leaving the working class in distraught and the trade unions in despair.

That the viewer spends the almost entirety of the film listening to these more or less casual conversations, immersed in the interior of a café is of no small significance. A bold and effective storytelling choice from López Carrasco which mimics that original act of him and his co-screenwriter Raúl Liarte who—imbued in a remarkable spirit of civic commitment—interviewed the workers and union leaders who had rarely been heard before. A monumental ode to the role of cinema as an act of listening and of rescuing from oblivion what dominant history might not want to keep a memory of.

— Ana David

Luis López Carrasco (1981, Murcia, Spain) is a filmmaker and writer. His first feature film Los materiales (2010) was awarded the Jean Vigo Prize for Best Direction at the Punto de Vista International Film Festival 2010 and the International Jury’s Special Mention at FID Marseille in 2010. In 2008, he co-founded Los Hijos, an experimental cinema and documentary collective. His work has been shown in numerous international film festivals, such as Locarno, Rotterdam, Viennale, Toronto, New York Film Festival – Film at Lincoln Center and Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema, as well as a number of contemporary art centres, including Museo Nacional Reina Sofía (Madrid), Museo Guggenheim (Bilbao), Centre Pompidou (Paris) and ICA London.

Filmography
The Grand Inga hydroelectric project—the world's largest proposed hydro-power scheme—promises to bring a permanent power source to the Democratic Republic of Congo, but when? In *Up at Night*, Nelson Mankengo shows the residents of a Kinshasha neighbourhood's creative approach to continual power outages caused by promises unfulfilled and finances revoked.

The film was originally conceived as a photography project. After studying at La Femis’s summer school in Paris, Makengo returned to the DRC and began mapping out the Kinshasha neighbourhoods as they were lit up by different light sources. Then, with additional funding, the installation merged into a film.

In a screen split three ways, images flicker; some scenes come close to total darkness. As the residents of the neighbourhood find creative solutions by using portable LED lights, Makengo shines a light on the effects of living in a state of uncertainty. The thrum of a generator rumbles intermittently throughout; a background noise that is at the centre of the soundscape. The camera focuses on young people who question the decisions of the ruling class, while a disembodied voice of an authority figure plays through small portable radios—the voice of Joseph Kabila, former President of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The children's faces are lit up by flower shaped lights, as if posing the question: is there hope for a brighter future?

For Makengo, the philosophical question of what it means to live in this way has more importance than the political situation that enabled it: “People no longer say they will wait for electricity, they organise and appropriate the question of light. What matters in the film is not politics, but how Congolese observe their reality wherever they are. Politics, we cannot escape. In Congo, everything always brings us back to politics ... But how do we perceive all the reinvention of light?”

— Myriam Mouflih

**Filmography**


**Filmography**


**Filmography**

After the death of her son an elderly woman reckons with her own sense of mortality. A story of community struggle begins to unfold as a government decision to build a reservoir interferes with the woman's plan for her own burial. Set in a small village in the mountainous regions of Lesotho, Jeremiah Lemohang Mosese's sophomore feature carefully grapples with the politics of land in contemporary nation states. Told through the lens of legend, the film illuminates the tension between ancestral land and modernity.

In this film, the spiritual world is entangled with the living and the presence of generations of ancestors are felt throughout. It is an enquiry into ecology, spirituality and indigenous relationships to land, life and bodies. In this rural mountain village, the community's way of life feels at odds with the promise of resettlement that is being sold to them. Interior shots of the protagonist's house in deep blues and red contrast with the pastel colours of the landscape in a country that has rarely been depicted on film.

Threads of collective responsibility and community empowerment are interwoven throughout the film, revealing a constant tension between the present and tradition. In a key scene, the Chief of the village notes, “every time I say the word progress my tongue rolls backwards. "I can't get myself to spit it out”—highlighting the village's difficulty accepting a decision that was made on their behalf by people outside of their community. The resilient spirit of the elderly woman named Mantoa (played by Veteran South African actress Mary Twala Mhlongo), drives the film until its end—the final scene cements the woman's legendary status.

— Myriam Mouflih

Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese (1980, Lesotho) is a self-taught filmmaker and visual artist based in Berlin. His film Mother, I Am Suffocating. This Is My Last Film About You, premiered in the Berlinale Forum in 2019 and was selected for Final Cut in Venice in 2018, where it won six awards. Mosese was one of three filmmakers selected for Biennale College Cinema and recently awarded the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Visionary Filmmaking at Sundance. Mosese is an alumnus of the Berlinale Talents (2011), Focus Features Africa First (2012), Realness African Screenwriting Residency (2017) and Cinefondation’s L’Atelier (2019).

Filmography
This Is Not a Burial, It’s a Resurrection (2019), Mother, I Am Suffocating. This Is My Last Film About You, (2019), Behemoth: Or the Game of God (2016), Mosonngoa (2014), For Those Whose God Is Dead (2013)
The Unseen River  (Giòng Sông Không Nhìn Thấy)
Phạm Ngọc Lân

The Unseen River (Giòng Sông Không Nhìn Thấy)
Phạm Ngọc Lân

Following on from his widely screened and hugely accomplished 2019 short Blessed Land, Phạm Ngọc Lân’s The Unseen River cements the Vietnamese filmmaker’s place as one of the most bold and unique visionaries of contemporary new cinema. The film explores the magic, beauty and intensity of the Mekong River by following several humans and one animal as they all traverse its banks. A young couple visit a pair of monks in a futuristic temple; two former lovers reunite by chance years after their affair; and a spunky black-and-white dog deftly navigates the river landscape tying them all together. Magic and melodrama mix and meld mellifluously along the Mekong.

Two more “M” words: memory and melancholy. The rushing Mekong is often compared to the flowing of time itself. Yet while time ostensibly flows in a forward direction, we regularly experience currents that drag our memory to and fro, strong pulls of an inescapable undercurrent lurking beneath the surface. The woman and the fisherman reminisce about their affair 30 years earlier, their conversation about separation, time and loss punctuated by wistful folk music. At the same time, the young, tattooed couple express their difficulty projecting their relationship into the future: “[Our parents] want us to hurry [to get married] but we can’t decide yet. Not because we’re not in love. We just can’t see our future.”

Though the characters express an abundance of uncertainty, Phạm Ngọc Lân’s filmmaking is confidently assured. Gentle, subtly kinetic camera movements seem to guide the viewer along as if by hand, with delicate zooms into the faces of each character conveying their inner emotions better than any dialogue ever could. In a brisk twenty minutes, The Unseen River establishes a remarkably-crafted atmosphere, a minimal yet engrossing narrative and characters who feel fully-fleshed and roundly dimensional. A huge part of that is certainly down to the performances. The woman is played skillfully and to full emotion by veteran film and television actress Minh Châu while the young couple’s naturalistic performances are delivered by creators/influencers Naomi & Wean. The pair also provide the kiss-off of an end credit song, the blustery indie-folk-rap mash-up “Retrograde”. The Unseen River comprises part of Mekong 2030, an anthology film of five shorts from different Mekong region countries produced by Luang Prabang Film Festival in Laos.

— Herb Shellenberger

Phạm Ngọc Lân (1986, Vietnam) is a film director with a background in urban planning and architecture, based between Hanoi and North Carolina. Lân’s debut short film The Story of Ones (2011) has been screened in numerous film festivals and art museums, including Visions du Réel (Switzerland), CPH-DOX (Denmark), New Cinema and Contemporary Art – Rencontres Internationales (Paris/Berlin) and Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. His first two short fiction films, Another City (2016) and Blessed Land (2019) both premiered at the Berlinale Shorts Competition. Lân is currently developing his first feature film Cu Li Never Cries.

Filmography
LIQUID STRANGER
Stefan Ramírez Pérez

A knife suspended in the air, a PVC trench coat, a slick of red lipstick and multiple stories of murder and obsession all become signifying agents in this camp mash-up of language, narrative and performance. This experimental short film challenges any claim for authenticity—least of all in the eyes of the viewer.

Stefan Ramírez Pérez’s experimental short is a kind of fan fiction, drawing on and queering cinematic references that range from Hitchcock’s psychological thrillers, 1970s porn to 1980s erotic thriller—allowing them to escape from, and flirt with one another (as well as the viewer), in a choreography of suspended narrative. LIQUID STRANGER takes apart and re-enacts familiar codes, settings and narrative sequences from genre cinema, thus making them strange and slippery. It draws on feminist film theory—particularly spectatorship and voyeurism—as well as examining conflations of queer sexuality with mental illness. The performance of narrative comes to stand in for narrative itself, and the three protagonists evolve out of their gendered roles, playing with and eluding the grasp of desire, violence, identification and representation.

The roles of victim, killer and investigating agent converge through the three actresses, in what appears to be a psychosexual thriller reduced to its surface. This fever-dream film takes props, costumes, gestures, language and narrative, and reduces them all to an equal level of artificiality, playfully questioning—what histories and violent desires do these surfaces hold? And how is this enacted in the act of looking?

The image deceives itself, it does so knowingly. It makes visible the mechanisms from which it is constructed, looked at and looks back, as well as how it operates within a system of value and power. LIQUID STRANGER examines the act of representation by looking at the performed surface—twisted to camp potential—where the characters and the image itself continually slip through the grasp of the viewer. Or, to put it another way, where the spectacle spins over the spectator from above, pole dancing to a hypnotic, cosmic soundtrack.

— Christina Demetriou

Stefan Ramírez Pérez (1988, Germany) is a filmmaker based in Cologne. He studied at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne from 2010-17. His experimental films and video works have been screened at several festivals and art institutions, including International Film Festival Rotterdam, International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, European Media Art Festival (Osnabrück), Visions du Réel Nyon (Switzerland) and Julia Stoschek Collection Düsseldorf, among others. His recent group and solo shows include Artotek Cologne, Kunstmuseum Bonn, Museum Folkwang (Germany), Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade and Alternative Space LOOP (Seoul). He received the Chargesheimer Scholarship by the City of Cologne in 2018, and the Graduation Award by the Academy of Media Arts Cologne in 2017. In 2018 he was a participant at the residency program Schloss Ringenberg (NRW Scholarship).

Filmography
Rejecting a catch-all definition of blackness while cast across two screens, The Name I Call Myself unpicks multifaceted LGBTQ identities within the local black British diaspora. References to Audre Lorde and W.E.B. Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness permeate the film, inviting viewers to interrogate multiplicities of Black identity.

In this short by Rhea Dillon, the multiplicities of Black LGBTQ identities are carefully constructed and deconstructed, discarding the notion of a universal, homogenous experience of the world. Across two screens, Dillon shows a parent stretching in gentle yoga poses with their child; a group of friends having a meal in someone’s home; a person voguing outside alone; and later, inside, surrounded by peers, a couple holding hands in the back of a taxi. Small moments of affection that are a joy to witness.

In an interview with Vogue, Dillon touches on the idea of Humane Afrofuturism—a term she coined to raze and rebuild notions of Afrofuturism. Dillon says, “I feel like there are practitioners right now, like Kerry James Marshall and Arthur Jafa, even designers like Grace Wales Bonner, who are elevating black people in an everyday sense. For instance, one of Kerry James Marshall’s super famous paintings is of a girl walking a dog down the street. It’s really just a girl walking a dog down the street, but why we’re marvelling by it is that the visual of a young black girl being so free in society has not existed until now, and that’s the problem.”

While her work is steeped in reality and research, there is also magic in Dillon’s frames. For the debut presentation of The Name I Call Myself, Dillon augments the screen to real life through a multi-sensory experience in collaboration with a fragrance from Byredo called Bal D’Afrique. The scent blends ingredients from Africa and Europe to pay homage to the diaspora of which these stories are being told.

Punctuating a soundscape by James William Blades, a voice echoes, “we are so many different ingredients,” reminding viewers to do more than just gaze beyond the binary—it asks them to dismantle it. It helps to transform the work into something beyond documentation, hitting an emotional register and inviting an active spectatorship. — Myriam Mouflih

Rhea Dillon (based in London) is an artist, writer and poet. Using video, installation, images, painting and olfaction, she examines and abstracts her intrigue of the “rules of representation” as a device to undermine contemporary Western culture. She is particularly interested in the self-coined phrase ‘Humane Afrofuturism’ as a practice of bringing forward the humane and equality-led perspectives on how we visualise Black bodies. Her work has been featured at a number of art and film institutions internationally, including The British Film Institute, 198 Gallery, Somerset House, Mimosa House, Blank 100 (London); Red Hook Labs, Aperture Gallery (New York); Red Bull Film Festival (Los Angeles); Sanam Archive (Accra, Ghana). She is an Associate Lecturer at Central Saint Martins (London) and the co-founder and curator of ‘Building The Archive: Thinking Through Cultural Expression’, a talk series that celebrates Black creative practitioners and their contributions to visual culture within arts and design higher education.

Filmography
Based on the 1990 experimental novel by Japanese author Banana Yoshimoto, Lisa Spilliaert’s feature debut *N.P* is a silent film translation of the text into a cinematic scenario. Translation itself is at the heart of *N.P*’s narrative, which details the compilations and absurdities of protagonist Kazami’s attempts to translate the short stories of fictional author Sarao Takase, as well as her sometimes disturbing interactions with the late author’s children. The previous three translators of Takase’s writing committed suicide in mysterious circumstances and Kazami’s encounters with his daughter (and lover) Sui increasingly pull her into a world of darkly chaotic energy.

As a teen, Lisa Spilliaert fell in love with Banana Yoshimoto’s novel and developed a plan to make a film adaptation over many years. The resulting film grapples with the complexities of moving from the written page to cinematic time and space. *N.P* is a silent film, though not in the traditional sense. While the sound of dialogue is erased—and rendered into captions—all the other sound is present, from room tone to the clinking of plates in a restaurant, from the chirping of birds to the quiet roar of sea waves. Beyond dialogue, narration is delivered as visual text via intertitles. These devices lend the film a dreamy, otherworldly quality befitting its enigmatic, unpredictable and at times violent action.

The film eschews respectability and is comparatively more quiet in its subversion than most transgressive films. The dark and unpredictable energy of Sui—the half-sister of twins Otohiko and Saki, whose incestuous relationship with her father may have had some bearing on his suicide—is magnetic and all-consuming. Actress Mikiko Kawamura’s portrayal of Sui (and Spilliaert’s direction of her) contributes an all-time great performance suitable for the influential MUBI film list ‘hysterical in a floral dress’ (compiled by user Jordany). Like Isabelle Adjani’s Anna in *Possession* (1981), Asia Argento’s Anna Battista in *Scarlet Diva* (2000) or Béatrice Dalle’s Coré in *Trouble Every Day* (2001), Kawamura’s Sui holds a venomous beauty, equally potent in saccharine elegance as it is in outbursts of violence.

As a director, Spilliaert is undoubtedly blessed with amazing material to adapt. It takes courage and self-assuredness to approach such a monumental work of literature for a first feature, but through her film, Spilliaert is able to effectively convey the complexities and contradictions of these delicately fleshed out characters. A soundtrack featuring music by Japanese ambient artist Asuna, the American harsh noise combo Wolf Eyes and Antwerp dream pop band Stacks help propel the film along, with the latter providing an anchor to the film’s memorable final, gorgeous and lengthy sequence. Lasting ten minutes, this gorgeously terse scene is yet another bold move from Lisa Spilliaert and will keep sensitive viewers on the edge of their seat for its duration.

— Herb Shellenberger
Filmmaker in Focus

Angelo Madsen Minax

US-born filmmaker and artist Madsen Minax crafts his short films and videos in various breaths—ever so often personal, experimental and transgressive ones. Within these breaths, Minax approaches and investigates queerness, trans identity and sexuality, mysticism and death, family bonds and social justice, in a many-layered approach to image-making. Spanning almost a decade of his body of work, and intended to be viewed chronologically, Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival presents the first Madsen Minax retrospective outside of the USA.

The timing of this presentation of Minax's work is of special importance: a decade has passed since the release of his first feature documentary, Riot Acts: Flaunting Gender Deviance in Music Performance (2010), and as we head out to select his video work so far, Minax is on the brink of the completion of a second feature documentary which promises to be of particular robustness and present a renewed conceptual and formal step in his practice, one already possible to foresee via his latest short, At the River (2020). If 2021 doesn't present itself as dystopian as 2020, we will see the release of a sophomore title, North By Current, a portrait of his family against the backdrop of rural Michigan.

In keeping with an artistic practice that is thematically close to home, Minax has listed “landscape, place, love, intimacy, sex, kinship, spirituality” among others as grand interests to point his camera and intellect at. The fact that one might be aware in advance of the grand topics of his work as well as knowing that they’re deeply personal—to the point of including himself in front of the camera—doesn’t prevent an ever-satisfying Pandora-box effect of taking place in the process of discovering it: one can never quite guess what one’s going to be exposed to, but it often is served with a fair amount of inventiveness and audacity, and there’s always something more to delve into and/or rediscover at a second, third reprise of it. For the sake of providing some cardinal points, though, the viewer who digs the great work of Jennifer Reeder, A.K. Burns, Dani & Sheilah ReStack and Ester Martin Bergsmark will probably also appreciate Minax's work.

Additional to being a multidisciplinary artist via music, installations, photography and even sculpture, Minax’s video work relentlessly explores and experiments with narrative and style. Watching his videos and short films is to come in contact with truly free, moving, tender, tabu-freed and image-bending pieces. One can say he’s a sort of alchemist of images. Luckily for us, it’s not just with images that Minax is talented with. He truly has something to say every time he crafts a film.

— Ana David

Angelo Madsen Minax is a director based between New York and Vermont. He received a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2005. His filmography spans documentary and hybrid filmmaking, formats, narrative cinema, experimental and essay film. His prolific practice transgresses form, style and narrative to explore queer and trans intimacies, chosen and biological structures of kinship, cosmic, natural, and technological phenomena. His works have been screened and exhibited at the European Media Arts Festival (Osnabrück), Kurzfilm Festival Hamburg, Ann Arbor Film Festival, Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), Anthology Film Archives (New York), British Film Institute (London), Museum of Fine Arts (Houston) and REDCAT (Los Angeles). Minax is currently an Assistant Professor of Time-Based Media at the University of Vermont. His second feature documentary, North By Current (2021), is currently in production.

Filmography


At the River

Angelo Madsen Minax

It is the 4th of July in rural middle America and the water levels are rising. The filmmaker’s religious family stage a half-hearted intervention with their adult child.

The filmmaker follows his father through the woods as he describes the growth and life force of the forest. The singular solitude of the forest is disrupted by the familial chaos of the domestic space, where food is being prepared. While hamburgers sizzle, the family fight about money, alcohol use, and skirt around an unspecified criminal charge, all while several small children zone out the arguments by gazing out windows or watching phones. Between arguments and meal prep, the family load possession into a truck. Seemingly preparing for the unknown as the water levels rise and a storm rolls in, there is a tension between what is spoken and what is unspoken. The unspoken looms like its own force of nature, here, where the sky still holds wonder on the fourth of July in middle America.

UK Premiere

Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival 2020

Movie Review

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**The Eddies**
Angelo Madsen Minax

A death and destruction-obsessed transsexual searches for human connection in the humid Southern underground worlds of internet hook-ups and storm tunnels.

From above and below ground, a man named Eddie describes flood lines, levees and trivial histories of the crumbling infrastructure of Memphis, TN. In this same city, the filmmaker, a recent transsexual transplant, watches war films and contemplates masculine connectivity as he attempts to integrate into the American South. He posts a Craigslist ad asking men to masturbate on-camera with their firearms. He receives a single response from a man who's name is also Eddie. Paced, static images of Mississippi River currents, freight trains and decaying infrastructure mark the above-ground landscape of Memphis, while shaky, handheld darkness, with flickers of light, depict glimpses of the city's underground tunnels. The encounter between the filmmaker and "Eddie No. 2" is revealed on camera, explicitly. The underground world becomes a lens through which the challenges of the above-ground world can be reconsidered, while coincidence and loose association reveal an inherent human desire to belong and to search for physical and psychic fulfillment.

**Because of Us**
Angelo Madsen Minax

Under found footage and animated skyscapes, a mystical voice guides us through a near-death experience. She begins by describing the experience as a sensation of viewing, similar to watching a movie. Through this form, the video explores the parallels, divergences, and interdependency of labor—capital, consumption, excess, ownership—and cosmology—stars, planets, networks, connections. It suggests that both are alchemical and that the nature of industry, progress and technology, are themselves icons for worship. On-screen text is sourced from "The Millennial Project: Colonizing the Galaxy in Eight Easy Steps," a 1998 book by Marshall T. Savage.
**The Source Is A Hole**  
Angelo Madsen Minax

United States | 2017 | 25 mins

A mystical voice contemplates mythology, science fiction, sexuality and death as a series of holes: through which to travel, through which to perceive, through which to accept, through which to speak.

Through a series of love letters to feminine deities, *The Source is A Hole* poses a web of loose connections and liminal associations to sculpt a treatise on transsexual mourning. Stories recount the authors own inception at the 1982 world’s fair, his attempt to remove a lodged tampon, and a barrage of fantastical, psychodynamic dreamscapes. Interwoven with sentiments of the everyday, performance reenactment, and waxings on the history of science fiction cinema, *The Source* displays unabashedly the human drive for connection, in all of its lifeblood and all of its bloodlessness. *The Source is A Hole* draws on science fiction works ranging from *Blade Runner* to *Back to the Future* to *Logan’s Run* to *The Omega Man* and a few contemporaries. The filmmaker appears on screen briefly to reenact Bas Jan Ader’s performance “I’m Too Sad To Tell You,” and engages theoretic conversations about psychoanalysis, ontology, phenomenology, and gender construction.

**Forward into the Afternoon**  
Angelo Madsen Minax

United States | 2014 | 6 mins

After an instructional road trip to the ocean a figure communes with stray dogs to build seaside graveyards, petite and monumental sand mountains, and nourishes the sand graves with fresh breast milk. The project was made with collaborator Sadie Lune.
**No Show Girls**  
Angelo Madsen Minax

*(No) Show Girls* is a series of three videos. Each video documents an encounter between the artist and a trans performer.

I dictate instructions to the individual performers, who then enact improvised strip-teases (in silence) while adhering to specific directions of positioning and movement. The performances fail to reveal genitals. Perspective oscillates between three different shot compositions; positioning the performer, my engagement with the performer, and the space we inhabit to divert and re-focuses genital revelation. Between trans filmmaker and trans performer, a trans gaze emerges, as we redefine our needs and desires for each other through the making process. The performer featured in the images and sample clip is long-time collaborator Jakob Van Lammeren.

— Angelo Madsen Minax

**My Most Handsome Monster**  
Angelo Madsen Minax

From vast, mystical, and historically charged landscapes, *My Most Handsome Monster* documents two separate BDSM scenarios as they unfold between queer sex workers and their play partners.

With archival footage, landscape meditation, on-screen text and voice-over narration the film ask a viewer to attempt to locate the slippages between subversion and re-inscription, liberation and retention, real and imagined, and consider how BDSM practices stage, re-inscribe, and/or open out historical narratives around race, bodies, sex, and power. Sweeping landscape portraits, oscillations of tender embrace, and controlled impact, create a state of waiting—a gesture toward both collective histories and imagined futures.
Notes on a Few Angelo Madsen Minax Works

Steve Reinke

1 — Spoken, Unspoken, Unsayable

At the River fades into a view of a canopy of old hardwood trees, the camera slowly spinning as the camera-person walks through the forest. We hear the sound of footsteps and throat-clearing, but the first words come from off-screen: “Its oak, oak tree.” The camera moves down to earth and we see a middle aged man continue to talk and slowly approach. “Hemlock, hemlock is so soft. Feel how soft the hemlock is.” The man—père Minax—talks about the ecosystem in an old-fashioned dad way: calm facts given with a distant cordiality that might pass, under the right circumstances, for some kind of intimacy. It is a quiet, bucolic scene, lasting about 2 of the video’s 10 minutes, though it does have an ominous edge. The taller trees are blocking the sun, choking out the birch. And the forest is empty of animal life.

The second and longest of the video’s three acts documents an afternoon in their house. There’s talk of batteries and generators, and the river looks ominously high; the family seem to be preparing for a storm or flood (or both). Minax documents a family squabble (money, alcoholism, probation violations) as frozen hamburger patties sizzle and the truck is loaded for evacuation. The protracted squabble is caught largely on audio (we follow with subtitles). Minax has removed himself from the proceedings. He mostly hangs out with the kids who are doing their best to ignore the adult world. The camera only occasionally documents mom and sis, the primary combatants. At one point—the only time Minax is really present or active—he intervenes in a nephew wanting to play with the camera. They discuss big boy toys and who is a big boy. Laughter releases the tension.

At this point, the video seems to be a particular kind of observational documentary: one in which the director is a participant but uses the camera as a kind of removal mechanism, an apparatus to escape and observe from a safe position, a position that, in this case, refuses to engage in the family squabbles. (I was trying to think of work in this mode, I was trying to remember Richard Billingham’s name and I googled “British family drunk photographer” and the top three results were indeed Billingham.)

But, of course, there are no innocent vantage points, no stable positions, no simple subjectivities in Minax’s work, which is marked by a playful, restless intelligence that uses a wide variety of strategies, techniques, approaches, voices. And this is borne out in the third act of At the River, which serves as much more than just the lyrical coda (or space for healing) it might initially appear to be. There are no characters in most of this section, though I like to imagine that the rest of the family have evacuated and Minax is left behind for a family-free 4th of July. Instead, we leave the banal external world of the domestic documentary and enter a lyrical space, which is simultaneously internal/psychic and external/phenomenological:

plunged into water, empty beaches, fireworks, solarized forest images, layered soundtrack. We are both in a “real” space: documentation of a particular 4th of July—and in a constructed representation of a fictional space which may be at times symbolic (water as purifier) at other times expressionistic (though in fairly subtle ways, particularly considering what Minax does in some other works). It ends with a return of the father (in v/o) telling—in stark contrast to his earlier talk about trees, though with the same flat affect—a story of his spiritual healing kissing Jesus’s wounds. (But still the forest is empty of birds, squirrels, weasels, all animals.)

Minax describes the video as having a tension between “what is spoken and what is unspoken”—and this is certainly true. But what Madsen means by the unspoken is not in regard to the things one is merely unable or unwilling to express, but to a larger force: “the unspoken looms like its own force of nature.” This is perhaps not the unspoken, but that which lies outside of—or exceeds—language altogether. It is this very category—not the unspoken, but the unsayable—that Minax returns to, trying to avoid, or to complicate, the Romantic conflation of the transcendent with the unsayable.

2 — Distributed Agency

If At the River is rooted in—and extends—a certain kind of observational documentary, then The Eddies is a radical take on the performative documentary. There are two Eddies. One takes Minax on a tour of the underground tunnels of Memphis. The other answers a Craig’s List personal ad to be filmed masturbating with a firearm, who asks Minax to join, the latter who explains that he is trans and has a different kind of penis. Eddie #2 is fine with that, and they have a fine, sweet time. In the third act (the first two acts are intercut) Minax is back at home, in bed, looking sad, bathed in a large video projection of Freddie Mercury performing “Somebody to Love”.

In performative documentary, as well as in artists’ video in general, the director/artist often occupies multiple positions. They can simultaneously be the subject in front of the camera, the narrator providing voice over (either simultaneously or retrospectively with the on-camera events), and the authorial force that hovers timelessly over all aspects of the project and may seem to determine meaning (implied author). Though a more thorough analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, I’d like to outline some of the subject positions Minax occupies in the video.

Although there is no authorial v/o in The Eddies, Minax does employ on-screen text in a sly, playful voice. In the first instance, the narrator asserts that “Eddie #1 chooses what to tell me. And what not to tell me.” But Eddie is being a straightforward, factual tour guide, so by raising this unfounded concern—that Eddie #1 may be leaving things out intentionally—we begin to doubt our narrator, the Minax of the first-person titles. Let’s call that position 1, the closest thing we have to an omniscient narrator, speaking retrospectively, but also unreliably.
A later title: “Eddie #2 didn’t mind that I insisted on calling him ‘Eddie #2.’” Well, that seems wrong. In the documentation of the encounter, the on-screen Minax doesn’t refer to him as Eddie #2, and there would be no reason for him to do so. What the title does is emphasize two contradictory subject positions: the Minax in the scene, documenting his interaction (let’s call that subject position 2) who has no inclination or reason to call him “Eddie #2,” and the slyly unrelia-

able narrator of position 1, who has reason to make him play the role of Eddie #2.

A similar split is suggested by another title: “In the caverns, Eddie #1 tells me things that I will never remember.” The I who will not remember is subject position 2. Subject position 1 will remember: he has the tapes. The subjects occupying each position thus have completely different relationships to sensation, memory, agency.

There is also a passive Minax, an object whose only activity is to absorb media, mostly war movies with pro-conservative values. This is subject position 3: a character, a performance. This activity suggests a narrative reason for Minax’s interest in the libidinal qualities of firearms, but also the causality short-circuits.

In the third act, a different subject position emerges: a hybrid of 2 and 3. This integrated Minax has some agency (he can return the camera’s gaze, he has projected the media onto himself, rather than passively viewing it). And, as always, we have the implied artist—an unstable, powerful force—constructed from the interactions between the previous 4 subject positions.

1 Narrator of titles (unreliable, playful, retrospective)
2 Active Minax (behind the camera, direct agency, in the moment)
3 Passive Minax (in front of the camera, passive, acting a narrative role)
4 Integrated Minax
5 Implied Author/Artist

3 — How to Draw a Tremor / Live Nude Genitals

One last quick note on The Eddies. Intimacy is difficult, as are genitals and documents of unexpected sexual encounters. (Vulnerability is easy). There are many amazing things about the encounter between Minax and Eddie #2. Not the least that it is entirely positive, sweetly life affirming (abject sex is easy). It helps that the visuals are limited to Eddie #2’s headless body and fine cock, and that Eddie is verbal enough to paint a picture for us of the images we are denied. (I’m not sure what I’m saying here, but felt compelled to say something). It is, to quote Jennifer Doyle, “a scene in which the pleasures of representing sex outstrip the epistemological drive to figure sex out.”

4 — Wet Dog / Dry God

The Source Is a Hole is a video essay, a great video essay. The excellence of the writing, and Minax’s performance of that writing, may make it seem like a predominantly literary affair, but this is not the case. The figural is the force which erodes the differences between image and text: making images (especially anima-
tions) become linear/discursive, turning text into image, spatializing in. Although often instances of linguistic metaphor and metonymy are, or could seem to be, merely illustrated graphically in the images, there are many other instances of metaphors and metonymies being produced exclusively through images (usually animations). Our impulse to prioritize verbal/linguistic meanings over visual ones should be put out to pasture.

The Source Is a Hole is also a mind-game film, like The Matrix (1999) or Inception (2010), except that The Source Is a Hole is good. (Possibly the only good main-stream thing in the genre is the HBO mini-series The Watchmen (2019). The others tend to put characters with old-fashioned senses of agency and subjectivity into overly plotty mysteries.) Other Minax works could also be viewed constructively as having some aspects of mind-game films (particularly in terms of distributed agency), especially his 2017 feature Karios Dirt & The Errant Vacuum. I like lists, numbered lists, and so I’m ending with an excerpt from Thomas Elsaesser’s 2018 essay ‘Contingency, causality, complexity: distributed agency in the mind-game film’:

Twelve key features of mind-game films: (1) multiple universes, (2) multiple temporalities, (3) causality between coincidence and conjunction, (4) feedback: looped and retroactive causalities, (5) mise-en-abyrne constructions, (6) the observer as part of the observed, (7) living with contradictions, (8) imaginary resolutions no longer dissolve real contradictions, (9) antagonistic mutuality under conditions of distributed agency, (10) agency—with the self, against the self, (11) time travel films as black boxes and (12) the mind-game film as pharmakon. Ultimately, mind-game films amplify ontological instability and dismantle both the sovereign subject and its antidote, the divided self of modern subjectivity, in view of accepting more complex but also self-contradictory, more limited but also more extended forms of agency.

Steve Reinke is an artist and writer best known for his monologue-based video essays. His work is in many collections including the Museum of Modern Art (New York), Centre Pompidou (Paris), MACBA (Barcelona) and National Gallery (Ottawa). He has shown work at many film festivals including Berwick, Sundance, Berlinale, Rotterdam, Oberhausen, BFI London and the New York FF. He has been in many exhibitions including the Whitney Biennial 2014. He is represented by Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi (Berlin). The Toronto International Film Festival named his The Hundred Videos (1989 — 1996) one of the 150 essential works in Canadian cinematic history. In 2006 he received the Bell Canada Video Award. A collection of his writings, The Shimmering Beast, was published in 2011. He has co-edited several anthologies, most recently Blast Counter Blast (with Anthony Elms) and The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema (with Chris Gehman). He also works as a curator and critic, most notably assembling a box set of George Kuchar’s video work for the Video Data Bank.
Ayo Akingbade (UK) is an artist and film director based in London. Her works draw on notions of urbanism, power and stance. Her 2016 film Tower XYZ received a Special Mention Award at International Short Film Festival Oberhausen and won the inaugural Sonja Savić Award at Alternative Film/Video Festival (Belgrade). She is a recipient of the Sundance Ignite Fellowship and exhibited in ‘New Contemporaries’. Akingbade is a graduate of London College of Communication and is currently studying at Royal Academy Schools.

**Filmography**

In her own words, Ayo Akingbade’s work “addresses notions of urbanism, power and stance”. Characteristic of her films is a contemplation and celebration of the rhythms of everyday London life, as well as the histories and legacies that move through it. These are social and political, but they are also cinematic: the legacies of images.

Akingbade considers the legacies of images through a film language which is both unhurried and lyrical, inviting the viewer to pause and look more closely. Her work is as much concerned with the form in which cinema allows us to look, as with what the subject of that looking is.

In Tower XYZ (2016) and A is for Artist (2018)—two poetic, reflective short film works—Akingbade challenges the limited (and often stigmatised) representation of tower blocks and social housing in visual culture. Claudette’s Star (2019) explores the relationship between spectatorship and art, giving space to the “oppositional gaze” (a term formulated by bell hooks in her essay collection Black Looks: Race and Representation), as well as inspirations and perspectives of black people from within arts institutions. As described by the film’s voiceover about the act of looking at a painting that moves you, Claudette’s Star explores the “magic quality of something you can’t really explain but feel” in both form and content.

Archive photographs and video pay tribute to Dora Boatemah in Street 66 (2018) and the Newham Monitoring Project in So They Say (2019): black and Asian community activists whose images are rarely seen and whose stories are often left out of historical accounts, despite their transformative legacies. In previous interviews, the filmmaker has pointed out the elitism and inaccessibility of working with archive material, underscoring the question: who decides the form in which stories of the past are told?

History, for Ayo Akingbade, is not about looking back to a neat box in the past. Rather, it is a lens for seeing the present, for considering viewpoints and for looking to the future. Her use of re-enacted and fictionalised time-ambiguous scenes in Dear Babylon (2019) and So They Say are woven into the films with present-day interviews and scenes of everyday city life. They bring attention to how legacies move through individual people, repeat in different yet similar ways, and remain in architectural spaces.

Urban settings are enmeshed with dreams and aspirations, collectivity and multiplicity, as well as being spaces literally shaped by power, enacted through gentrification and marginalisation. The imaginary, in Akingbade’s films, is not separate from reality but rather an active agent of it. Her work is unmistakably committed to the everyday life of its subjects (she is often one of them), and through these undramatic, quotidian scenes, rituals and gestures she pays tribute to the currents of energy that reside there and connect people—in the present, the past and the future.

In each of Akingbade’s films, there are often moments of pause. Sometimes the image is withdrawn, and the viewer stays for a moment looking at a screen with simply light or colour across it: a moment of meditation, for breath, for looking closer. Details are expertly composed, and resonate as something much bigger, beyond their short film form. Much of the filmmaker’s camerawork and editing echoes the affective movements of music, evoking again the “magic quality” alluded to in Claudette’s Star: that hard-to-describe ability to transport or absorb in a moment of reflection, connecting both with a world inside and a world outside of the body of the viewer.

The cinematic voice of Ayo Akingbade is distinctive and assured, yet not fixed or formulaic. It is a voice in-motion, skilfully regarding the present, the past, and heading forward, calmly focused and untroubled by any restrictive notions of storytelling or time.

— Christina Demetriou

Ayo Akingbade (UK) is an artist and film director based in London. Her works draw on notions of urbanism, power and stance. Her 2016 film Tower XYZ received a Special Mention Award at International Short Film Festival Oberhausen and won the inaugural Sonja Savić Award at Alternative Film/Video Festival (Belgrade). She is a recipient of the Sundance Ignite Fellowship and exhibited in ‘New Contemporaries’. Akingbade is a graduate of London College of Communication and is currently studying at Royal Academy Schools.

**Filmography**
So They Say
Ayo Akingbade

United Kingdom | 2019 | 12 mins

Set between East London in the 1980s and the present day, So They Say is a tribute to anti-racist activism, exploring in particular the work and legacy of the Newham Monitoring Project. The NMP, a grassroots community organisation by and for black and Asian residents, set up local structures, support and legal aid in response to a violent time characterised by increasingly prominent far-right groups like the National Front, as well as widespread racism in the police.

The film pays particular attention to the case of Eustace Pryce, who was murdered in a racist attack in 1984, and shortly after Pryce’s brother Gerald was arrested. The murderer, Martin Newhouse, was also eventually arrested, but the judicial proceedings clearly revealed the bias of the police and of the wider justice system: the murderer was released on bail over Christmas—whereas Gerald Pryce, whose brother had died and was dubiously charged with affray, was denied bail. The NMP organised a defence campaign, and their work was crucial in contesting Gerald Pryce’s criminalisation, as well as highlighting the institutional racism of the police and legal system.

The reverberations of these historical events in the context of the present are striking, and this short film is as much concerned with the present—and the future—as with the past. In a cinematic style distinctively hers, Akingbade brings together interviews, archival images, present day footage and re-enactments, to create an emotive documentary and portrait of community activism. The film creates a dialogue between the past and the present: disturbing parallels with racist violence then and now. The film is primarily a commemoration of the inspirational work by community activists whose stories and images are largely forgotten by historical accounts. Everyday scenes and routines, such as high street shops and bus journeys, become spaces of contemplation imbued with legacies of power and violence, but also of agency and community. Personal interviews and recollections intermingle with present-day reflections.

Akingbade, a careful researcher, brings these stories closer to contemporary life by allowing space for details. The film’s re-enacted scenes portray the day-to-day running of the NMP office: answering the helpline, printing leaflets and speaking to one another. Instead of re-enacting protests or speeches, Akingbade chooses to represent the everyday, the not-quite-graspable, visceral feeling, which fills the scene, and the lyrics contrast feelings of serenity and possibility, as a young girl reaches towards the sky and attempts to catch it in her hands. Threading throughout So They Say is the not-quite-graspable, visceral feeling, which art—whether music, painting or literature—can evoke, exceeding the institutions that may claim to define them.

Equally visceral is the composition of the film: textured and manifested as a series of interpretations about spectatorship and voice. The artist’s camera records relaxed and intimate portraits of young black artists, walking through gallery spaces and in the Royal Academy collection and library. Some of the film’s subjects talk about their literary inspirations, others give their responses to paintings, and the film situates them as active, vocal agents of cultural institutions with a history of exclusion. Akingbade’s film considers these architectural spaces (with their hushed histories) alongside the lived imaginary space—the site of dreams, inspiration and collective feeling—of her black subjects.

— Christina Demetriou

Claudette’s Star
Ayo Akingbade

United Kingdom | 2019 | 6 mins

In Claudette’s Star, Ayo Akingbade recreates and documents her subjects’ encounters with art, literature and the “canon.” A commune between young artists and artistic legacies, that looks towards the future.

The film opens in a hazy field, where a slowed down mix of Derrick Harriott’s “The Loser” fills the scene, and the lyrics contrast feelings of serenity and possibility, as a young girl reaches towards the sky and attempts to catch it in her hands. Threading throughout Claudette’s Star is the not-quite-graspable, visceral feeling, which art—whether music, painting or literature—can evoke, exceeding the institutions that may claim to define them.

Equally visceral is the composition of the film: textured and manifested as a series of interpretations about spectatorship and voice. The artist’s camera records relaxed and intimate portraits of young black artists, walking through gallery spaces and in the Royal Academy collection and library. Some of the film’s subjects talk about their literary inspirations, others give their responses to paintings, and the film situates them as active, vocal agents of cultural institutions with a history of exclusion. Akingbade’s film considers these architectural spaces (with their hushed histories) alongside the lived imaginary space—the site of dreams, inspiration and collective feeling—of her black subjects.

Claudette Johnson, to whom the film owes its name, is a British visual artist who was a key member of the BLK Art Group in the 1980s. Yet the “star” of the title suggests different associations. Shining light from a cosmic past, stars are a direction for the future; stars are heroes and inspirations, a source of luminosity and energy. And a star is also a shape, evoked by the confident, assertive body language of a black woman in Claudette Johnson’s paintings—Trilogy (1982–86)—as Akingbade’s voiceover in the film observes, telling her friend about this favourite painting.

As is the case across all of her films, Akingbade is concerned with rhythms: the patterns and flows that can’t be contained to individual people, places, or moments in time. Claudette’s Star, just over 6 minutes in length, is a multifaceted and poetic consideration of the act of looking: away from the white gaze and the white imaginary, and looking forward with an unfazed energy. Confidently, the camera sometimes glimpses and sometimes lingers, pausing for thought and for space.

— Christina Demetriou
Ayo Akingbade

Filmaker in Focus

Akingbade’s trilogy of films act as an ode to her cinematic project on social housing, tied together through an interweaving of archive, fiction, 16mm film, digital, activism and dreams. Tower XYZ demonstrates self-actualisation in the capital, where the protagonists wander around one of London’s iconic social housing tower blocks and contemplate the future. Here, Akingbade’s use of 16mm captures their performance so viscerally that the setting is transmuted into a Labyrinthian dreamscape.

Street 66 is a vibrant commemoration of Ghanaian-born Dr. Theodora Boatemah MBE, who led the campaign to organise tenants and demanded better housing on her Angell Town estate. In this film, archival footage blends with Akingbade’s own filmmaking style; photographs of Boatemah complement the living room, as well as testimonials of the tenants who organised activism with her. Focusing closely on one person’s quietly epic life of work, Street 66 creates a sense of scope that interrogates the socio-economic webbing of the UK.

The final of the trilogy, Dear Babylon begins with the introduction of the fictional “AC30 Housing Bill”, which states that London tenants renting from a housing association must pay a flat fee of £18,000 to their landlords to continue their tenancy. This provocation sets the narrative in motion: we’re transported to a gauzy, neon-coloured house party, a disco ball swirling lights around the sound of lovers rock. When news comes down about the bill passing, our trio of protagonists—Ada, Jazz and Rooney—mobilise to interview their neighbours and create a film on the situation. (Though Jazz asks: “How is a film going to change public opinion? I prefer my riot idea...”). Thus, with Dear Babylon, Akingbade narrativized her own project. The beautifully shot film is anything but a standard take on gentrification, and makes the viewer encouraged that the artist will continue to find new forms to further continue working on the important topics which her work has sustained time and again.

— Herb Shellenberger and Naomi Gessesse

A is for Artist

Following a tragedy, a young woman assembles photos from her father’s archive to encourage the pursuit of being an artist.

— Ayo Akingbade

A is for Artist begins with scenes of Akingbade in her home, as the artist looks through a pile of photos from her father. The meditative, ambient soundtrack gives a sense of reflection, and suggests the presence of grief.

The film considers what being an artist means for Akingbade: being part of a lineage of images and movement. She is situated as a daughter, connected to the stories of her father in the past, which shape her in the present. As she leaves the flat she begins to walk, with a heavy heart, perhaps, but focused and determined. Citing a 70’s performance by Chillean-American artist Sylvia Palacios Whitman, Akingbade crosses Mabley Green in Hackney wearing strange giant hands: extending her self into the space around her, reaching out and forward. This is Akingbade’s own archive. Her position as an artist is inseparable from her family history, as well as to the spaces she walks through. The walking connects the artist with the city, with the urban spaces she is lyrically committed to: the site of her practice as a filmmaker. She moves at her own pace, holding her own optimism. A snippet of a telephone call with her father is a message of reassurance, and a reminder to stay focused.

Walking as process; walking as care; walking as bond. Perhaps alluding to the journey of her father before her, and to movement between generations and between places. The poetic observance of everyday city life as meditation on familial connection across geographical locations is reminiscent, in part, of Chantal Akerman’s 1977 film News From Home. Yet A for Artist is very much Akingbade’s own. The places in her father’s photographs and the places she herself moves through (and makes her own images of) combine in this filmic expression of psychogeography: the way geographical landscapes shape emotions.

In the final shot, Akingbade holds the gaze of the camera, finally raising her hand to her face in a gesture that reads as both a salute—a tribute of admiration to her father—and a movement to focus her eyes on what is ahead.

— Christina Demetriou
On The Films Of Ayo Akingbade

Ralf Webb

DREAMS

Midway through Ayo Akingbade’s short A is for Artist (2018), the protagonist—played by Akingbade herself—leaves her flat, presumably in an effort to clear her head, or to gather her thoughts. She gazes out over a grassy knoll which fills the frame. And then: a figure with enormous, splayed, non-human hands strides across the hill. Seen as it is from a distance, the figure is almost silhouetted, its movements uncanny. The hands swing one after the other, in jagged, choppy motions, which are reminiscent of stop-frame animation, or phantasmagoria.

On seeing this figure up close, we are shocked to find that it is in fact the protagonist herself—or at least, some version of her, a doppelgänger, whose enormous hands are gloves, made from fabric. The doppelgänger continues to stride, fiercely determined, driven—or led by—the swinging motion of her hands. There is an intuitively-grasped splitting of selves here: the protagonist, who earlier in the film is shown engaged in the assembly of photos from her father’s archive, and the pure, creative force—that determination of vision which fuels the creative process.

Throughout the remainder of A is for Artist, the protagonist—clad in a trench coat, like a Noir detective—wanders London in pursuit of her doppelgänger. There are echoes and traces: she sees, from a distance, a young woman, swaying a newspaper back and forth whilst walking. But it is not her. The Noir atmosphere is sustained by the film’s rich, staticky grain: black-and-white, shot on 16mm film, the grain hangs in every frame like weather, like a psychic fog in the film’s temporal settings—the films look somehow antiquated, as though dislodged or out of step with the contemporary time period in which much of their action takes place. The effect is such that, when Akingbade revisits the film’s characters unfurl as a single stream:

I hope I don’t die for a long time,
I’ve still got things I want to do and look at and boys to talk to
I want to see an African spirit, or like, sleep on top of a volcano
I want to talk to [insert name here] about life, consciousness...

In a recent interview, the poet Ilya Kaminsky said that a “great poet is a very private person who happens to write beautifully enough, powerfully enough, spell-bindingly enough that they can speak privately to many people at the same time... a very private speech that the form teaches you how to partake in—and that becomes the reader’s own private speech”. This is true of Akingbade’s poetry. Tower XYZ’s narration can be read as the vehicle through which the film’s characters bear witness to, and hope to parse, the myriad hypocrisies, mysteries and complexities of a rapidly transforming and gentrifying London. It is also the means through which the characters hope to (re)locate themselves within the city, as their own local cultural and familial heritage is threatened by the conspiring forces of appropriation and industrial development. But such is the power and generosity of Akingbade’s poetry that it blossoms outward, speaking across the idiosyncratic, private and personal histories from which it derives, to us all individually: it becomes part of our speech, and we are invited to partake in it, too.

ARCHEOLOGY

Akingbade takes an archaeological approach towards the materiality of film itself. As well as her extensive use of archival materials—photographs, newspaper clippings—she also shoots on 16mm film stock, which is then transposed onto digital. Shooting on 16mm challenges the viewer’s ability to easily discern the film’s temporal settings—the films look somehow antiquated, as though dislodged or out of step with the contemporary time period in which much of their action takes place. The effect is such that, when Akingbade revisits
On The Films Of Ayo Akingbade

Ralf Webb

Ralf Webb is a writer and editor. Previously he co-ran the Swimmers pamphlet and event series, and works as Managing Editor at The White Review. He also runs PoetryxClass, an Arts Council England-funded reading group series around British poetry, poetic practice and class. His debut collection of poetry, Rotten Days in Late Summer, will be published by Penguin in 2021.

historical accounts—as she does in the film-essay So They Say (2019)—past and present bleed into each other.

Set both “in 1985 and the present day”, this film tells of the racist violence enacted upon different communities in East London in the mid-80s, communities—as one of the interviewees puts it—“‘who had their backs to the wall: Asian, African, Caribbean’. So They Say spotlights the Newham Monitoring Project, an anti-racist community organisation that was developed in the early 1980s, following the murder of Akhatar Ali Baig, an East Ham teenager, by a white gang. Through the weaving together of personal testimony and archive material, two stories of racist police tactics, and the NMP’s activism in response, emerge: that of the Newham 7, and the Pryce brothers. In the former case, seven young Asian men were arrested for defending themselves against a group of white attackers, while the perpetrators went free; in the latter, Eustace Pryce was murdered in a racially motivated attack, and his brother, George Pryce, was arrested, while the murderer went free. So They Say is in conversation with Handsworth Songs (1986), a film-essay—directed by John Akomfrah as part of the Black Audio Film Collective’s œuvre—about the 1985 riots in Handsworth, Birmingham, and Tottenham, themselves triggered by racist police violence. Mark Fisher, writing on Handsworth Songs in 2013, remarked that “it is important to resist the casual story that things have ‘progressed’ in any simple linear fashion since Handsworth Songs was made”.

Akingbade’s archaeological approach rallies against any such reductive claims of progress, by underscoring that racism, racist tactics, violence and injustices are endemic in British society, that they run in seams through the strata of our collective history. By shooting the present-day on grainy 16mm—scenes outside East Ham station, a market, a family walking along the road—we are shunted forward, as viewers, from the past into the now, but remain unsure of our temporal footing. The police brutality that sustained “past” injustices, we are reminded, is still here, it’s still happening. Akingbade conveys this formally, too, with a mind-boggling sleight of filmic hand: she recreates, with period costume and set-design, the NMP offices as they would have looked “back then”. The effect is such that we think we are there, in 1985: that is, until the camera pans to a Black Lives Matter poster. “Many things are still the same”, one of the interviewees states at the close of the film, “the racism within education, within housing and employment, it’s still there”.

FUTURISM

Akingbade’s artistic response to the prejudices and injustices written into our history isn’t a fatalistic one, though. A pattern is identified, but so is a means of rupture. Frequently her work contains an expansive gesture, a looking outwards, or forwards. This is shown, to inspiring effect, in Claudette’s Star (2019), described as a “part ode” which depicts young artists “considering with sheer wonder who is given a voice”. Claudette’s Star is named after Claudette Johnson, a British visual artist and founder of the Blk Art Group—an association of young black artists founded in 1979.

The film opens with a young woman walking through a field of lavender, before lying down in the grass. From her perspective, we see her arms and hands stretch out and open up toward the blue, cloud-stippled sky: a similar gesture to that of A is for Artist’s doppelgänger, though the tone and feeling here is one of joy and optimism, rather than surrealist unease. Suddenly, her hands clap closed, as if to capture and hold the spectacular openness and expansiveness suspended in that vast and clear ether. The film then meanders through a gallery, offering hypnotic and freely associative shots of paintings, sculptures, statues, and fragmented interpretations of the work by two narrators, before finishing with four micro-interviews with the young artists in the Royal Academy Library.

In the closing shot, these four artists stand in the library gallery against a backdrop of bookcases stuffed with leather-bound hardbacks. They look up and out, silently, above the confines of the library, the bookcases, and then beyond the confines of the frame itself: perhaps at the very same sky that opened the film. They seem to be waiting for something—some knowledge, the spark of an idea or vision—or else looking outward, scanning the terrain of the future, so that they might map it. One by one, they step contentedly out of frame, into the unknown.
Izza Génini (1942, Casablanca) is a film director and producer based in Paris. Before turning to cinema, Génini studied Literature and Foreign Languages at the Sorbonne and at the School of Eastern Studies in Paris. She is a pioneering figure in Moroccan documentary and founded the distribution company SOGEVAL, producing and distributing Moroccan and African cinema. Her influential films grapple with themes such as her Moroccan-Jewish heritage, diasporic identity and the wide variety of socio-cultural contexts of music in Morocco. Her body of work includes music documentaries such as Aïta, Vibrations in Upper Atlas and Rhythms of Marrakech, as well as Return to Oulad Memen, a portrait of a village in the Atlas Mountains.

In a chapter on Génini in her book, Negotiating Dissidence, both Dr Stefanie Van de Peer and Génini note the complex relationship some Moroccans had with their own culture:

During the French Protectorate, Génini explains, many educated Moroccans, including herself, turned their backs on their own culture, preferring instead to direct their gaze towards France. ‘Like others in my generation I rejected Moroccan culture because I thought it was inferior to the French. Our dreams of emancipation were directed towards the West’ (Hillauer, 2005: 349). When she finally started to look back at Morocco, she experienced an emotional reconnection with the country’s musical heritage.

It is this emotional connection that shines through in Génini’s films. She has spoken about her filmmaking practice as being geared towards instinct and feeling, and this can be clearly seen in the vivacious energy of her films. Her presence shines through, showing a familiarity, but with an excitement that is almost infectious. — Myriam Mouflih
Return to Oulad Moumen (Retrouver Oulad Moumen)
Izza Génini
France, Morocco | 1994 | 48 mins | French and Arabic with English subtitles

Return to Oulad Moumen follows the Edery family as they migrate from Oulad Moumen—south of Marrakech—to Paris over a number of years. As children are born, raised and leave home, life continues in Morocco and Génini contextualises the circumstances of her family’s departure in the social and political history of the country.

The film opens with a family portrait and thebeckoning hand of Génini: an invitation to journey together. References to Moroccan-Jewish tradition are made clear in the first few minutes of the film, as we watch another set of hands prepare a Passover meal that is pagan in heritage—an early symbol of the interculturality that is predominant in Génini’s films.

As Génini tells it, in Oulad Moumen, a rich landowner—sympathising with the plight of those who have been persecuted—gifts an olive grove to the dispersed who were obliged to “flee from the village and scatter in the countryside.” In doing this, alluding to the decrease of the Jewish population explicit, and uses the community spirit following this event as an example of Jewish/Arab solidarity and friendship. In modern day Oulad Moumen, two men ask each other if they remember the Jews, mentioning in this film by Izza Génini. Nestled in the Atlas mountains, the residents of this small village work the land in time with the natural rhythms of the landscape. Sound and tempo are part of the composition of daily life where ancient celebrations are passed down through generations.

Due to the large Muslim population in Morocco, the musical traditions that Génini has shown in her other films have been deeply connected to Muslim celebrations. But the Amazigh people of the Aït Bouguemez valley’s cultural heritage—pre-date the arrival of Islam in Morocco and the folklore of their tribe is much more connected to Muslim celebrations are passed down through generations. The coming of spring, a village in the Atlas mountains comes to life. As the melody of the zamar floats through the air, people work the land and sheep roam. Snow melts to a rumbling stream. The composition of the landscape and the buildings that sit within it become central to the viewer’s understanding of this place.

Finding a way back to their ancestral home, the family reunion amongst the olive trees in Oulad Moumen. The gathering Génini organises is an inter-generational and transnational affair, as members of the family come together on the occasion of the filmmaker’s birthday in 1992. Coming full circle, the family chat together, slipping between languages, cultures and generations. — Myriam Mouflih

Vibrations in Upper Atlas (Vibration en Haut Atlas)
Izza Génini
France, Morocco | 1993 | 27 mins | Arabic with English subtitles

Vibrations in Upper Atlas shows the rhythms of everyday life for the people in this mountainous region. Singing and music seem to be part of the composition of daily life. Celebrations are connected to nature and the land—the dance of ahwach connects the people to the cosmos, representing the movement of the planets and a cleansing ceremony of fire signifies the end of the evening’s festivities.

The pace at which language changes becomes apparent, as Génini refers to the place as “Berberland,” being a catch-all term to describe the pre-Arab inhabitants of North Africa. The name by which these people call themselves, Amazigh, is still unspecific, and doesn’t necessarily denote the varied communities living in North Africa.

While in her other films Génini often focuses on the voice or drums as the central carriers of rhythm, in Vibration en Haut Atlas, a woodwind instrument is introduced when musician Mohamed Ben Aïssa is depicted playing a zamr, a sort of double clarinet made of wood. Tambors, a drum made from goat skin, play a crucial part in the ceremony of the valley. By drawing attention to the materials of these instruments, Génini shows how life in rural areas has differed from in cities—highlighting an interdependent relationship between the land and the people that live on it: the rhythms of nature and people synchronising. — Myriam Mouflih
Rhythms of Marrakech (Rythmes de Marakech)

Izza Génini

Opening with shots of the Atlas Mountains that surround it, Marrakech is the Moroccan city that most tourists visit, but in this film Génini shows the red city through the lens of its inhabitants. Suggesting that the city is a crossroad of Arab, Berber and African cultures, conveyed through music, Génini focuses on the traditions of the city’s vibrant music cultures, expressed through the festival of Achoura—a celebration of the birth of Prophet Mohammed.

Génini observes rhythm as a feature of the people of Marrakech and the expression of collective joy is located in hands and voices; women are shown beating drums and ululating. The women are seen parading through the street, and then singing together in an interior space, sat on brightly coloured rugs, backs against the tiled walls.

Gathering in the old market of Jamaa El-Fna, men perform a similar ritual in the streets of the city in a ceremony that can last all night long. They follow the leader, improvising upon tradition and adding their own twist to these rhythms.

Génini captures small moments of mundanity with charm: a cow chews its owner’s robes, children play in the gardens of the city, and in the lilac dawn of Marrakech, men prepare to feast. A shot from above of men dressed in white as they gather round a plate of food to eat almost resembles a flower; the movement of each body a petal opening and closing. These shifts in perspective serve to refocus the viewer’s attention, kinetic energy of bodies in motion.

— Myriam Mouflih

Aïta

Izza Génini

Fatna Bent El Hocine and her group of female troubadours travel through Morocco singing songs of aïta—a trance-like call and response, bringing to life tales from Morocco’s history. Génini shows the singers in moments of fantasia and celebration, but also in intimate camaraderie and reflection.

Following legendary aïta singer Fatna Bent El Hocine and her troupe of singers, this short documentary was one of the earliest works in Génini’s music documentary series Morocco, Body and Soul (1987–1992).

At the Moussem of Moulay Abdellah Amghar, a gathering on the West Coast of Morocco, generations of people celebrate their ancestral heritage in a return to the soil on which historical battles were fought. Named after the holy Moulay Abdellah Amghar, the moussem is an annual celebration where men on horses shoot rifles—a callback to a time where the land of their ancestors was protected from invaders by men on horseback. This big moussem is also well known for its night shows that last all night long. Musical performances are part of the celebration and travelling bands congregate near the coastal town of El Jadida to perform. As Génini notes in her narration, aïta “doesn’t speak of ordinary things”; and rather, “it speaks of heroes, knights, historical facts.”

Describing the singers, she says, “the cheikha is a woman who sings out with splendour and in pain.” This travelling troupe of singers voice history and legend, a public veneration of the great heroes of Moroccan history. Through a trance-like repeated call and response, the women perform an act of retelling, but also create a transcendent, almost meditative state. The performers move their bodies to the rhythm as drums beat in time.

It is in the private moments that Génini captures the inner feelings of this group of women, who speak openly about their favourite songs of the aïta genre. These are historical songs, but they are tales of women’s pain, too. Songs of heartbreak and desertion. As Dr Stefanie Van de Peer notes “Cheikhat are women with the performative power to divulge women’s secrets in public. “ and it is this radical act of public feeling that makes them so engaging to watch. In their downtime between performances and between places, the group eat lunch together, swim in the sea and visit markets. It is these moments of intimacy that Génini captures so masterfully, away from the spectacle of their performances.

— Myriam Mouflih
Born and raised to Darija-speaking parents and Francophone older siblings in Casablanca, Morocco, at the age of seventeen, Izza Génini moved to Paris, France. She later returned to Morocco to make more than a dozen documentary films.

One of her most personal and intimate films, Return to Oulad Moumen (1994) retraces her family's history leading to her own return. Tied together by her mother's narration, the film mixes interviews, archives, and sceneries, as if grounding inherited memories and feelings in landscapes.

In Arabic and Moroccan Darija, hanan and hanin are two close words that mean tenderness and nostalgia. Génini's direction is full of both. In the film, she tells her family's history, the memories diluted and scattered across maps and time, connecting the personal memory of her Jewish family's return with the country's history and the Moroccan Jewish community's experience and unrooting.

In Return to Oulad Moumen, Génini mentions that her return happened through music. She says that Moroccan music pulled her in and reminded her of home, first working as producer for Ahmed El Maanouni's film Transes (1981), which follows the life of Nass El Ghiwane, one of the most influential music groups of postcolonial Morocco. In a radio interview for RCJ, Génini said, “music is really what brought me back to myself”.¹

In Rhythms of Marrakech (1988), Génini sets music not as a frame, but as the subject itself. She lets her camera linger on long shots of singing and dancing, and the film is tied together only with a very simple and rare narration. The musicians play their instruments in the Menara gardens and the dancers perform the rekza, their feet stomping and marking the rhythm, their bodies thus adding a layer to the music making.

Surrounded by the circle of female percussionists, there is a dizzying feeling. As viewers we ourselves experience this bodily and spiritual experience, often referred to by Moroccan musicians, singers, and dancers as ihal; a state of being where your body is here and your mind is elsewhere.

Escape and landscape are interwoven in Vibrations in Upper Atlas (2004), where the women's chants meet the water. The ebb and flow of the water and the hands against the drums, the goats' bleats, the horses' and donkeys' hooves and far away the men's instruments and the women's voices. In the valley hidden in the mountains, all of these sounds meet in harmony.

The film is a constant dance between the rhythm of nature and the rhythm of the villagers’ music: the ebb and flow of water and bodies. Men and women welcome the sunset as they dance in a circle around the fire, reminiscent of a cosmic circle. We are invited into their sensory experience, away from folklore and onto the spirituality, feelings, escape and trance at the core of their dance.

The film is part of a series Génini made named Maroc, corps et âmes (1987-1992), a title based on the anagram of Morocco, meaning Morocco, body and soul. The first film she directed, entitled Aïta (1988), is also part of the series, and sets women's chants and voices as an essential trope of her work.

The film revolves around aïta, a singing art form that the cheikhat have upheld for centuries. Female performers, singers and dancers, the cheikhat take an important space in the Moroccan musical imaginary. They are fearless tellers of Moroccan epics, whose subversive freedom has often attracted rumors.

Their singing and the eternal movement of their hair carry our heritage. The gold and silver in their teeth shining, the tears and the pain in their voices, the cheikhat's cry is a matriarchal and political appeal to the past, to memory, to love, and to resistance.

As I lay on my bed watching the mesmerizing rocking back and forth of their bodies, my hips start moving. All the lyrics rush to my brain. I am being carried away, floating. The music calls on me.

In an interview with Yabiladi, Génini mentioned a question that she asks in one of her films: “what is this mysterious power that music has to bring you back to yourself when you thought you had left everything behind?”²

As a Moroccan diasporan, these films are a way to connect our bodies and souls to our home. Our minds respond to the music and dances in Génini's films, as their power lies in calling on our sensory memory and evoking our past and heritage.


Today, these films are of great importance for Morocco and Moroccan diasporas. They respond to the need to keep a record, especially when most of what’s available to us is ethnomusicology made by foreigners such as Paul Bowles and the like. Génini’s films come—with another handful of films by Moroccan filmmakers—as our way to reclaim our space and our music.

Génini’s work is not decontextualized recorded music. In Rhythms of Marrakech and Vibrations in Upper Atlas, she makes a powerful choice to film these musicians, singers, and dancers, within the spaces they exist a space which soul seeps through their movements, words, and voices. As a viewer, you are allowed to see them, accompany them in their journey.

Génini’s in-betweenness transpires through her work. As a Moroccan director, she manages to avoid voyeurism and hence break the colonial gaze. As an outsider to these particular singing and dancing communities—by filming them in the space they own—there is no pretension either that we viewers could ever fully know their experience.

In Return to Oulad Moumen, the sound mixing prioritizes the French translation of the dialogues over the original Darija you can faintly hear behind. The voice over, just like in the other films, is also spoken in French.

Language also raises the question of audience as well as access. Beyond wondering if versions of these films exist entirely in Amazigh and Darija, I imagine what these versions would be like. The voice over mainly serves the purpose of informing and explaining the social and historical context of the films, which probably wouldn’t be needed for a Moroccan audience.

Génini has made her films over the span of twenty years, witnessing and keeping a record of Morocco throughout great changes in its political and societal dynamics. Making art at the beginning—just as Morocco was coming out of the years of lead, a time marked by state repression and censorship—was a political act. Even more so today, her work raises questions in regard to the state’s folklorisation of traditional and indigenous music.

In Aiṭa, Génini films the cheikh's performances in the Moulay Abdallah moussem. A moussem is an annual pilgrimage in celebration of a saint and their life. There are thousands of them in Morocco, celebrated at different times of the year. The ministry of religious instances decides the public funding for these celebrations based on the traditional and religious aspect of the celebration—its “authenticity”—and more and more its potential for tourism and folklore.

These films are even more important in the current political context, where staged presentations of Moroccan folklore have become more subtle instrumentalizations of culture than plain old censorship.

Génini’s films are, then, records for future generations, so that we always know where to find inspiration for our reinvention. When I was two years old, upon being asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I answered that I wanted to be a cheikhā. To me, then and now, the cheikhīt represents an art that sings the past to the future—just like Génini’s films. As we build our future, we newer generations are slowly forgetting these art forms, and these films are reminders of our music.

Yasmin Benabdallah is a filmmaker and writer born and raised in Morocco. She studied Film and Mathematics at Columbia University for four years before moving to Paris to attend the Experimental Programme in Political Arts at Sciences Po (SPEAP). Through filmmaking, visual art, and writing, she explores stories around memory, identity, dance, heritage, diaspora, borders, archive, and rituals. Her films and installations have been shown in France, Egypt, the US, and Palestine, and she has participated as artist-in-residence in Morocco, France, Palestine and Tunisia. In 2016, she directed her first film, The Travel Curiosity, based on her father’s love for travelling. Other works include the short film Observational (2018) which explores images of surveillance; Ojalá: la vuelta al origen (2019), a feature documentary on the dance of the Palestinian diaspora of Santiago, Chile, and its people, its sky, its scent (in production), a video installation on finding Chile in Palestine. She is currently working on Moussen Trans(l), a documentary on a Moroccan pilgrimage between religion, sorcery, and trans identities, as well as Chebbâ, a hybrid short about a Moroccan family and a protective ritual.

3 Génini, “Marocaine corps et âme.”
Génini dismisses objectivity in documentary. She emphasises her entirely subjective approach by inserting herself into the narrative. She acknowledges her outsider status and exploits her transnational identity within Morocco. Even the purely informative sequences in the films are built on the love she feels for music and her conviction of its relevance for all subjects in the films. She states in several interviews that her interest in music and national heritage stemmed from an emotional reconnection with her own past. Music, film and Morocco are inseparable since the making of Transes. With Aita, for example, it has become clear that through her encounter with Morocco, and with the music of Morocco in particular, she renewed her personal connection to the country and its heritage. She told me:

The inspiration that led to my production and directing of the series Maroc, Body and Soul, is the result of a long process that was instigated in March 1973, when I had returned to Morocco after 13 years of absence. From then on, I really got to know my country of origin, via its culture, its music, its language, its nature, etc. Working in the film world in Paris, I attached myself to the cinema of Morocco, producing and distributing Moroccan films. At the same time, I got to know a musical treasure. I particularly liked Fatna Bent El Hocine, whom I discovered at Essaouira. She was the one to inspire me to make my first film; I had to do it in order to safeguard her talent for the future. (pers. correspondence, 2011a)

Génini’s subjective approach is most explicit in Retrouver Oulad Moumen.1 It is a subjective exploration of the migration patterns of her own family: a Jewish-Moroccan family dispersed throughout the world, from Marrakesh to Casablanca, to Boucheron (now El Ghara) and eventually to Paris in France. Some continued their travels to the United States, Mexico and Martinique. From the first few minutes of the film, Génini puts herself centrally in the frame. A slow-motion sequence shows a group of people getting ready to have their group picture taken. They are celebrating Génini’s own birthday, the occasion she chose to bring her extended family back to their place of origin: Oulad Moumen. This photographic aspect of the first few sequences continues throughout the film: the source material she uses for an illustration of history is made up of photographs (sepia or black and white) and archival footage, home videos and old family pictures. The moment Génini decides to return to Oulad Moumen for the first time, she is alone, travelling through Morocco as a tourist. It is her first time in Morocco since she left when she was eighteen years old. On her journey through the country, she meets people in the places to which they had emigrated, who remember her family and with whom she re-establishes an immediate intimate bond. Génini often enters the frame and gets close to family members and old friends. She joins in the family routines when people are singing, talking, eating. The whole film has a very intimate feel, and the subjective approach adds a familiarity to her exploration of Morocco. It shows her emotional, personal reconnection to be intimately entwined with heritage, migration and art, in particular music.

The exchanges between music traditions, she reveals, also entail an exchange between different ethnicities. The wider perspective of the films is not always directly visible. For Génini it is a nostalgic look into the past that inspires her to make creative documentaries. Nevertheless, a closer look at some of the topics and subjects she approaches do reveal a wider political point of view and a critical eye, if one looks further and listens better, a subtle, enfolded central concern with Moroccan women and minorities is revealed, just as Patricia Pisters sees it in more recent women’s films (2007).

Aita questions the status of itinerant women singers; Retrouver Oulad Moumen seemingly avoids the questions or answers about emigration, but they are implied precisely because of the personal bond between the family and the spectator; and La Nûba d’Or et de Lumière digs deeper into the performances of the women singers and love poetry of an ancient and well-respected art form. The film-maker’s personal relationship with women, artists and a multi-filmmaker Morocco leads to ambiguities and dissident questions, and a trust in the intellectual abilities and unfolding power of the spectator will lead to possible answers through really ‘seeing’ and listening. The ostensible absence of conflict or tension in her films is not only a political choice but also an aesthetic statement. While she avoids the censor and ensures investment, her style also reveals multiple enfolded layers to the Morocco she represents. Her own transnational knowledge is reflected in this: being an insider and outsider, she can see and reveal that Morocco is a diverse nation. Her transnationality enables her to accept the various individual aspects of the country. Instead of unity, then, she advocates transnationality, heterogeneity and diversity, like a mosaic that is only truly understood when observed from a relative distance.

In Génini’s films, music represents Morocco, and it takes on such an important role that it becomes a character in its own right. She loves music and wants to represent a subaltern type of music that does not, in her view, get the attention it deserves. She told me:

Making these films, I became aware at which point music films are difficult to edit and at which point they remain subjective. The technical difficulty of cutting in the music, the notions of time, rhythm and tempo are personal and at the same time they need to make sense to the spectator. It is a subtle balance to find between listening and seeing. For me, when speaking about music, what is essential to clarify is the pleasure one experiences. (pers. correspondence, 2011a)

1 I have written in more detail about Retrouver Oulad Moumen elsewhere, see Van de Peer (2014b).
The music not only shapes the structure of the film, it is also the subject that needs to be listened to and seen. She films music and performances in their natural settings, bringing the camera into the situation instead of bringing the situation to the camera. Music in these films represents a spirit of freedom and tolerance. To capture music visually, she shows performances and musicians practising. In addition, she captures audiences and visualises their experience. Génini's documentaries therefore visualise sound. On the reason why she chose to make music documentaries, she comments:

Music constitutes a red thread throughout my career. The first feature-length film I produced (Transes) was musical. When I became a director myself, I was immediately attracted to making a film about women singers, the Cheikhats ... The music of Morocco is so rich and diverse that I have never stopped being surprised and I keep discovering: I am always ready to crack a new genre or a new voice. (Jezequel, 2006)

As music ethnologist Deborah Kapchan acknowledges, music is an intercultural, transnational exchange that holds the promise of universal understanding. But even a promise is a “performative”: it enacts rather than refers and by its very action accomplishes its goal, which is to create an intersubjective contract that is often affective and implicit rather than acknowledged and juridical’ (Kapchan, 2008: 470). As a non-verbal means of communication it relies on the solidarity raised by sounds and the common experience of them. It represents the hope that there is a common human experience that can comprehend the other across borders and cultures, and the ‘self-selecting festival audience embraces the promise’ (Kapchan, 2008: 470). This intersubjective belief in the language of music holds true for Génini’s emotional connection to it, and her very subjective approach. The belief in the power of music reflects another, more contemporary hope for transnationalism: that cultural diversity is an urgent theme in a world in which the rise of fundamentalism is so obvious.

An attempt is made to give new life to heritage through the testimony of the protagonists. These protagonists are usually discovered at yearly festivals in Morocco, where she films and interviews them. Kapchan illustrates that Morocco is a country of festivals. She argues that festivals create exceptional circumstances, where the willingness to perform and be heard as well as to perceive (“see”) and listen is heightened and out of the ordinary: ‘the Moroccan monarchy has many stakes in the spate of yearly festivals. They construct a public discourse of neoliberalism and engage producers in the active creation of Moroccan culture as a product of national and international consumption’ (Kapchan, 2008: 471). That the government has high stakes in these festivals does not mean they are not also used for awareness-raising through music and gatherings. This potential for music and festivals to be politically challenging as well as entertaining is nothing new. Génini highlights the wealth of intercultural exchange and its importance for the development of the Arab world.


References
Filmmaker in Focus
Payal Kapadia

Over the past decade, Mumbai-based filmmaker Payal Kapadia has built up a remarkable collection of short films. In particular, a trilogy of sorts made between 2015–18—The Last Mango Before the Monsoon, 2015; Afternoon Clouds, 2017; And What is Summer Saying, 2018—stands as a massive achievement and as a hybrid form of new cinema. For our BFMAF 2020’s Filmmaker in Focus presentation of Payal Kapadia’s work, we present the first retrospective screening showcasing these three recent short films together.

Though each film could be classified as a different genre—experimental, narrative, documentary—none easily fit within those boxes and all the borders between styles are blurred to obscurity. While they were created as distinct works, these films can be viewed as a cohesive experience and are a testament to Kapadia’s bold artistic vision and unique cinematic sensibility.

When watching Payal Kapadia’s films, one is never quite sure what is a dream and what is reality. At some point in each film darkness falls suddenly and unexpectedly. Memory is not necessarily internal or embodied; rather, it’s dispersed across rural landscapes and domestic spaces, or else contained within potent objects, drawings, images. As a woman filmmaker in a still male-dominated national (and international) cinema, Kapadia’s aesthetically daring films operate with refreshing viewpoints and unconventional perspectives. They are entirely unbound to tropes of either short filmmaking or Indian filmmaking.

The time is right to reflect on this collection of films by Payal Kapadia, as she is currently preparing her feature debut All We Imagine As Light, an Indian-French co-production supported by awards from IFFR/Hubert Bals Fund, Cannes Cinefondation Residency and CICLIC Development Fund. With this Focus programme, we will look back on the filmmaker’s past work which has screened and been awarded at numerous international festivals (Berlinale, Cannes, Oberhausen and Indielisboa among them) as a way of looking forward to what will come next, not only in her first feature but towards a career of cinematic excellence.

—Herb Shellenberger

Payal Kapadia (India) is a filmmaker and artist based in Mumbai. She studied Film Direction at the Film and Television Institute of India. Her work deals with that which is not easily visible, hidden somewhere in the folds of memory and dreams. It is between minor, ephemeral feminine gestures where she tries to find the truth that makes up her practice. In 2017, her film Afternoon Clouds premiered at Cannes film Festival in the Cinefondation selection; in 2018, her experimental documentary And What is the Summer Saying had its world premiere at the Berlinale. Shorts. The latter went one to receive the Special Jury Prize at the International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam the same year. Kapadia’s experimental short The Last Mango Before the Monsoon premiered at Oberhausen International Film Festival in 2015, where she was awarded FIPRESCI Prize and Special Jury Prize. The film received other awards including Best Film and Best Editing at Mumbai International Film Festival in 2016 and Special Mention at Filmaprit. Currently, Payal is working on making her first feature film All We Imagine as Light, which she developed at the Cinefondation Cannes Residency between 2019-20 and is supported by the Hubert Bals Script and Project Development Fund.

Filmmography

Payal Kapadia’s most recent film defies easy description. The question posed by the film’s title—and spoken enigmatically by one of the film’s subjects—is answered through the intricate tapestry of sound wedded together by Kapadia into a rich collage.

Disembodied voices float on top of sharp, mostly black and white cinematography, showing scenes of daily life in a small village on the edge of a forest. It’s never made clear who is speaking, or who is meant to be listening, but these random snatches of speech contribute to the vivaciousness and universality of the film’s perspective. That they are heard throughout a film in which we are also watching dogs, cows, bees or other non-human animals alone within the frame, contributes to the horizontality of all the living beings within the film.

As the third highly accomplished, cinematically rich and sonically dense short film made by Payal Kapadia within the span of four years, And What is the Summer Saying provides further evidence of the trademark themes and aesthetic techniques across her work as a whole. In addition to the colourful sonic palette, we see the recurring images of darkness and nighttime; the familiar spaces—or sometimes evocations of—deep forest and quiet village; the visual and symbolic resonance of clouds, fog or smoke; the reflexivity of memory and the vitality of its sensory impulses; and the mixed textures of live cinematography and drawn, painted or otherwise constructed images.

Rather than becoming rote or predictable, Payal Kapadia’s use of these trademarks across her films is significantly diverse in form, style and expression, and as such point to the strength and versatility of her filmmaking. And What is the Summer Saying beautifully caps this informal trilogy, which should be seen as the first major cinematic statement—with many more to come—by the young and talented filmmaker Payal Kapadia.

—Herb Shellenberger
**The Last Mango Before The Monsoon**

Payal Kapadia

Elliptical sequences combine to form a filmic tone poem: the expanded sense of time during a rural summer dusk; the trudging of two scientists who place cameras in the forest for animal observation; watercolours that float atop the landscape; a woman yearning for her late husband. Ever-present clouds drift above the forest valley and back across a city.

The Last Mango Before the Monsoon has no central character, narrative arc or clear progression. Its scenes are non-linear and flow freely into one another. Rather than being a weakness, this is precisely the film's strength. The film is perhaps the first clear example in Kapadia's filmography of how sound can lead the process of image-making, with densely layered aural textures and tones melding together to enhance the vibrancy of environments they are placed overtop of.

Afternoon Clouds

Payal Kapadia

With Afternoon Clouds, Payal Kapadia fosters a poetic world within a beautifully simple scenario. In a Bombay apartment, 70-year-old widow Kaki and her Nepali maid Malti cook together, conversing while beholding a flower which only blooms for two days. Malti asks, “why don’t you grow a flower that blossoms through the year?”

The Bombay home is quiet and serene. Malti, walking with a limp, ambles slowly past a tiny orange cat gently sipping milk. The open window looks out onto the vast sea and the viewer can almost feel the salty air blowing across the accoutrements laid out on top of linen: old photographs of children, seashells, knick-knacks and prescription pills. After a pause in which she stares into space, Kaki asks, “shall we make fish for dinner?” The restless tedium hangs in the air so thickly that one could cut it with a knife.

As both women retire for an afternoon nap with clouds passing overhead, reality and dreams become increasingly indistinguishable. In the corridor of the building, Malti suddenly meets a man from her hometown who is now a sailor, while Kaki dreams of her late husband among the clouds of the building's fumigation. The afternoon soon slips into darkest night—the blossom now only faintly illuminated by a thin blue hue of moonlight and streetlamp creeping through the still-open window.

Within the film's short running time, the two reflective yet restless inhabitants are suffused with expansive expressions of wonder, fantasy, memory and longing. The sailor reads the back of the postcard he gives to Malti, “the wind, the trees, they are but a dream. In front of you, even the stars look dull.” But like all dreams, this romance fades away unexpectedly, rushing out with the clouds of fumigated chemicals never to be seen again.

— Herb Shellenberger

— Herb Shellenberger
Dreams of Direct Love: The Films of Payal Kapadia
Kelley Dong

Swathes of the supernatural and natural world lightly brush across one another in the films of Payal Kapadia, in which the viewer becomes witness to their elegant enmeshment. In her trilogy of short films—The Last Mango Before the Monsoon (2015), Afternoon Clouds (2017), and What is the Summer Saying? (2018)—each title is respectively categorized by the filmmaker as experimental, narrative and hybrid documentary. But even such strictures of terminology dissipate when these meditations are collated into a sweet, singular world of lonely lives across India. Together, they surpass the superficial visual markers of the dreamy, instead creating an overarching investigation of the dream as an incubator, where suppressed desire might find a new means of articulation.

I am referring to one dream study in particular: while watching Kapadia’s films, I recalled a 2013 research project by Japanese neuroscientists, who used machine learning to decode the imagery of three men’s dreams. Their research focused on the hypnagogic stage of consciousness, a transitional period of lucidity as one falls asleep. But although the team could learn the type of object—for instance, a person—that appeared in such a dream, they fell short of identifying the object’s specifics, like a name or a face. They were left with a much broader database of universals, the truth shrouded in (or rather, protected by) ambiguity. Within the broad range of regions of Payal Kapadia’s selection, from Mumbai to the Western Ghats in Maharashtra, her fantastical suspension of reality mostly emerges on a small scale through the arrangement of generic objects as surreal still life portraiture. Long takes across houses (which bring to mind the elliptical rhythm with which Tsai Ming-liang floats across humid apartments) draw the eye across the geometry of domestic space, punctuated by these little trinkets, until the neatness of the familiar becomes peculiar.

In interviews Kapadia regularly refers to the haiku as a formal equivalent to the short film. We can recognize the succinctness of the haiku applied in the division of Kapadia’s films into multiple vignettes, each marked by the presence of a small, symbolic souvenir (the aforementioned objects) found in the dream. As she explains in a 2018 interview with Berlinale, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Within a dream, that whole is lost at the moment of waking. Only the loosely gathered parts can be salvaged. This epistemological limitation is the subject of Last Mango Before the Monsoon, which meets grief with images of rebirth. The film opens on a woman seated alone in a room, holding a red mango; we can barely see the flashes of fleshy red between her fingers. Cloaked in a solemn shadow, she faces the window with lonely yearning. Upon her exit from the room and to the field by the village, the film is drawn from darkness into daylight, but the dream does not end. The woman looks out at the forest outside the village. Her husband stares back, standing at a distance not as an arrival but as a final farewell: a voice speaks over a montage of watercolours, describing a lost spirit’s wandering through the forest before reincarnation—”as an insect, a bird, or an elephant.” The elephant, however, can only be recorded from afar with a camera installed by two scientists who’ve entered the forest to observe animals. But even they cannot stay to watch these creatures walk the earth up close, and neither can we. The elephant moves offscreen through the trees as the film transports us to the city, where cars fly across the highway and inhabitants (including the woman, now returned to her apartment home) occupy the isolated single frames of windows and relay stories of apparitions, of an encounter that might have been.

In Afternoon Clouds (2017), the only Indian film to compete at the Cannes Film Festival that year, the central object is a fictional flower that “blossoms throughout the whole year.” That such a plant does not exist is a source of sadness in Kaki’s (a 60-year-old widow) life, its absence a source of longing for a lover. Kapadia’s films are suffused with the atmosphere of mourning. The central object is a motor going off on its own on the ship, the presence of “so many ghosts” in the ocean. Without warning, the halls are suddenly fumigated. The air around him fills with smoke. Could he be one of those ghosts, paying his last visit before departure?

Meanwhile, as Kati sleeps, the film briefly cuts to a nude portrait of a woman (by Singh) circled by flowers and men. When she opens her eyes, it is night, and Mati has already returned. Like the mother
who shares what she saw the night before to her daughter in Last Mango, Kati attempts to hold onto the fleeting fragments she remembers through confession to Mati: she'd seen her late husband in a suit, but he did not recognize her. The search for the flower that blooms all year, the last of the trilogy, What is the Summer Saying? expands the erotic and spiritual dimensions of this encounter to its broadest proportions. The film begins and ends in colour, but its middle portion is in a rich black-and-white, and it moves across Kodwal village (located in Maharashtra's Sahyadri hills), in and out of houses, to continue Kapadia’s reflections on what she describes to Scroll.In as “the inability to talk openly about love.” That resistance to expression has an invisible hold on the women in the film who, reticent to appear on camera, only speak through voiceover about the village’s remote location, about getting fish for dinner. One woman, as is characteristic of the trilogy, remembers her late husband and his affection for her. The shot, however, only contains a cow looking into an empty room, an empty bed with a folded pile of unused blankets. The viewer, by this point, might be accustomed to Kapadia’s signature superimpositions of animated drawings. The blankness of the frame invokes an image of the lovers at the mere suggestion of what’s now lost: “He gave me a lot of love... I’m alone.” Obfuscation, a theme that in the earlier works appeared as fog over the hills and clouds in the sky, takes on more clever appearances here, like in the case of a hammock thrashing about against gravity that only hints at the weight of a wrapped body, and the bookending sequences of a man who collects honey from the bees in the forest.

The fate of the male bees, the film suggests, is to die after mating, or falling in love. Drawings appear again depicting a man and a woman before the man slowly rises and fades away as a new voice fades in, this time telling the tale of an arranged marriage in stark contrast to the union described by the previous voice. In fact, unlike the other films in the trilogy, which cut between or around and through dreams and reality, the voices and solitary figures of What is the Summer Saying? are reminiscing in total wakefulness, spinning fantasies from the fabric of monochrome memory. The approaching giggles and shouts of children signal the film’s return to colour. We do not see them, but we know they are discussing a love confession, one that for an older generation might be as unreal as a midsummer night’s dream: “I wrote her a love letter...and she said yes! That’s what I call ‘direct’ love.”

The Propositions strand is a hybrid of discussion and online screenings that dive deep into new cinema and share discoveries encountered through artists’ and filmmakers’ research, experience and practice.

This year’s slate includes two newly-commissioned films, Renée Heléna Browne’s personal exploration of the influence of paternal lines on bodily experiences of gender, and Zinzi Minott’s filmic manifestation of a body carrying the personal histories of her families and ancestral journey. These are joined by Kat Anderson’s video works which enquire into representations of mental illness and trauma as experienced by or projected upon Black bodies in media; and Tiffany Sia’s experimental exploration of the potential for anti-colonial filmmaking, aiming towards an urgent, process-driven cinema while resisting dominant narratives of crisis pushed by news journalism.
Artist and filmmaker Kat Anderson presents the world festival premiere of ‘Restraint Restrained’. The programme features two films from Anderson’s first solo exhibition. The works draw on the experiences and narratives of the many mentally ill Black people who have met their deaths in police custody or mental health facilities, through excessive restraint holds and other violent and negligent behaviours. ‘Restraint Restrained’ references the central premise of Frantz Fanon’s essay ‘Concerning Violence’, in which he claims that in order for the decolonisation of indigenous land to happen, a total and violent purging of the colonisers by the indigenous people must occur. Anderson repurposes this idea to consider how the contemporary Black mind and body, as a ‘colonised space’, is processed through public health and police institutions; understanding such authorities as embodiments and enforcers of structural white supremacy.

The word “episode” has dual references. It is derived from the ancient Greek word for the material between two songs in a Greek tragedy, and in contemporary visual culture it refers to a narrative unit within a larger dramatic work, as well as being a term used by mental health professionals to refer to a period of unstable mental illness. Kat Anderson’s ongoing artistic and research framework Episodes of Horror draws on both references. Her work challenges racialised depictions and projections of visual culture onto Black subjects and their wider implications on the lives of Black people. It also draws on the experiences of Black people with mental illness at the hands of police or mental health professionals. Anderson’s practice centres the accounts of Black people and has its focus on Black liberation.

‘Restraint Restrained’ was originally exhibited at Block 336 following her residency at the Black Cultural Archives. In the video work John, which makes up one part of Restraint Restrained and was originally exhibited as a two-channel installation, the mechanisms and genre codes of horror cinema are re-claimed as social investigation. Familiar cinematic tropes are utilised by the artist to make highly visible the insidious and systematic horror of racism. Anderson’s work confronts how racism manifests in the white imagination, as well as its direct outcome of severe violence in both the mental health system and policing.

Anderson’s work is interested in re-claiming the cinematic language of horror films—the cinematic imaginary, alongside its shortcomings, holds the potential for escape, visual pleasure and creative freedom—but, equally, her work is deeply engaged with the “non-fictional” (if such a binary can be applied to her work) spaces of community, activism and anti-racist work across spheres of everyday life. The ways in which her artistic practice is interwoven with a commitment to activism is demonstrated across her work, and here in particular in the film Roundtable Conversation. As Rabz Lansiquot succinctly writes in their accompanying essay to the films, “this piece gives voice to those doing the work.”

The mechanisms of film and fictional storytelling are one approach to a close and re-positioned perspective on violence. But alongside cinematic, literary and poetic references, Anderson’s work is also a close listening to the accounts and experiences of Black people dealing with mental health issues, those who have lost loved ones, and those working professionally and in their communities against the many guises of racism.

The moving-image works of Restraint Restrained, presented here at BFMAF, point to Kat Anderson’s ongoing artistic dedication to engaged dialogue on Black liberation, a conversation that continues after the cameras have stopped rolling.

— Christina Demetriou

‘Restraint Restrained’ was commissioned by Block336 and Black Cultural Archives and supported by Arts Council England, Elephant Trust, LUX and Spike Island.

Kat Anderson (UK) is an artist and filmmaker. She studied Fine Art at the University of West England and Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. She is currently working under an artistic and research framework entitled ‘Episodes of Horror’, which uses the genre of horror to discuss representations of mental illness and trauma as experienced by or projected upon Black bodies in media. Anderson has co-curated ‘Jamaican Pulse: Art and Politics from Jamaica and the Diaspora’ at the Royal West of England Academy. She has previously been commissioned by the KW Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin) and has been an artist-in-residence at METAL Liverpool, as part of its Liverpool Biennial programme to look at the historic and contemporary mental health of Black people living in the city. Her first solo exhibition ‘Restraint Restrained’ opened in 2019 at Block 336.

Filography
**Roundtable Conversation**
Kat Anderson

In *Roundtable Conversation*, Anderson brings together family members of Black men who have died in police custody or psychiatric units; mental health and legal professionals; activists and artists who reflect on violence as it relates to institutional racism. Through their discussion, the people gathered round the table communicate what needs to be done in order to free the Black mind.

Reflecting on the film in which they have been part of, those sat round the table discuss institutional racism and the hostile environment as policy, but the psychological consequences of this are felt too. Emotional impact is intoned through voices, facial expressions, breathing. The reverberations of violence and of trauma are felt not just in the bodies of those it is inflicted upon, but through their loved ones too. But it is not just individualised actions that inflict this, but being other in a world where white supremacy reigns.

And yet within this roundtable space, Anderson is able to enact a space of healing, where the discussants' shared experience puts them in solidarity with each other. Community care is felt through this action—of allowing people to openly speak about the work that they have done, that they continue to do, in resisting institutional racism in its different forms. In this space, much like in *John*, the participants play a role in imagining the liberation of the Black mind, through resistance and through speaking truth to power.

— Myriam Mouflih

**John**
Kat Anderson

*John* tells the story of a young male, a psychiatric hospital patient who witnesses the death of another Black male patient at the hands of white staff. Blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction, this work draws from real life cases of Black mentally ill men who have died as a result of excessive force of the State.

On a split screen, a man writhes on a wooden bed. The man moves from the bed—in a dark room lit by a fluorescent light—revealing a red smear of what looks like blood on the wall. John moves out of this room, through a hallway illuminated by white light, and emerges into a communal space—a recreation room of sorts. Utilising the stylised tropes of horror films, Anderson depicts the mental health unit in which John is in as a cold and harsh place. Other people populate this shared space. Patients and staff are distinguished by the differences in their pastel clothing. John watches two other Black men as they sit and talk, but he doesn’t join their conversation. The screen goes black and John’s nightmare resumes, as he is back again once more, writhing on his bed. Amidst this loop, tears gather in John’s eyes, as another Black man in the room is put in a hold by the staff. As John runs away, he finds another room: a solace. A group of people sit on chairs chanting, “come the light, come the hope.” Hands grip his own in a handshake and smiling faces approach him, welcoming him. Illuminating this stark contrast, warm tones radiate outward, and hands come together on John’s head—an act of care, of healing and protection. It is through this ritual that John is given power and he returns to the room of before—where he saw a man restrained—holding his fist high in resistance.

Elements of the soundscape bring the film back to genre, too: a low buzz is punctuated by cold metallic clangs, shakes of percussion, heavy bass—a near constant pulsating of an eerie variety. A disembodied voice seems to address the universal “you” in a monologue reminiscent of Frantz Fanon.

In framing the work through the lens of this clinical world of horror, Anderson is able to communicate nuance in a depiction of pain. Using a genre and visual language where violence is expected, an act of violence can be brought into a fictionalised focus and remove a layer of reality from it. How does one gesture to the very real violence that people suffer from without inflicting more harm?

— Myriam Mouflih
“Come the Light, Come the Hope”: Revisiting Kat Anderson’s *John* and *Roundtable Conversation*

Rabz Lansiquot

I write this piece as I encountered the work, as myself, a Black, queer person with first-hand experience of mental illness, and second-hand experience of those institutions set up to deal with mental illness through friends and family in various ways. I guess one could say that I also have third-hand knowledge of the ways in which mental illness and the conditions of those institutions have and continue to cause pain, trauma, and sometimes untimely death to Black people disproportionately. I say this to assert the subjectivity inherent in all engagements with art, foregrounding James Baldwin’s notion of “the flesh-and-blood-person”, an embodied spectator whose experience of art and film, how it makes us feel, what it makes us think of, what we think of it, is always informed by how we are or aren’t able to move through the world.¹

I first encountered Kat Anderson’s works *John* and the accompanying *Roundtable Conversation* as part of her solo exhibition ‘RestRAINT, RESTRAINED’ at Block 336 in 2019, when I initially wrote a version of this essay. There, the works were curated carefully by the artist, alongside other pieces of print and sound, as an act of care for the Black audiences interacting with the intensity of the subject matter. To revisit these films as part of this online programme at BFMAR during a still raging global pandemic, within which the reality of Black people’s proximity to premature death has been thrown back into the fore by the largest anti-racist uprising in generations, just reinforces my already-held view that Anderson’s work on screen is some of the most stunningly crafted and politically vital I’ve seen in my lifetime.

This particular uprising, sparked by the deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery—documented on film—and the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Tony McDade—not documented on film—has been characterised by abolitionist sentiment in a way that we have never seen before. Activists across the world are demanding an end to prisons and police, the prison industrial complex and the carceral system, which responds to harm with punishment, and to mental health crises with force and restraint. Kat Anderson’s film *John* is singular in its exploration of carceral ableism and its violent manifestations in what abolitionists term the mental health industrial complex.

The two-channel film follows John, a dark-skinned Black male patient of a psychiatric hospital. The oscillating soundtrack acts as a sonic representation of both mental illness, a dull hum, bass which vibrates the room as you watch it, so constant that sometimes it seems to disappear and other times it is debilitating, and white supremacy, high frequency ringing, tapping and buzzing in your ears. When they converge they become bigger than the sum of their parts.

The film begins with a black screen, a group chants “Come the light, come the hope”; a refrain from the poem Revolution by H.S. and C.B. (two black sisters), one of the many text references Anderson employs from her research at the Black Cultural Archives. The voices call John’s name and he wakes on an in breath, as if from a nightmare. He struggles to wake comfortably, stirring, thrashing, stretching. The only adornments in his light grey room, which his clothing almost blends into are a mirror and a red mark on the wall. Blood? He approaches the mirror, pulls at his face, rubs his eyes. Waking up black in racial capitalism feels like this. Heavy. Dull. As John slowly emerges from his room through a neon-lit corridor, the fact of his institutionalisation becomes clear. A concrete room with blue walls is populated with patients and white medical staff, who appear to engage calmly and sympathetically with the only white patient before they all turn to glare at John as he enters.

He wakes again, same weight. The red smudge on his wall is now bigger and is the head of a horse. As he leaves his room again, faster this time, he witnesses the three white staff members restraining an older black man: arms around his neck, hands pulled behind his back as he struggles to the ground. John is scared, tearful and runs away as we witness the man fighting for his life. This is not a fantasy. Anderson’s work references the formal modes and aesthetics of the horror genre, and this work specifically references the sorts of ‘clean’ dystopia’s created in sci-fi. As a fan, I’m constantly fascinated by the ways in which the worlds and stories, most often told through white protagonists in worlds without any significant black presence, parallel black experience in the lived world and *John* is a film clearly made by someone who shares these concerns. This scene refers explicitly to, and draws from, real cases of Black people in mental health crises who have died in psyceral spaces which masquerade as care facilities. Sean Rigg and Olaseni Lewis, whose relatives appear in the film, are just two in a long list of UK cases that include both men and women.

John hides in a dark cylindrical space and follows a flickering light at the other end, which leads him to an orange room filled with a group of Black people who chant, over and over again, “come the light, come the hope”. The warm oranges and browns of their clothing, and the sun-like wall are a stark contrast to the clinical blues and greys of all of the other spaces we’ve seen John in so far. The group are Black revolutionaries, healers of varying types, including Marcia Rigg (activist and sister of Sean Rigg, a Black British musician who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and died in police custody in August of 2008), Hakim Taylor (teacher, mindfulness practitioner and child emotion coach, Barby Asante (artist, curator and creative activist), Melz Owusu (non-binary academic, activist and poet), Aji Lewis (activist and mother of Olaseni Lewis, who died in psychiatric institutions; carceral spaces which masquerade as care facilities). Sean Rigg and Olaseni Lewis, whose relatives appear in the film, are just two in a long list of UK cases that include both men and women.

The revolutionaries nurture John, hold him, hear him, and he is able to return to the ward and resist. Fist in the air, John stands in defiance, still visibly fearful, until one of the staff members tackles him to the floor. John’s protest is, unsurprisingly, met with violence. What happens next is obscured somewhat with darkness. Flashing lights in blue and red are all that illuminate the struggle. But the struggle we see is not of John, restrained, being killed, yet. It is of John, fist still raised, and of the institution’s staff, writhing in pain, brought to the ground by fear, despair and torment. The oscillating bass

intensifies and Anderson's voice emerges, reciting a complex and nuanced text with Fanonian inflection. "...that moment when, you realise that you yourself are dying, and have been for centuries. But up until now, you have thought that you were somehow, utterly alone..." This segment continued to ring in my ears. "They let you go on thinking that you were alone. Thinking that somehow in your superiority, and moral making, that you were the rights and they were the wrongs of the earth. That you could find a way to finally rid them, the ones of no worth." I realised quickly that this text was not about me, or John, but was about them, those white people wrapped up in institutional racism to the point of violence.

I read this in two ways. First, the effect of violence, its burden, is not just held by those it is enacted on but also on those who enact it. It, and the culture, or more specifically hegemony, of justification around it, reverberates in their psyche’s, warps reality, produces and reproduces itself. Second, that this act of defiance, this resistance and strength, causes a psychological fissure in the minds of white subjects. It challenges all that they think is right, and just, and all that it has told them, throughout their lives and beyond them, of their superiority and of their claim to privilege. The inclusion of this performance of fright by the white actors, who we see screaming, crawling, unconscious, dying, turns the gaze onto whiteness, points the finger, illuminates. It also resists the expectation of the evidencing of acts of violence against Black people, the spectacle of black death and pain displayed in film, journalism and art so commonly in recent years, “the demand that this suffering be materialised and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and terrible.” It addresses the double standard in the media, of withholding such imagery of the deaths of white victims of violence, and gratuitously displaying that of black ones.

This explosion ends with everyone on the floor, seemingly unconscious, and the Black man who appeared to die earlier in the film, coming to, approaching John and with sadness and intimacy placing his hand over his head. He says a prayer, kisses John's head, and suddenly, John's unconscious body transforms into that of a blonde, white man. The other man stands to his feet with strength, as if he has accomplished what he set out to do and as he stands he is lit in orange light, wearing orange clothes, mirroring those of the revolutionaries. He has changed John's lifeless body into that of a person may demand some collective sorrow, or some dignity, some humanity.

Rabz Lansiquot is a filmmaker, programmer, curator and DJ. Rabz Lansiquot situates America 2 revisiting scenes of the Black Panthers film in 1994 that came to signify the Black Panthers movement. This work begins with a question; “can we map the impact of technologies of race, gender, law, colonialism, empire, capital, and governmentality on Black minds and bodies?” They reflect on the themes of the film at large, they talk through the psychotic effect of policies such as the hostile environment and institutional racism in general, their own mental health challenges, the cases of their loved ones who were stolen from them as a result of institutional racism in psychiatric institutions, their strategies for survival and for resistance, and on violence. This piece gives voice to those doing the work. Those fighting back, those trying to heal and encourage others to heal. It makes real the fantasy, elucidates the terror, reminds us that sci-fi is not just fiction. As I compare this moment, of isolation, collective grief and uprising, to the first time I saw these works, I realise that, while others may feel like the whole world has transformed completely since the beginning of the pandemic, anti-black violence and carceral ableism remain largely unchanged. Roundtable Conversation is an eerily timeless document that could just have easily been staged yesterday, in 1992, or in 1969. Being Black or otherwise other-ed in a world built on white supremacy is proven to be bad for your health. This kind of violence and negligence from state institutions at every level (yes, that includes the NHS) is, quite literally, a killer, and it is imperative that this work be shown alongside John, to remind us of that, from the lips of those who deal with it everyday.

Roundtable Conversation situates John alongside a lineage of ongoing, fierce and powerful collective resistance to the conditions he, and we, face. There's no avoiding the fact that these films are painful to grapple with as a Black person, any exploration of these issues would be, but Kat Anderson is an artist who makes work with careful consideration of the context of resistance, through painstaking research and attentiveness to historical lineages, not without hope, not without community and not without revolutionary intent. Kat Anderson's work is liberatory, an act of resistance through the moving image, film work made in defence of Black life and in service of abolition. I'm so glad it exists.

Rabz Lansiquot is a filmmaker, programmer, curator and DJ. They were a leading member of sorryyoufeeluncomfortable (SYFU) collective from its inception in 2014 and now work alongside Imani Robinson as the curatorial and artistic duo Languid Hands, who are the Cubitt Curatorial Fellows for 2020-21. Rabz was Curator In Residence at LUX in 2019, developing a public and educational programme around Black literate cinema. Their first solo exhibition ‘where did we land’, an experimental visual essay exploring the use of images of anti-black violence in film and media, was on view at LUX in Summer 2019. They have put together film programmes at the ICA, SQIFF, Berwick Film & Media Festival, were a programme advisor for LFF's Experimenta strand in 2019, and are on the selection committee for Sheffield Doc Fest 2020. Rabz is also training to deliver workshops in working with Super 8 and eco-processing at not.nowhere.

In *Daddy's Boy*, Renée Hélène Browne creates an intimate portrait of their Irish homeland, documenting their father as he undertakes tasks around the house and on a rural farm. Browne’s voice-over draws the viewer in as a confidante, introducing elements of narrative from the 1990 sci-fi *Jurassic Park* and using the character of T-Rex to explore patriarchal dynamics, gender conformity and societal expectations.

The work opens with Browne’s father manoeuvring a digger into position. The pastoral scenery and familial space are witnessed from Browne’s own perspective: a curious donkey sniffs the camera, washing dries in the living room and their father lazes on the couch. Browne’s voice breaks this everyday scene with viscerally violent descriptions from the dystopic thriller *Jurassic Park*, “A tearing laceration runs from his shoulder down his torso. At the edge of the wound, the flesh is shredded and at the centre, the shoulder is dislocated with pale bone exposed.” The work is punctuated by images of the artist moulding and reshaping a piece of purple plasticine into the form of a dinosaur.

*Daddy's Boy* takes its title from a photograph by Phyllis Christopher, first published in the Lesbian Erotica magazine *On Our backs*. The image captures an embrace between two people, one bearing a tattoo with the words 'Daddy’s Boy' in gothic font. Browne’s *Daddy's Boy* examines heteronormative expectations and explores the potential for change. Browne investigates human control over natural impulse, traditional structures and belief systems, and what happens when these are challenged or ruptured. In *Jurassic Park*, the human-driven experiment begins to deteriorate and eventually descends into chaos. *Daddy's Boy* journeys to a similar point of break-down, as the artist’s voice begins to change and distort, and the familiar imagery morphs into abstraction.

— Claire Hills

*Daddy’s Boy* was commissioned for the 16th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival 2020.

**Filmography**


Renée Hélène Browne (Ireland) is an artist based between Glasgow and Donegal. Browne makes vocal soundscapes, essay films and angry drawings, focusing on schisms and transitions between language and the body. They are currently Research Associate with Centre of Contemporary Art Derry for 2020 and was Graduate Resident at Hospitalfield (Scotland) in 2019. They were selected for Platform, the emerging artist commission for the 2018 Edinburgh Art Festival and are a recent graduate of the Master of Fine Art programme at the Glasgow School of Art. They have upcoming solo exhibitions at Lunchtime, Glasgow (2020) and Intermedia, CCA Glasgow (2021). Browne is supported by the Arts Council of Ireland.
Marla

Notes on Daddy’s Boy.
Esther Draycott

Synthetic, flexible and non-drying, Marla’s properties make it ideal for the early stages of child development. Non-toxic and non-staining, with a dough-like texture, it can be handled at great length without ever breaking down. It is stiff enough to take intricate forms, and has the appropriate resistance to maintain ridges and holes. It is available in a wide range of shades, none of which will bleed. The heavy manipulation of two or more colours may instead result in the appearance of veins, or sinew.

Marla is said to encourage a child’s ability to interpret signs and symbols. A malleable material, it provides a medium through which they may observe, repeat, and manipulate figures and images manifest in their early lives. Marla’s tactile properties—its softness, and vitality—make it appropriate for exploring bodily characteristics of the world beyond the self, often for the first time. How the child identifies their creations, the name they are given, is a critical exercise in deciding the social categories into which these characteristics may fall.

If a child sets about making a T-Rex, they will likely call on existing observations and sensory experiences of human bodies as a foundation for that task. Their stylistic choices, driven by curiosity, will deliberately test and disorder such knowledge in a novel process of representation.

In the process of making this creature, they will tacitly or explicitly engage with the unhuman-as-category using the limited faculties at their disposal. They may incise the dough-like substance to represent scales, or roll it out to make hunkered legs. They may gently pinch together claws on splayed feet, or use both of their thumbs to impress a deep, wide mouth.

In 1951 paediatrician and child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott coined the term “transitional object” to refer to any object to which a young child forms a particular physical attachment. He used the term transitional to refer to the role of these objects in introducing the child to objects and bodies beyond those with which they are in immediate contact. Soon heralded as one of the most influential psychoanalysts in Britain, transitional phenomena formed a crucial area of his research for a number of years, unpacked at length in his later work Playing and Reality.

Lauren Berlant referred to genre as a category exerting control over the ways in which an acting and interpreting subject experiences life. Encompassing emotions, impressions and historical contingencies, genres work to manage difficult or conflicting messages stemming from a subject’s encounters with other individuals. Berlant has argued that the genre of the “innocent child” has been fed through contemporary Western society to posit exploration and experimentation as hallmarks of infancy—their appearance in adulthood, by contrast, a sign of deviance.

In a 1991 paper on the semantics of gender, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore addressed the operation of trans- as a human category as one that attempts, failingly, to delimit a set of marginalised people from a wider public. Instead, they argued, trans- should be understood as a distinctly porous social category encompassing a wide spectrum of bodies and identifications. It should be considered, they continue, the means by which the various forms of power, capital and sociality reproduced through individual bodies are imagined otherwise.

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1. In 1951 paediatrician and child psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott coined the term “transitional object” to refer to any object to which a young child forms a particular physical attachment. He used the term transitional to refer to the role of these objects in introducing the child to objects and bodies beyond those with which they are in immediate contact. Soon heralded as one of the most influential psychoanalysts in Britain, transitional phenomena formed a crucial area of his research for a number of years, unpacked at length in his later work Playing and Reality.

2. Lauren Berlant referred to genre as a category exerting control over the ways in which an acting and interpreting subject experiences life. Encompassing emotions, impressions and historical contingencies, genres work to manage difficult or conflicting messages stemming from a subject’s encounters with other individuals. Berlant has argued that the genre of the “innocent child” has been fed through contemporary Western society to posit exploration and experimentation as hallmarks of infancy—their appearance in adulthood, by contrast, a sign of deviance.

3. In a 1991 paper on the semantics of gender, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore addressed the operation of trans- as a human category as one that attempts, failingly, to delimit a set of marginalised people from a wider public. Instead, they argued, trans- should be understood as a distinctly porous social category encompassing a wide spectrum of bodies and identifications. It should be considered, they continue, the means by which the various forms of power, capital and sociality reproduced through individual bodies are imagined otherwise.
During the pre-communication, breast-feeding stage of infancy, the body of the parent extends from the body of the child like another limb. The assembly and destruction of various bodily forms through Marla is widely taken as a playful reclaiming of omnipotence as this stage passes, and the parent ceases to attend instinctively to the child's physical needs and wants. It may also be a form of speculation—accounting for a desire to narrate the breaking apart of the body, and the sadness and potential of its composite parts.\(^5\)

The child's use of Marla in this stage is echoed in cultural turns to scenes of monstrous or beastly disfigurement in instances of widespread trauma, such as humanitarian crisis or world war. Both reckon with a moment in which an image of the human as something bounded and unitary is left behind—albeit in the case of the latter, through scenes of astounding horror. Creatures of mismatched limbs and synthetic binds, these monsters make omens of the improvised body. They say: there is no greater threat to humanity than believing me real.\(^6\)

Left alone with Marla, a child may make and unmake the T-Rex repeatedly, the scene of her birth imagined time and again in hope of further insight into the unnatural as a way of living. Cuts heave wounds, skin thickens to pelt.

As a child moves through adolescence and eventually into adulthood, the practice of free play of any kind is increasingly looked upon as a symptom of failure to fulfill expectations of their development. In the Western world, these can be traced through patriarchal lines of inheritance. The son as rightful heir to the father also constitutes him as emissary of the gestures and movements that accrete in the father's body over time. In order to maintain the coherence of this patriarchal line, bodies are officially identified through the successful imitation of actions a child of either gender has observed their parent of the same gender perform. The father's actions, gestures and movements, purposeful even if not visibly so, are a benchmark of the poise, the sense of inattention, with which the right body is performed. He gives the impression it could be no other way.\(^7\)

The failure to fulfill these expectations—due to a failure to imitate the correct gestures with enough precision, or a desire to imitate the wrong person—may be met on the part of the subject with a feeling of dispossession. Marla gives shape to phantom limbs.

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5. Kelly Hurley notes that not only do images of the abhuman—humans that have been destroyed or otherwise manipulated beyond recognition—come about periods of accelerated scientific progress, but that equally notable in some of the art and literature is the “obsessive staging and re-staging” of horrific scenes of abhuman birth, death or mutilation. While she reads this creative impulse as a sign of epistemic trauma, the sheer flamboyance of the spectacle signals a cultural category in which thrilling, vertiginous pleasure is taken from imaginative testing of the “morphic possibilities of the body.”

6. The father-son relation as the axis of cultural modernity has been discussed by Lee Edelman in his essay Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That’s Out of Joint. Edelman argues William Shakespeare’s Hamlet has retained its popularity because it continues to demonstrate postmodern psychoanalytic and critical debates regarding the conceptual position of the child as guarantor of human viability. Contemporary subjects that do not reproduce, or are not positioned towards reproduction in this way, are understood as something out of time with humanity—and therefore somewhere outside of its bodily requirements. This view of the non-reproductive subject (a son that fails to imitate the father) is, he argues, “a negativity that haunts the social order”: a constant, abstracted figuring of such subjects as something less than human.

7. The study of the repetitive actions of the body known as “habitus” was introduced by Marcel Mauss during a lecture at the Society of Psychology, Boulogne, in 1934. There he identified sociality as a driving force behind the practice of imitation, complicating the psychological and biological factors to which human movement had already been attributed. He called the repetition of the father’s actions by the son “prestigious imitation...actions the son has seen successfully performed by people in whom he has confidence, and who have authority over him.” Sara Ahmed later argued that Mauss’s prestigious repetition, as a way of being in society, is “a script that binds the intimate familial to the global order.” The failure or refusal of an individual to imitate, to repeat, the motion of the parent, has been figured for centuries as a pervasive threat to a humanity defined along biological terms.
Regardless of the skill with which it has been applied, Marla’s pliable texture means it retains an amateurish quality. Difficult to handle with precision, its surface is often covered with visible signs of its maker’s touch. These are methods that elucidate, rather than erase, the conditions of their production. Traces of the material remain on the user’s fingers, and their fingerprints stretch across the object’s surface, in a process out of which both subject and object emerge reformed.

A T-Rex made of Marla may, for this reason, be categorised as a form of fan art. Fan art is a product of the close study of an object or figure present in popular culture, otherwise manifest in forms such as erotic fiction or costume-play. Forgoing technical tools and skilful methods as means that obfuscate the maker’s body, fan artists prefer to engage in methods of reproduction that are sensory, instinctive and privately orchestrated. They express forms of love that constitute the object of the fan’s desires as part of the fan themselves. Crude portraits and shoddy imitations, the uneven surface of fan art is alive with needs and wants. It is a form of love that is publicly disavowed.⁸

Fan art invokes childhood as a refusal of the epistemologies of adult identification, returning to a primordial scene of childhood trauma to re-imagine the human in fragments. The survival of the object is assured through an ongoing process of transformation, in which subject and object exchange radiant forms. To be a fan is to give the body a new name.⁹

⁸ Catherine Grant described fandom as widely pathologised in wider society for its connotations of embarrassing desire and a loss of perspective. Identifying not just figures of popular culture but historical moments and political movements as possible fan objects, Grant argued the practice should instead be recognised for capitalising on desire as a critical faculty. As with any form of love, the attachments nurtured through fandom incorporate a multitude of perspectives that blur the boundaries between academic and intimate knowledge. To be a fan is to feel antagonism, disappointment and distance towards your subject as well as, or rather inherently as a part of, intense forms of love.

⁹ Writing in My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamonix: Performing Gender Rage, Susan Stryker advocates listening to monsters as bearers of revelation. In categorising monsters as outcasts that betray the essential lie of the natural order, Stryker occupies the subject position of monster as a means to make her body legible. Occupying the postures and cadences of romantic depictions of monsters, Stryker implores a human audience to listen to those of her kind.

“Be forewarned, however,” she writes, “that taking up this task will remake you in the process.”

Daddy’s Boy is a declaration of love which may appear as a small circle held between two palms. She may appear as a lumpen snout of two bright colours, pressed one way, then another. She may appear as a raised heel incised with a small metal rod. She may appear with wrist extended, three small claws pointing towards small incisions on her torso. They are the mark of human fingernails.

Every attempt at perfection, everything she has ever been before, curled across her skin like fronds.¹⁰

¹⁰ 18:29, Daddy’s Boy, Renée Helena Browne.
Tiffany Sia: Never Rest/Unrest

For this year’s Propositions strand, Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival is dedicating a focus to the diverse practice of Hong Kong writer, artist and filmmaker Tiffany Sia. Though the centre of this presentation is Never Rest/Unrest, Sia’s directorial debut and an urgent work that functions as creative reportage of the 2019 Hong Kong protests, the full range of work on view includes writing, collage and performance documentation, as well as a livestream discussion with Sia.

As someone deeply embedded within international circles of cinema, visual art and activism for a number of years, Tiffany Sia has worked in many visible and invisible ways advocating for artists, writers, filmmakers and political activists. In more recent years, her own diverse practice has grown across media, though with a coherence of aesthetic style and recurring themes as well as a commitment to direct action and solidarity. This presentation is the first to bring as many of these seemingly disparate elements together in arguing their cohesion and connection to each other. Within Sia’s body of work, text can be a form of image-making and the screen of a video image is always vertically orientated. Critical theory and direct action sit alongside each other and mass political protests are unmasked as full of boring moments.

— Herb Shellenberger

Never Rest/Unrest
Tiffany Sia

Hong Kong | 2020 | 29 mins

World Festival Premiere

Never Rest/Unrest is a film documenting the seemingly never-ending protests that began early summer 2019 only to fizzle out earlier this year due to Covid. (Sia explains, “protests now have taken smaller-scale and at times more mutable forms [also] due to the recent legal crackdown.”) The 28-minute film, shot on a hand-held mobile device, poses what Sia calls “ambiguous, anachronistic and often banal time.” While news media typically distil complicated and sprawling information into easy-to-digest images and narratives, the situation one finds on the ground is very different. The exciting bits of protest are far outweighed by the moments spent sitting around and waiting. But the film certainly shows exhilarating moments of mass action, from a large group of protesters chanting at night towards the city from a hill, to an occupied shopping mall protest singalong conducted by a person in a furry Doraemon costume.

Through the shooting and editing of Never Rest/Unrest, Sia takes up the mantle of Cuban revolutionary filmmaker and theorist Julio Garcia Espinosa, who originally published the manifesto “For an Imperfect Cinema” in 1969. This anti-colonial cinema is a cinema of urgency, a cinema of the counter-spectacle and one that is driven by process and resistance rather than fabrication and convention.

Alongside Never Rest/Unrest, Tiffany Sia presents a new leak of material from her forthcoming book Too Salty Too Wet, a sequel to the 2019 zine Salty Wet published by Inpatient Press.

— Herb Shellenberger

Filmography
Never Rest/Unrest (2020)

Note regarding Never Rest/Unrest: subtitles are intentionally omitted from the film as a means of interrogating the cultural proximity or distance of the viewer from Hong Kong.
Tiffany Sia: Embracing the Doomscroll
Herb Shellenberger

One morning earlier this summer, during one of any seemingly infinite number of random scrolls through the various feeds connected to my handheld device, I saw a friend posting about a live, online screening of a new film by an artist I wasn’t yet familiar with. Online film screenings, especially during the early Covid-19 lockdown period between the months of March–June 2020, became a regular occurrence effectively for the first time. As a consequence, the excitement of having open, free, worldwide access to this new and much-needed form of collective film culture was tempered by the practical fact that there were still time zones to reckon with. By the time I woke up in London, I realised the screening had already occurred just a few hours before. I decided to send an email to the artist Tiffany Sia to check if I could watch the film another way.

That email sent on 12 June—three months to the day in which I’m writing this essay, 12 September, currently at 2:35AM, woefully past deadline and just days before our festival launches—set off a chain of conversation that has led to this writing and the programme on Tiffany Sia’s work at Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival that it belongs to. It also led me to the realisation that Sia is one of the rare individuals whose deep-seeded commitments—to radicality and political action; to humour and satire; to unfiltered and graphic sexuality; to artistic expression; and to unblemished humanity—are legion.

With this text, I’d like to use my words to draw a diagram of all the overlapping areas of Tiffany Sia’s diverse activities, as they all feed into one another to produce a huizing mass of activity and information that a viewer can follow, learn from, interact with and even contribute to. Though I will touch on Sia’s writing, producing, residency hosting, live streaming and filmmaking, it would be a failure not to mention the single, overarching and unifying activity between them all. She is a prolific social media poster, synthesising diverse information and delivering it to those following along on the various commodified platforms we all use. Rather than reject the doomscroll—the infinite scroll on our hellish news timeline and feeds full of terrifying information—Sia embraces and rectifies it, publishing her own version and vision of the world towards radical, liberatory and aesthetic truths.

Tiffany Sia’s highly developed and singularly unique writing practice mirrors in several fundamental ways the form, texture and personal/public divide of social media. In 2019, Inpatient Press published her zine Salty Wet,咸濕, a series of anti-travelogues on distance and desire with and without Hong Kong. The publication exists both as a paper zine and digital PDF (accessible at the Asia Art Archive) and includes screen grabs, texts, tweets and the visual texture of the infinite scroll, with sections and paragraphs divided and images pixelated, blurry or hastily-cropped. The cover of Salty Wet,咸濕 is appropriated from the cover of a Hong Kong soft-core pornography magazine from 1989, showing a topless centerfold model juxtaposed with a crowd of student protestors in Tiananmen Square. The association between sexuality and radical politics is one way to read this appropriation, though I propose a more complex reading. Imagine a reader on the subway with a copy of the zine. Anyone looking at her reading this might think she is just reading vintage pornography, while in actuality, the writing and information inside is much more scandalous, shocking and powerful than mere soft-core porn.

On the heels of Salty Wet,咸濕, the forthcoming book Too Salty Too Wet更咸更濕 will be published on Sia’s own imprint Speculative Place Press. The book is still actively being written but it has still been disseminated in the form of several leaks of material in progress. In February 2020, the first of these leaks was made as a poster-size zine released in an event at Printed Matter in New York. As part of this retrospective for Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival, Sia is publishing Too Salty Too Wet更咸更濕 Leak as Discharge, a “consensual leak” of material that is companion to her 2020 film Never Rest/Unrest. This specific material is “a retelling of geography that takes aim at the notion of the spectacular”. The reader should note all the different possible meanings of both the words in the appended title. Whistleblowers leak material, authorities discharge protestors unlawfully, pornography gets leaked online, discharge denotes sexual fluids.

Another aspect of Tiffany Sia’s work is the series of live stream readings/performances she delivers titled Hell is a Timeline, yet another reference to and resonance with the dooms- scroll. The series is delivered through Home Cooking, a geographically-dispersed collective of artists and an open-source digital platform most often accessed through Instagram. Each livestream (or episode) of Hell is a Timeline consists of reading aloud several texts that each accentuate a different theme—episodes include “Fear as a Weapon and a Shadow”, “The Crisis of Our Lived Myths” or “The Violent Fictions of Maps”, for example. Sia sits in front of the (portrait orientation) camera, her face pixelated by the don’tlookatme filter, introducing the session, reading at a measured pace and taking liberal gulps of water when necessary. There is little in the way of personal conversation or even expounding on the texts—which range from philosophical treatises to film reviews and history writing—so Hell is a Timeline feels more like a performance than a chat. But reading these texts aloud is ultimately a tool both productive and beneficial. As Sia has spoken, reading aloud is one way of making what is often scattered and confounding stumble upon these livestreams and perhaps fall headlong into “the discourse” as a result.

Beyond her own creative pursuits, Sia has worked with other artists and filmmakers to help them realise their own projects. She worked as executive producer for Adam Khalil & Baylee Sweitzer’s 2018 film Empty Metal (the Opening Night film of BFMAF 2018) and is executive producing Adam Khalil & Zack Khalil’s forthcoming, Sundance Documentary Fund supported documentary Ancestors in the Archives. Beyond this activity, Sia is the founder of Spectulative Place, an experimental project space in Hong Kong that hosts a rotating cohort of artists, writers and filmmakers in residence, including artists Carolyn Lazard and Alex Nguyen-Vo. This work and these alliances are very much in line with the solidarity and support that she lends to many causes, campaigns and protests both locally and internationally.

The intermingling of all these diverse activities creates a hub of action, thinking and connections supported by and channeled through Tiffany Sia. The film Never Rest/Unrest is an important expression—and a significant work in its own right—but it should most clearly be seen within the linkage of all of these other activities, expressions, meetings and ideas. However, paradoxically, through the various, occasional and effective strategies she employs—such as obstruction, refusal, ambivalence and/or inscrutability, Sia’s work is didactic and political only purely by suggestion. She never delivers anything usable by the state—even the protest footage in Never Rest/Unrest doesn’t show anyone’s faces uncovered, only masked up. In these ways, the artist shadowboxes with the specter of state terror through a strategy of plausible deniability.

While it might seem curious for a film festival to devote a retrospective to someone who has thus far only directed one film, all the above activities show Never Rest/Unrest to be yet another aspect of a wider practice that defies easy categorisation and expands outward without end. Because the only way to face the infinite doomscroll of hellish news and terrible information is to create one’s own timeline of solidarity, beauty and infinite possibility.
Ancestral interference

Ancestral interference is the feeling of rage or anger bigger than your own rage, pain bigger than your own pain, it is the feeling of being tired of a fight you have only just begun. It is the feeling of being on the march forever, of screaming from a place deep inside that does not belong to you. It is the feeling of being frightened for your life, fighting for your life. It is standing on the edge of the sea and hearing screams, it is being begged by them not to give up. It is being on your portion of a walk that has been ablaze for centuries, and feeling the weight of every foot that has walked. It is being strengthened by the ability for your ancestors to lose everything, and build something, again, and again and again.

My ancestors meddle, they interfere, they see cracks and break through and they scream with us, they rage with us, they remind us.

It is conjuring the strength of those who fought for their lives.

There will be Ancestral interference.

We have been fighting for time. We are not propelled into this fight just on our legs, but the legs of those that have walked, pounded the pavement, they have run, in between the blades of cane and the balls of cotton to freedom. For those of us who don’t only imagine the horrors of slavery but carry it in our blood, life expectancy still cut short by the consequences of horror, there will be ancestral interference.

For the rumble that we all feel, the feeling of impending eruption, for the rage that bubbles within us, that rage is not ours alone. There will be ancestral interference.

For those of them that came to rebuild a mother country that only ever loathed them, there will be ancestral interference.

There are people fighting for and with us on many planes—Ancestral interference.

Read between the glitch. Ancestral interference.

In this moment where the vice seems to squeeze ever tighter around our Black lives, I need you to remember that there will be Ancestral interference.

There will be Ancestral interference.

Pour out and walk. Some times yuh haffi stan crooked an cut straight. Ah so we dweet. Call them. Ancestral Interference.

That scream stuck deep down in your throat is not yours alone. Call them. Ancestral interference.

Everyday I get closer to becoming an ancestor. I will interfere. There will be meddling, there will be interference. I will interfere.

— Zinzi Minott

Fi Dem III is produced and commissioned by Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival, Spike Island, Bristol and Transmission, Glasgow.
Embodied Thoughts on Zinzi Minott’s
Fi Dem III: Ancestral Interference
Rabz Lansiquot

Zinzi Minott has made a new short video work as part of the Fi Dem series every year since 2018 and intends to continue doing so. On her website, she describes Fi Dem as “a commitment to the Windrush generation, and a continued investigation of Blackness, diaspora and the heritage of her family”. The work is usually released on Windrush Day, June 22nd, but, of course 2020 had other ideas. I, as a filmmaker, curator and descendant of Caribbean migrants, follow this body of work intently and have had the privilege of being in conversation with Minott about it in both professional and personal settings. This essay is a personal, embodied and possibly fragmented reaction to the latest iteration, Fi Dem III: Ancestral Interference, which premieres this year at BFMAF.

In the first weeks of lockdown—before the personal losses, state sanctioned murders, uprisings and other traumas that pop up as a Black queer person living in a global pandemic during late capitalism—I managed to find the clarity of mind to sit down to read Dionne Brand’s novel At The Full and Change of the Moon, and watch Med Hondo’s epic West Indies. Brand’s book tells the story of one family’s migration from an escape from the plantation in the Antilles (through both maroonage and suicide) to scattered migration to Canada, the U.S and The Netherlands. Hondo’s film charts a similar lineage in an MGM-style musical adaptation of Martinican playwright Daniel Boukman’s Les Nègriers, taking us on a journey from the introduction of sugar cane cultivation in 1640, to the slave trade, to the broken promises of migration and independence. It wasn’t until I saw Fi Dem III: Ancestral Interference that I truly understood why these two works haunted—and touched—me so.

Minott poetically describes her concept of ancestral interference as follows: “the feeling of a rage or anger bigger than your own rage, a pain bigger than your own pain, it is the feeling of being tired of a fight you have only just begun...of being on the march forever, of screaming from a place deep inside that does not belong to you.” She articulates this as an action taken by the ancestors, who “meddle...interfere...scream...rage...[and] remind” us to fight, and why we fight, and what we are fighting for.

Like Hondo and Brand, Minott crafts a replication, as well as an exploration, of ancestral interference in Fi Dem III. As with the two previous works in the ongoing series, she plays with glitch in both the visual and sonic elements of the film. The brightly coloured glitch footage used in Fi Dem II recurs, a nod to the strained dissonance she feels as a queer Black woman about the largely overlooked Windrush Day being positioned in the midst of the highly commercialised Pride month. Queerness is in the glitch, is the glitch, when the world requires us to celebrate a part of ourselves whilst diminishing another. Footage flashes, parts are missing, layered on top of one another. Sound crunches, crashes, is broken apart and stuck back together. Loudness and silence are pressed right up against each other, revelling in the discomfort they create. Minott asks us to “read between the glitch”, to be attentive to the dissonance, to listen to the interference.

The novel, At the Full and Change of the Moon and the film West Indies both deal with ancestral interference, with the reverberation, the echo, that history which flows through our veins. Fi Dem III allows me to understand that feeling which haunts me. It gives name to that weight I carry. It gives meaning to those moments where my emotions seem to swell from an unconscious, otherworldly place. It’s the kind of work which tells you that yes, that really happened, and yes, this is what you must do. I know that many reading this essay may not understand what I mean by that, and those same folks probably felt similarly watching the film, but, if you know...you know.

Throughout the Fi Dem series, Minott reuses footage; the brightly coloured glitch, dominoes at a Nine Night, a ship on the horizon. She reuses sound; 1950’s archive voiceovers as well as sirens, airhorns and MC’s voices familiar for those of us who grew up in and around sound system culture. She throws aspects of previous works back and forth, meddles with them and repeats them, forgoing linear time as ancestors do, as generational trauma does in our bodies. Fi Dem III, more explicitly than its previous iterations, confronts slavery. It begins with a 3-D rendered sea, rough and illuminated by the moon, waves rising and falling. This sea conjures the image of the middle passage. That deadly crossing, that limbo. The fact that the HMT Empire Windrush, on its journey from Jamaica to London in 1948, also crossed that same ocean where captives from Africa were transported, is another tragically absurd layer of meaning. Footage of a field of sugarcane, lightly blowing in the breeze also reminds us of the trade’s purpose: the extraction of labour to sell and consume goods. The sea and the cane both reappear throughout the film, at points becoming overlaid with flashes of scarlet red. A further reminder of the blood spilled overboard—those killed and those who chose death over the deadly unknown—and on the plantation—a result of work, of punishment or rebellion. The red water is reminiscent also of Enoch Powell’s infamous Rivers of Blood speech, emphasising his implication that the blood will be, as it always is, that of the Other.

The use of COVID-19 deaths statistics, which showed that Black Caribbeanans were almost three times more likely to die as a result of the virus than their white British counterparts, alongside a replication of the famous diagram of the ‘Brookes’ slave ship creates an explicit thread between the injustices of the past, and those of the present.

Whilst all of the Fi Dem series so far sit with science fiction in some way, Fi
Essential Cinema

Essential Cinema 2020 features Mártta Mészáros’s fascinating and rarely-seen third feature Szép leányok, ne sírjatok! (Don’t Cry, Pretty Girls!) (1970), which examines the social structures of the Beat era in socialist Hungary within the framework of the director’s most vital and pressing topic, the possibility of women’s freedom; Ulrike Ottinger’s Paris Calligrammes (2020), a personal retrospective and filmic collage built around the artist’s memories of life in Paris during the 1960s, charged with the vitality of personal and societal revolutions to come; the late Armenian filmmaker Maria Saakyan’s impassioned, unsentimental debut feature, Mayak (The Lighthouse) (2006), which follows a young woman embracing an apocalyptic vision of freedom; and the recently rediscovered Badnaam Basti (Alley of Disrepute) (1971), Prem Kapoor’s bandit musical debut which features Hindi cinema’s first portrayal of queer desire and stakes a belated claim to be one of the Indian New Wave’s most remarkable films.

Dem III has a distinct sci-fi aesthetic. This is the result partly of the conditions within which the work was made; in self isolation, with a significantly reduced capacity to film organically and a significantly heightened sense of life mediated by technology. The artificial humanoid forms made up of ones and zeros, whose slow march appears and reappears on screen during the film also reference the wildly under-theorised link between slavery and robotics. Enslaved people were rendered fungible, mutually interchangeable and indistinguishable from each other, by those minds who created the philosophical and epistemological foundations to justify and support the practice of chattel slavery. That fungibility still persists in an age where a mechanised replacement for human labour is closer every day, and the fear that the machines may become intelligent to the point of rebellion is a common theme of exploration in both the scientific community and popular culture. These issues of what humanity is, who is or isn’t human, and what kinds of threats those who are non-human, yet conscious, pose, are complex and vital to Minott’s ongoing exploration of the legacies of Windrush.

In our conversations, Minott describes liking the possibility of Fi Dem as a form of propaganda, work made to further a specific political cause, in service of something bigger than its own making. I would add to this that Fi Dem III is an example of what Stephen Best & Saidiya Hartman, in their essay Fugitive Justice, term “redress discourse”; work that can be positioned in the space between “grievance and grief; between the necessity of legal remedy and the impossibility of redress...in which all captives find themselves—the interval between the no longer and the not yet, between the destruction of the old world and the awaited hour of deliverance”2 To pull that apart a little, Fi Dem III acknowledges the need for, and pushes toward, revolution and reparations to address slavery and its ongoing impact of the Black people of the Caribbean, whilst also foregrounding the fact that neither of those things can undo, or adequately account for, the material, emotional, psychological and epistemological harm already done.

Fi Dem III affirms us, as descendants of the Windrush generation and thus of the enslaved, in our grief and in our rage to sit meditatively—and to allow it to galvanise us to fight.


Rabz Lansiquot is a filmmaker, programmer, curator and DJ. They were a leading member of sorryyoufeeluncomfortable (SYFU) collective from its inception in 2014 and now work alongside Imani Robinson as the curatorial and artistic duo Languid Hands, who are the Cubitt Curatorial Fellows for 2020–21. Rabz was Curator In Residence at LUX in 2019, developing a public and educational programme around Black liberatory cinema. Their first solo exhibition ‘where did we land’; an experimental visual essay exploring the use of images of anti-black violence in film and media, was on view at LUX in Summer 2019. They have put together film programmes at the ICA, SQIFF, Berwick Film & Media Festival, were a programme advisor for LFF’s Experimenta strand in 2019, and are on the selection committee for Sheffield Doc Fest 2020. Rabz is also training to deliver workshops in working with Super 8 and eco-processing at not.nowhere.
Badnam Basti (Alley of Ill Repute)
Prem Kapoor

India | 1971 | 82 mins

Briefly released in 1971 and subsequently lost for decades until its rediscovery in 2019, Badnam Basti is the debut feature of Indian New Wave filmmaker Prem Kapoor. The rough-hewn, low budget Bollywood melodrama, an adaptation of Kamleshwar Prasad Saxenaa's eponymous novel, traces a circular relationship between its three main characters: truck driver and petty thief Sarnam, the lovely Bansuri who he saves from being raped and Shivraj, who works in a temple is later hired by Sarnam to clean his bus.

Badnam Basti's atypical love triangle finds Sarnam and Shivraj becoming increasingly physically and emotionally intimate. These queer (or perhaps more appropriately bisexual) encounters marked a revolutionary act in Indian cinema, where any previous reference to homosexual characters was played for humour, derision or worse. To instead portray a same-sex encounter with tenderness, complexity and sensitivity was remarkably forward-thinking for its filmmaker and screenwriter Prem Kapoor.

While the film engages several key Bollywood tropes, its construction, editing and artful cinematography set it apart from the baseline expectations of 1970s Indian cinema. The black-and-white film's unique camera perspectives at times drink in the visages of the main actors, in yet other sequences beautifully surveying the landscape. The outsized visions of Kapoor find resonance with prior visually-rich cinematic movements like German Expressionism or silent-era French avant-garde cinema.

Recently rediscovered in the rich archive of Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art in Berlin, the film has been quickly digitised and is presented in an unvarnished digital transfer. The filmmaker's son Hari Om Kapoor is shepherding Prem Kapoor's work into the world with help from Arsenal and a full restoration of the film is forthcoming. But for now, enjoy the urgency and immediacy of this important landmark of Indian cinema.

— Herb Shellenberger

Szép lányok, ne sírjatok! (Don't Cry, Pretty Girls!)
Márta Mészáros

Hungary | 1970 | 86 mins

An eccentric gang of young boys and girls hit the streets and bars of Budapest after their monotonous shift in the factory has ended. Living within and out of society, but closed in their private life, they seek intimacy, entertainment and freedom. Despite being already engaged, Juli starts to flirt with a handsome musician, who takes the girl along with the band for a gig in the countryside. When the fiancé and his furious friends also turn up, Juli has to make her own decision.

In the form of a gentle Beat ballad, Don’t Cry, Pretty Girls! depicts the depressive atmosphere of the Eastern Block in the post-1968 era. The songs played by Metro, Kex and Syrius—legendary Hungarian Beat bands of the time—became very popular after the release of the film. While the camera work focuses closely on faces, music is the factor that creates situations around the players. Lyrics, poems and performative gestures provide not just entertainment, they also open another, intellectual dimension of the story. The captivating traveling shots by János Kende—who was also the cinematographer for countless iconic Miklós Jancsó movies—are as fluid and full of emotions as the music itself. The 15-year-old Czechoslovakian leading actress Jaroslava Schallerová is joined by important figures from the Hungarian underground counterculture, thus also making the film unique as a socio-historical document.

Don’t Cry Pretty Girls! centres around questions of personal freedom, and more specifically, freedom of choice in love. The story follows a girl who is speechless and defenceless, but extremely strong at the same time. In this film, Mészáros depicts her favourite topic: the female experience, and from the point of view of youth. The mood of a generation is reflected in the delicate style of black and white lyrical realism which immediately grabs the viewer and lingers with them.

— Janka Barkóczi
Paris Calligrammes
Ulrike Ottinger

Germany, France | 2020 | 130 mins

In a rich torrent of archival audio and visuals, paired with extracts from her own artworks and films, Ottinger resurrects the old Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Latin Quarter. Amongst their literary cafés and jazz clubs, she revisits encounters with Jewish exiles; life with her artistic community; the world views of Parisian ethnologists and philosophers; the political upheavals of the Algerian War and May 1968; and the legacy of the colonial era. “I followed the footsteps of my heroines and heroes,” Ottinger narrates, “wherever I found them, they will appear in this film too.”

“In 1962, as a young artist, I came to live and work in Paris. That period until 1969, when I left the city, was not only one of the most formative for me, it was also an era of intellectual, political, and social upheaval in modern history. The film Paris Calligrammes combines my personal memories of the 1960s with a portrait of the city and a social cartography of the age. Like Guillaume Apollinaire’s poetry collection ‘Calligrammes: Poems of Peace and War’, I have given it the form of a filmic “picture-poem” (calligram) in which the words and images, complemented by language, sound, and music, form a mosaic that emerges from the vivacity of those exciting years while speaking to the fragility of all cultural and political achievements.”

— Ulrike Ottinger

The film is a blend of the personal and the political. It’s a picture about Ottinger’s love of art, being introduced to artistry, and slowly getting the requisite experience to try to act on her desire to be an artist. It’s also a window into Paris at the time, albeit occasionally narrated with the rose-tinted glasses of nostalgia. There is never a dull moment as she gives a feeling of the politics of the time, and also of her personal journey, with the archive clips crisscrossed with present-day images. It is the work of a consummate artist who understands the importance of the form matching the story.

— Kaleem Aftab, Cineuropa

Mayak (The Lighthouse)
Maria Saakyan

Russia, Armenia | 2006 | 78 mins

An impassioned, unsentimental debut feature by Maria Saakyan—whose life was cut tragically short in 2018—Mayak is a war film that breaks out of the genre’s conventions with a uniquely haunting perspective. Embattled Northern Armenia at the end of the 20th century—where Lena, a young woman returns from Moscow to convince her grandparents to join her on a trip back to Russia—presents an apocalyptic vision of freedom and imagination in limbo, made forlornly oneiric through the film’s pallid tones and discreet performances of its cast (including Sofiko Chiaureli, best known as Sergei Parajanov’s muse).

In the opening of Mayak, we stumble across a barren landscape, scarred by conflict, and are transported into a timeless mountain village swirled by mist. A young woman, Lena (Anna Kapaleva), is apparently coming home. But where is this place? And when? As Lena removes the dust sheets from her long-abandoned furniture she notably listens to a record of Alice in Wonderland—appropriate for a world where war has made nonsense of the normal. And Mayak is best approached as a tumble down a temporal rabbit hole, where grainy flashbacks of a pre-war past are elided with an ever-pervading fear of future destruction and a fleeting respite is found in the mundane, domestic present.

Shots of a child being bathed or hands sawing logs for a fire, sing with a simple beauty. Like Lena, her 20-something heroine, the then 27-year-old director Maria Sakaayan was a young woman displaced by war. Aged 12 the conflict in the Caucasus forced her and her family to flee Armenia to Moscow. Mayak, her remarkably confident debut, was not just about realising her own vision as a filmmaker—an uphill enough challenge given she is the first female director to complete a feature in the history of Armenian cinema. It was also a way of exploring the trauma of her own past and that of her fellow collaborators which, on Mayak, included a Serbian set designer and a Georgian screenwriter, both similarly swept up in the mass migration that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union after 1991.

Saakyan focuses her lens mainly on women and girls and their concerns and everyday struggles. Men are absent (away fighting) or disempowered as a ‘threat’ located in the black army helicopters that roar overhead or the radio voices that announce fatalities. Both of these represent the powerful external forces that dictate the women’s lives and that are, terrifyingly, beyond their control. The penultimate shot of the film is that of a female refugee silently screaming. With Mayak, Saakyan has finally given that nameless woman, and thousands like her, a voice.

— Larushka Ivan-Zadeh, Kino Kllassika Foundation
Maria Mészáros was born in Budapest in 1931. Her father, the avant-garde sculptor László Mészáros, moved the family to Kirgizia whilst fleeing fascism where, on the outbreak of World War II, he fell victim to Stalin’s purges. Her mother also died. She was placed in a Soviet orphanage and only returned to Hungary after the war. Between 1954-56 she studied at the film academy in Moscow and until 1968 she made Romanian and Hungarian documentaries. These autobiographical motifs inspired the Diary series that garnered considerable international acclaim. She has directed feature films since 1968. From her very first full-length film, The Girl through to Don’t Cry, Pretty Girls!, Riddance, Adoption, Nine Months, and The Two of Them, Mészáros depicts— in a non-judgemental way and with punctorial unaffectedness—the process whereby something great and simple happens in the life and relations of her self-aware, seeking-rebellious female protagonists, forcing them to make decisions. These films were instant international hits. In 1975 Mészáros won a Golden Bear at the Berlinale for Adoption, awarded to both a female and Hungarian director for the very first time in the history of the Berlinale. Nine Months took an OCIC prize at the Berlinale and a FIPRESCI prize at Cannes in 1977. This opened the way for international co-productions, and these films by Mészáros differ from those of the Budapest School that developed in parallel with her career. The Heresses, made in a co-production, reveals a historical background behind remarkable love triangle relationships. Then came the Diary tetralogy, of which the first, Diary for My Children, won the Grand Prix Speciale du Jury at Cannes (1984). Mészáros, with 30 feature films and numerous documentaries to her name, also made a movie entitled Unburied Man (2004) about Imre Nagy, the leading figure of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Her latest film, Aurora Boreals (2017), recognized with several international awards, looks back to the Soviet occupation of Vienna through an unusual mother–daughter fate.

Selected Filmography

Maria Saakyan (1980, Yerevan, Armenia) was born and grew up in Armenia. In 1992, she moved to Russia with her parents and graduated from Moscow’s VGIK film school in 2003. During her studies she shot several short animated and experimental films. From 2003 to 2006 Maria worked as a creative producer for the Andreevsky Flag Production Company, and in 2009—alongside Victoria Lupik—she founded ANIKO Films, where she developed her second feature I’m Going To Change My Name, that formed as independent international co-production and was awarded Best Pitch from B2B, Belgrade and DAB at Golden Apricot International Film Festival, Yerevan. In 2010 Saakyan was selected for Berlinale Talent Campus. Her films have screen worldwide at IFFR, International Film Festival Telkide (USA), Premiers Planes (France), Film Festival Oberhausen (Germany), Karlov Vary Film Festival, Sofia International Film Festival, among others. Her directional debut Mayak has been awarded Special mention at Premiers Film Festival (Moscow), Best Debut at Golden Apricot (Armenia), Grand-Prix at Split International Film Festival and First Prize at Moscow Human Rights Festival.

Filmography
Feast: Work in Progress
Tim Leyendekker

The Netherlands | 2021

Having crafted an intricately nuanced filmmaking practice since his debut in 2003, Tim Leyendekker’s work is distributed by EYE Film museum and Light Cone, and his most recent film Blinder (2015) was screened in the Tiger Shorts Competition at that year’s International Film Festival Rotterdam. Feast tackles no less than the meaning of love itself, thrown into relief by an act so horrific we would like to think of it as fiction. Considering the film’s concept was presented in a seminar with the artist at BFMAF 2015, the Festival is excited to showcase it at the final stage of its production.

In Feast, perpetrators, victims and their onlookers get entangled in a dramatic reconstruction of the Groningen HIV case, the story of three men who drugged other men during a series of sex parties and then injected them with their own HIV-infected blood.

The source text of the film is Plato’s Symposium, which depicts a banquet attended by a group of notable men. During this gathering, seven of the attendees engage in a playful contest in which they try to find the most convincing definition of Eros, or truth, or beauty, or love.

Feast is the result of the collision of these two narratives, which initially appear to be each other’s antitheses, culminating in a story about power and submission, the reversibility of the truth and the desire to come home. The film is told in seven sequences, recorded by seven different directors of photography, and in which documentary and fiction strategies both merge unnoticed and clash dramatically.

— Tim Leyendekker

Filmography

Rock Bottom Riser: Work in Progress
Fern Silva

United States | 2021

Rock Bottom Riser arrives on the heels of a decade-plus of widely-exhibited and critically-praised short form filmmaking, extending the depth of Fern Silva’s typically analytical and essayistic focus on a politics of place. The winner of awards from Ann Arbor Film Festival, Curtas Belo Horizonte and 25FPS, Silva’s films have screened in numerous film festivals, cinemathque museums and in exhibitions including the 2017 Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival.

For over a decade, my art practice has been focused on 16mm filmmaking. I shoot and edit my films in order to engage directly with the environments I cover and the politics surrounding them. Rather than focusing on a single perspective, my films examine the influence of industry on culture and ecology while referencing their various depictions throughout cinematic history. They are drawn to subjects that defy national identity while considering methods and strategies associated with established genres and documentary modes, incorporating mythology, phenomena, and historical accounts. Rock Bottom Riser is my first feature and began with my interest in Mauna Kea land preservation, its cultural impact, and the resiliency that has kept it from further destruction. Mauna Kea is a symbol of resistance.

From the earliest voyagers who navigated by starlight to the discovery of habitable planets by astronomers, Rock Bottom Riser examines the all-encompassing encounters of an island world at sea. As lava continues to flow from the earth’s core on the island of Hawaii—posing an imminent danger—a crisis mounts. Astronomers plan to build the world’s largest telescope on Hawaii’s most sacred and revered mountain, Mauna Kea. Based on ancient Polynesian navigation, the arrival of Christian missionaries, and the observatory’s ability to capture the origins of the universe, Rock Bottom Riser surveys the influence of settler colonialism, the search for intelligent life, and the discovery of new worlds as we peer into our own planet’s existence.

— Fern Silva

Filmography
Kimberley O’Neill is an artist and filmmaker based in Glasgow. O’Neill was shortlisted for the Margaret Tait Award 2019/20. Recent activities include; Enigma Body Tech, solo exhibition, Satellites Programme, Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, 2019; Ways to Speculate, Screening, Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2019 and she was co-Programmer of AMIF 2019 with Ima-Abasi Okon & Emmie McCluskey at Tramway, Glasgow.

Everyday Apocalypse
Kyra Bell, Sam Bicknell, Jaimee Lowson & Ben Watson-Driscoll

Everyday Apocalypse is a new short film made by four local young people, developed in collaboration with artist Kimberley O’Neill, exploring our shared experiences of lockdown. Over a three week period in August, the group met via Zoom to share stories and develop the film. Through a series of online workshops, the young people were introduced to lo-fi mobile-phone filmmaking techniques and used writing exercises to generate ideas—expanding their personal quarantine anecdotes into subjects and locations for the film.

The stories shared by the group had some similarities; normal daily rhythms disrupted and replaced by strange new dimensions in the everyday. Familiar territories of the woods, beaches and parks became liminal spaces to escape into. Being restricted for this 5 month period opened up portals between our home environments and imaginations.

The final film combines footage and sound recorded individually by the young people in each of their lockdown locations. This material has been edited together by O’Neill whilst reflecting on the conversations and themes of the workshops. The final film has taken influence from horror and fantasy genres, to capture the uncanny atmosphere of the landscapes the young people have explored during the pandemic.
Ana David is a film programmer based in Berlin working between Germany, Portugal and the UK. She is a member of the shorts selection committee and industry manager at IndieLisboa, a member of the advisory board of the Berlinale Panorama, and associate programmer at Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival. In 2018 she programmed at the BFI London Film Festival with a special focus on documentaries. In the past she has held positions at Portugal Film—Portuguese Film Agency, Lisbon Docs—International Financing and Co-production Forum, Festival Scope, and Queer Lisboa (2010-2015), the latter as co-director and programmer.

Originally from the UK, Christina Demetriou relocated to Berlin in 2015 where—with the aim of organising intimate film events dedicated to dialogue—she founded the screening series LUNAR. While taking place predominantly in Berlin, she has also curated LUNAR screenings in Paris’ legendary Beverley cinema and the Arctic Moving-Image & Film Festival in Norway. Christina also works as the Festival Coordinator for the arthouse sales agent Coproduction Office, and has been a participant in the Oberhausen Seminar (2017) and The Film Society of Lincoln Center Industry Academy (2019).

Myriam Mouflih is a film programmer and sometimes writer from Glasgow, UK. Her research has focused predominantly on Artists Moving Image from the African continent and the diaspora. Since 2017, Myriam has programmed for Africa in Motion Film Festival and served on the committee of Transmission Gallery from 2018-2020. She is also a member of the LUX Scotland Advisory group and was on the jury for the Margaret Tait Award 2020/21.

Herb Shellenberger is a film programmer and writer originally from Philadelphia and based in London. He has curated screenings and film series at an international array of very excellent film festivals, cinemathques and art institutions, as well as some not so good like Tate and Tyneside Cinema which unfortunately have treated their workers very poorly. He is editor of Rep Cinema International, a newsletter/online publication focusing on repertory and archival film exhibition around the world and has recently written for the exhibition catalogue Dream Dance: The Art of Ed Emshwiller (Anthology Editions/Lightbox Film Center, 2019).

Peter Taylor (Belfast, 1974) is a film curator living in the North East of England. He has been the Director of Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival since January 2015. Previously based in Rotterdam, Peter was a programmer at International Film Festival Rotterdam and WORM between 2006-16. At the 2021 Glasgow Short Film Festival he will co-present Barbed Wire Love: Artists and their North of Ireland Troubles with Myrid Carten.
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Courtney Stephens
Diana Stevenson
Transmission:
Isabel Barford, Zoë Charley, Zoë Guthrie, Danny Pagarian, Colm Guo-Lin Peare
Ilincica Vanau
Dennis Vetter
Chris Watson
Ralf Webb
Faith Weddle
Welcome Visitor Project:
Andy Ashcroft, Jenna Shields
Neil Young
Accessible Cinema

Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival is working to provide as much access to our programme as possible.

Access measures at BFMAF 2020 include:

To make the Festival more accessible for Deaf and hard of hearing audiences, **SDH/Captions for the deaf and hard of hearing** are available for the following programmes and screenings:

- **All films in the Berwick New Cinema Competition**
- **Fi Dem II by Zinzi Minott** (Propositions)
- **Daddy’s Boy by Renée Helena Browne** (Propositions)
- **Roundtable Conversation by Kat Anderson** (Propositions)
- **John by Kat Anderson** (Propositions)

**Subtitles** are available for the majority of the rest of the programme. Please see individual titles for your guidance.

All of our films contain **content notes** to help indicate any potential distressing subject matter for audiences.

**Transcripts** will be available for all podcasts – these can be found on the podcast pages.

All live discussions will be recorded and available with subtitles on our website shortly after the event.

A **large print version** of our catalogue is available on our website.

A **text only version** of our catalogue is available on our website.

**Ticket prices** for the Festival have been flattened to ensure as many people as possible can enjoy the programme.

If you have any queries regarding accessibility please do not hesitate to contact info@bfmaf.org.