

BERLINALE TALENTS /2016



TALENTS

SEEN THROUGH THE
EYES OF TALENT PRESS

EIGHT REFLECTIONS
ON THE NATURE
OF RELATIONS
REVIEWS AND REPORTS

More reviews and reports by recent and former
Talent Press critics at www.talentpress.org

TALENT PRESS

Eight film critics spent the past week covering Berlinale Talents events and reviewing Berlinale films.

Their main task is to reflect on this year's Berlinale Talents theme "The Nature of Relations", by researching their long-form essays. Under the tutelage of experienced film critics, they have written several reviews, reports and interviews. On the following pages you'll find the abstracts of their long-form essays as well as a selection of other articles from the workshop.

The participants

ISABELLA AKINSEYE | NIGERIA "I wanted to do something; contribute my own quota to the discourse on African cinema with a focus on Nigeria's film industry, popularly known as Nollywood."

ELIZABETH CHEGE | UK/KENYA "As a communicator, film is crucial in the way it exposes us for our cruelty, allows us an avenue to express joy, trauma, hope, helps us escape and at times, crashes our ego."

RUBEN DEMASURE | BELGIUM "We see that the texts on Sabzian are printed, shared, discussed, especially by film students, and are an occasion to watch the films together. A new chapter is being written."

RASHA HOSNY | EGYPT "It is great to be a film critic but it is so difficult to be a good one. The challenge is how to make your work noticed. Cinema: watching, reading and writing about it; this is my passion in life."

SERGIO HUIDOBRO | MEXICO "For me, to be a film critic means to share a passion. To share a look and a way of seeing. To write about films means to watch every single film as if it were the first one, like a child's first encounter with the ocean."

TARA KARAJICA | SERBIA "I want to be in a world where I can become an authority in film criticism as a young voice eager to be heard and appreciated in the changing landscape of this profession."

SEVARA PAN | GERMANY/UZBEKISTAN "What drives me as a film journalist is these areas of darkness in cinema born out of the dictatorial regime – the darkness that pushes us to the sidewalk of our comfort and forces us to acknowledge the bastard child we have been compelled to disown – our freedom to wonder."

XIN ZHOU | CHINA/USA "Living outside of the country for three years has been a revelation – knowing how Chinese cinema circulates outside of its domestic reception, as well as the images of the country in the Western context."

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Jumana Manna's *A Magical Substance Flows into Me*



Cynthia Nixon and Jennifer Ehle in Terence Davies' *A Quiet Passion*

HISTORIES OF PLACE

BY SEVARA PAN

This year's Berlinale Forum offers the audience a window into the narratives and histories of place.

Knowledge that shapes our history is fragmented. Often histories are simplified, placed within defined nation-state borders, failing to notice the unsettled subtleties of the relationships between them. The Berlinale Forum, which has been designated as a more politically and socially conscious alternative to the Competition, allows the Berlinale audience a window into the narratives and histories of place.

A focus of this year's Forum is the conflicted region of the Middle East perturbed by civil wars, forced migration and the repercussions of exploitative working and living conditions. Jumana Manna's *A Magical Substance Flows into Me* (Palestinian Territories) and Avi Mograbi's *Between Fences* (Israel/France) reshape the dominant notion of these places through the creative avenues of expression. In doing so, the films go beyond the mere dramatization of the experiences of flight or deportation. Manna's film visits the musicians of the Kurdish, Moroccan and Samaritan groups, among others, as they exist today within the geographic space of historical Palestine. By engaging these ethnic groups in a conversation around their music, its history and its current endangered state, Manna brings to the fore the complexities of the place and its intrinsic impossibilities through the means of music.

Exposing a nuanced fabric of life in the Middle East

Mograbi's *Between Fences* negotiates the past and present of Israel through theatre. By documenting the efforts of African asylum-seekers, detained in the Israeli Holot detention facility, and staging scenes from their own lives, Mograbi says they offer them an opportunity to claim ownership of their stories. The film takes one step further by involving Israelis in the Holot theatre troupe and casting them as African refugees, thus dramatically reversing established roles in the microcosm of Israeli society. If music is at the centre of Manna's attempt to assert the Palestinian minorities' presence within the hegemonic narrative, then in Mograbi's film, music stands in the hindsight of the drama yet it is not subordinate to the narrative. The composer of *Between Fences* had the African asylum-seekers sing fractured, reiterated lyrics of old Hebrew songs in the style of their choosing while bringing the character of their distinctive voices to Israel from their homelands. Both *A Magical Substance Flows into Me* and *Between Fences* stand out from the plethora of Arab films by abstracting the politics in film from the archetypes and exposing a more nuanced fabric of life in the Middle East.

A QUEST FOR THE ARC OF SAFETY

BY ELIZABETH CHEGE

An exploration of the mind as a sanctuary and a prison at this year's Berlinale.

What would your demons look like were you to encounter them in worldly form? What is the price of revealing our damaged selves to those around us? The fear of disconnection is a recurrent theme in three compelling characters grappling with personal demons.

In *A Quiet Passion*, (Terence Davies, UK/Belgium) poet Emily Dickinson (Cynthia Nixon) is held captive by the idea that she is a "wretched creature" and that she will "never amount to anything," as she tells herself in the mirror. It is suggested that the despair she suffers from may be inherited from her mother or caused by her determination not to succumb to normative behavior. Her poetry delivers solace, but also nurtures her isolation and feeds her self-revulsion.

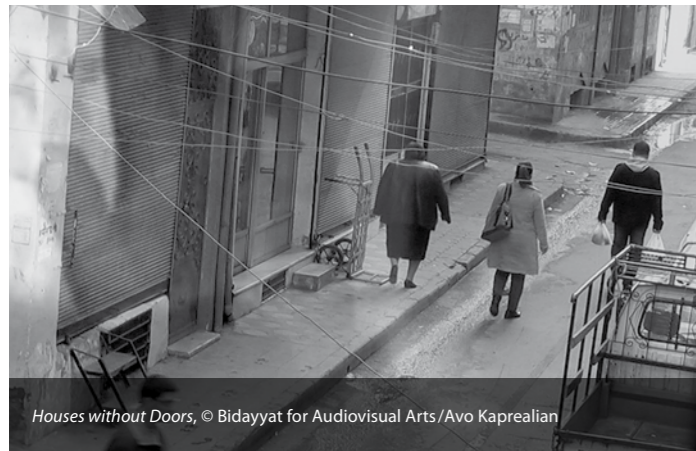
An embodiment of your inner turmoil

In the narrative short *Reluctantly Queer* (Akosua Adoma Owusu, USA), a gay man named Kwame must suspend his true self so as not to drift away from his mother's love. His authentic self is thus rendered, in his own words, "homeless." In a letter to his mother, Kwame reveals his desire to bring his "self" home, but cannot bear the prospect that loving a man will permanently sever him from his birthplace. The intercontinental distance provides him the freedom to live as he wishes, but costs him an ever-present anguish and loneliness.

In *Der Nachtmahr* (Akiz, Germany), Tina's personal fears are manifested in frightful physical form. She is confronted by a terrifying, blind beast – which only she can see. She soon discovers that it is an embodiment of her inner turmoil, as every time the creature is harmed she suffers physical pain. A fascinating concept is introduced when it is suggested that by literally feeding the beast and befriending it, she is somehow able to overcome this mental torment.

Becoming the very things we dread

A common thread running through these stories is how the gradual erosion of a person's spirit can undermine the mind and, in Dickinson's words, "stun you by degrees". The poet consistently queries where she will find the arc of safety in a world where a person's "exquisite nature" can easily be crushed. However, all three characters are convinced there is a way out and that we do not necessarily become the very things we dread.



Houses without Doors, © Bidayyat for Audiovisual Arts/Avo Kaprealian



From Perspektive Deutsches Kino: Aline Fischer's Meteor Street, © credo:film

FILMS ON MIGRATION AND REFUGEES: THREE IMPORTANT FACTORS

BY RASHA HOSNY

Three important factors on which directors of Berlinale films build up their works on migration and refugees.

Responsibility

"To show the tragedy that's playing out in front of our eyes ... We're all responsible," Italian filmmaker, Gianfranco Rosi said about his recent documentary *Fire at Sea (Fuocoammare)*, Italy/France 2015). The film looks at Lampedusa, a small island on the Mediterranean that on a daily basis receives a good deal of migrants and refugees coming on boats from Africa. As we live in the age of the image, Rosi felt that he, as a filmmaker, has a responsibility to express a situation he describes as a tragedy.

These people went through unimaginable inhuman suffering on what they call a "death journey". After all that they have been through, Rosi's response is to treat them humanely by capturing their special moments: playing football in one scene, and telling the story of their journey by singing in another.

Identifying & Empathizing

The three-minute documentary *Havarie* (Germany 2016) films a refugee boat floating off the coast of Spain calling for help at the same time as a tourist cruise ship beside them. "It is hard to film these crisis in cold blood as if it is a calm and ordinary situation," said Hamburg-based filmmaker Philip Scheffner. But in just three minutes, he puts the viewer in the position of the migrants on that boat.

How to tell the story?

Avo Kapealian shows the daily routine of Armenians in Aleppo in the time of war and how war affected these people's everyday activities in his film *Houses without Doors* (Manazil Bela Abwab, Syria-Lebanon, 2016). After Syrian security forces chased him and broke his camera, he insists on telling his story by filming his neighborhood from his balcony. From Kapealian's filming experience, he concluded that to make his film, he first determined what the story is about and then decided the most convenient and suitable narrative to tell it.

DEPICTION OF CULTURAL RELATIONS ON SCREEN

BY ISABELLA AKINSEYE

The nature of intercultural relations lead three protagonists of Berlinale films into a serious identity crisis.

My aim to participate in this year's Berlinale Talent Press was to watch films tackling issues not from the political "black and white" divide, but from a broader angle and deeper perspective. I chose three films representing diversity and intercultural relations trying to observe how they depict their protagonist's dilemma and identity crisis.

Nakom, Meteor Street and Letters from War

The difficulty of choosing between family obligations and personal ambition for Idrissu, the main character in TW Pittman and Kelly Daniela Norris' feature *Nakom* (Ghana/USA) is depicted culturally. Traditional rural life in his village, Nakom is juxtaposed with life as a student in Ghana's capital city, Accra. Even when the sudden death of his father forces him to return to his village, the city's modern pull is still strong. On the one hand, he takes pride in his heritage and stays even longer than he planned, but his heart remains torn between his dreams to be in a "real" world.

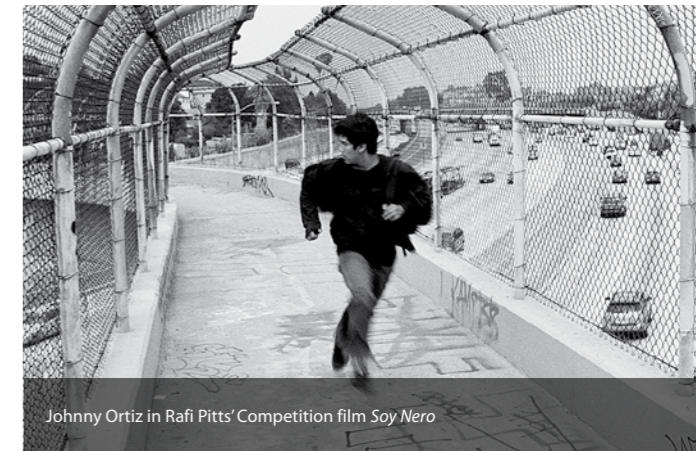
In Aline Fischer's *Meteor Street (Meteorstraße)*, Germany, 18 year-old Mohammed is an Arab immigrant living in Berlin with his elder brother Lakhdar, since their parents have been deported. Like Idrissu in *Nakom*, Mohammed is torn between joining his parents in Lebanon and integrating into German society. Fischer uses the leitmotif of airplane landings and take offs as a metaphor for being suspended between two worlds. His parents encourage Mohammed to stay in Germany. His brother on the other hand insists that he remains attached to his Palestinian roots. Somehow, Mohammed must become a man on his own terms traversing his home and adopted cultures.

Antonio, a young Portuguese army doctor in Ivo Ferreira's *Letters from War (Cartas da Guerra)*, Portugal) is on assignment in Angola during the colonial war, in 1971. Despite his fascination with the African landscape and the warm reception he receives from the locals, he does not fully blend in and remains faithful to his wife despite temptations, and to his country despite his conscience.

Irrespective of their locations and backgrounds, the cultural dynamism experienced by all three protagonists is a metaphor for the identity crisis they face.



The Shooting Stars 2016 on the Red Carpet, © Vittorio Zunino Celotto/Getty Images



Johnny Ortiz in Rafi Pitts' Competition film Soy Nero

CASTING EUROPE

BY TARA KARAJICA

What would the actor's career be without the casting director? The examination of a close relationship.

Every February, for the past 18 years, European Shooting Stars, a unique pan-European initiative, takes place at the Berlinale, shining a little light on Europe's most prominent up-and-coming young actors and placing them at the top of the busy film programme that unfolds year after year at the festival. These ten emerging acting talents, hailing from across the Old Continent, are selected by a jury of experts who hand-picks them among a long list of potential candidates nominated by the member organizations of the European Film Promotion.

During the craze of the festival's first weekend, the Shooting Stars connect and network with casting directors, talent agents, directors and producers with the objective of broadening and strengthening industry alliances. Apart from offering support and publicity to these fresh faces of the big screen as they step from national fame into the international spotlight, the endeavor also highlights the vital role new actors can play in the marketing of European films. And, this year's Shooting Stars are very well aware of that.

Daphné Patakia, the Greek star of *Interruption* (Yorgos Zois), says it is a "great opportunity to open in a European way and meet people from all over Europe." The international cooperation and linguistic dimension of Shooting Stars is something that fellow Dutch Shooting Star Reinout Scholten van Aschat and former Shooting Star, and this year's jury member, Anamaria Marinca, also share, "...everyone is involved in co-productions so there is place for someone from Croatia or France or Spain in an international production spoken in English, or Spanish or another language, and because they have these aptitudes and they can act in another language, not only speak it," the latter observes.

The unsung heroes of cinema

Behind the scenes of the glamour of festivals, there is a world, unknown to audiences, where films are made and discussed by the movers and shakers of the film industry, not always as obvious as producers or directors, but without whom new projects wouldn't be realized. They are the casting directors, the unsung heroes of cinema who "make" the careers of the Shooting Stars.

The relations between the various layers of the industry that outsiders cannot fathom are many, varied and fascinating. Not only does film make us dream because of and thanks to them, but they also bridge the gaps between cultures and open new horizons and possibilities.

A TALE OF TWO COUNTRIES

BY SERGIO HUIDOBRO

Three Mexican films in the Berlinale programme: how are they dealing with the stereotypes of the Latin American "misery porn"?

In the early decades of the 20th Century, visual artists such as André Breton, Sergei Eisenstein or Leonora Carrington traveled through Mexican landscapes and cities looking for innovative ways to translate the country's inner essence – if there's such a thing – into images. Not an easy task, as all of them realized.

While for novelists and poets like D.H. Lawrence or Malcolm Lowry, Mexican identity was a quintessential literary subject, visual attempts either on canvas or film rarely went beyond archetypes, dramatic schemes or common places, from noirs set in Acapulco to border westerns or drug cartel thrillers.

Poverty, war and child abuse

Three films which have premiered in different sections of the 66th Berlinale explore similar contexts seen through unusual cinematic perspectives: Berlinale Talents alumnus Joaquin del Paso's fiction feature, *Maquinaria Panamericana* (Mexico, 2016) and Tatiana Huezo's documentary *Tempestad* (Mexico, 2016) which screened in the Forum section, while Raffi Pitts' fifth feature film, *Soy Nero* (Ger-Fra-Iran-Mex, 2016) was included in the Competition.

In a recent article, Spanish film programmer Gonzalo de Pedro Amatria recalled what scholar Michael Zryd referred to as the fantasy of making the world better by producing documentaries about social issues: poverty, war and child abuse. That's an old discussion related to the cinema from the developing world. It's what Colombian filmmakers Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina used to call "misery porn" back in the seventies: that insatiable hunger of A-class film festivals for films starring beggarly children, demonic dictators or deathly guerrillas. Even nowadays, as Argentinean film critic Agustín Mango recently pointed out in a Hollywood Reporter piece, Latin-American filmmakers are thriving on and being awarded by the festival circuit, but their projects remain no match for the multiplex nor for local audiences.

These three Mexican films (one an international co-production) dealt with the aforementioned issues: a broken economy, cartel wars, immigration, guns trafficking and corruption. But how are they dealing with them? Are they bringing to the table a renewed critical perspective? Or are they reproducing the usual, stereotypical representational schemes?

IN SEARCH OF EL DORADO

BY RUBEN DEMASURE

Six films from the Berlinale Forum interrelate in the longing for a fabled city of gold. Ruben Demasure shares six exemplary impressions.

The quest for an El Dorado can be seen as an undercurrent within the Berlinale Forum's larger focus on migration. The longing for a fabled city of gold not only shines through thematically but also translates in terms of how the filmmakers utilize sound, texture and lighting. What follows is a series of six exemplary impressions or visual relations that tie the works together.

Six utopias of El Dorado

In Midi Z's *City of Jade* the images of Myanmar's illegal jade rush are covered in matte-like gold dust. The images' digital noise cinematically erodes the luster of the diggers' dreams and desires.

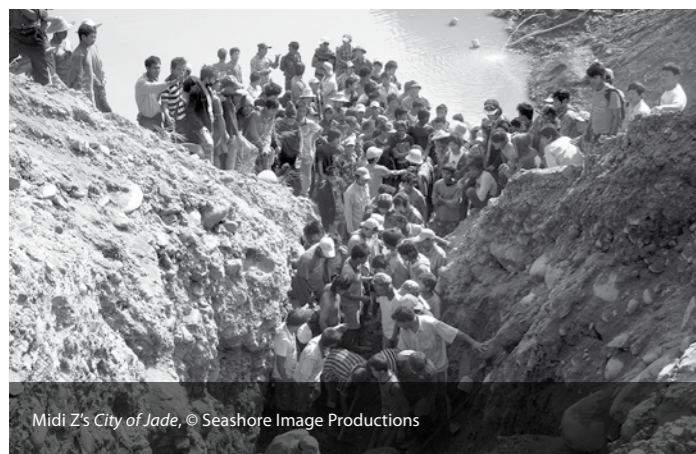
Dusk turns into pitch black night during the one-hour, static long take that opens Berlinale Talents alumnus Salomé Lamas' *Eldorado XXI*. The trail of gold miners trudging up a slope in the Andes turns into an absurd dance of helmet headlights. In the second part, a contemporary reggaeton song is put over a frantic Spanish colonial dance in which masked workers loose themselves around a violently flickering fire.

In Wang Bing's *Ta'ang*, the campfire in the central section of the film is also the place where the eponymous Burmese refugees engage in storytelling activities. Bing uses the burning flame as his single light source, resulting in a DV-aesthetic with burned-out blacks. An unsteadily shining candle in the middle foreground creates a flicker that renders a deaf-mute woman in ghostly shadows.

In Hugo Vieira da Silva's *An Outpost of Progress* colonial ghosts visit two imperial representatives commissioned to restart the ivory trade along the Congo river. Here, there's no access to the natives' reactions because of a conscious omission of their subtitles. As the film winds down, it evolves into a silent film, including intertitles, piano accompaniment and a final iris frame.

Ivo M. Ferreira's *Letters from War* is virtually a film without dialogue. The letters of yet another Portuguese colonial agent are read in voice-over by his wife. The noirish low-key lighting casts shadows over the contemporaneous conquistadors' cause.

In *Rio Corgo* a wandering Einzelgänger, Joaquim Silva, swaps his sombrero for a golden crown and gazes at a piece of fool's gold. The cowboy reaches a state of mental fortune and attains a spiritual treasure when he expresses: "I do what I want. I go where I want to go."



Midi Z's *City of Jade*, © Seashore Image Productions

SURFACE ENCOUNTERS

BY XIN ZHOU

"Traversing the Phantasm" is the central theme of the Berlinale Forum Expanded.

Now in its 17th edition, the Berlinale Forum Expanded was established in 1999 as the further development of the Forum section of the Berlinale, already known as the most daring programme in the festival. It features film and video works of avant-garde, experimental, political documentary, and other moving image practices. It is also the most flexible response to the migrating nature of contemporary moving images, whose exhibition formats in film and art contexts range from single-channel projections, celluloid and digital video installations, mobile phones, and the Internet. In Berlinale Forum Expanded, we see how the images of the featured works in different visual and discursive forms, as well as media and disciplines switch positions and transform one another across the screens.

Collective fantasies and geo-political realities

This year, 49 artistic works have been selected, including 32 films of varying lengths, 15 installations, one lecture performance and a reading. Both the exhibition and the screening programme were put together under the titular concept of "Traversing the Phantasm," a term coined by art historian and curator Helmut Draxler. Borrowed from Jacques Lacan's genealogy, this concept is the central thread of the entire Berlinale Forum Expanded section, which was reflected in many aspects of collective fantasies and geo-political realities.

Taipei-based artist James T. Hong explores the transnational conflict between mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan on the Senkaku / Diaoyudao / Diaoyutai Islands, a disputed territory throughout history. German artist Omer Fast re-edited his Documenta 13 video into an 85-minute film that uncannily depicts a middle-aged couple's three different ways of losing their son. In addition to the screening and exhibition programme, Amman-based artist Ala Younis and Indonesian filmmaker and Berlinale Talents alumnus Edwin spoke about their research into abandoned film archives that have been rediscovered by their respective efforts. Their lectures were part of the "Visionary Archives" project, a transnational attempt to look at the past in order to envision possible futures.



Continuity by Omer Fast, © Filmgalerie 451



Aaron Brookner and Jim Jarmusch in *Uncle Howard*, © Ryan Muir

THE MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA

BY RUBEN DEMASURE

Aaron Brookner's portrait of legendary *Burroughs* director Howard Brookner was shown in the Berlinale Panorama.

"Open your mind and let the pictures out," was the adage of William S. Burroughs. In 1983, Howard Brookner realized the only film about and with the cult writer. His nephew, Aaron Brookner, discovered a lost print of *Burroughs: The Movie* and crowdfunded its digital restoration (available on Criterion). Now, he made a documentary about the life and work of his "funny uncle" who always carried a camera. *Uncle Howard* premiered in Sundance's US documentary competition and is now showing in Berlinale's Panorama section.

The film opens with Aaron gaining access to Burroughs' Bowery bunker, which also served as a burial chamber for his uncle's archive of outtakes footage and home movies after he fell victim to AIDS at the age of 34. The film ends with a video diary entry in which Howard puts on The Pretenders' "Hymn to Her" that starts with the lines: "Let me inside you / Into your room." Between the windowless bunker and that last intimate scene against a wide-open, exterior view on to a Manhattan sunset, the filmmaker opens up the world of his childhood hero. Ultimately, we see Howard pass his video camera to the young Aaron and instructs him on how to look through the viewfinder. The subject of many of his home movies has now changed position to the other end of

the looking glass. In execution and form, the film is a fairly standard documentary. It chooses the worn-out format of the director as the on-screen guide who, more or less, genuinely discovers stuff. A hand-held camera operator closely follows the filmmaker's quest but is never acknowledged. The film truly thrives on the rich archival material, which is already fascinating in itself. The footage from Howard's next projects were more scarce and not as strong as the material on Burroughs. He went on to make *Robert Wilson and the Civil Wars* (1987) on the aborted project of the theatrical avant-gardist and a posthumously released Hollywood feature debut, *Bloodhounds of Broadway* (1989), starring Madonna, Matt Dillon and Rutger Hauer.

The carefully structured story is well supported by the music and soundscape and by associations between the footage and the new scenes. Although the filmmaker's aim is to uncover the myth of his childhood hero, the interviews with his family and friends inevitably add to the "what if"-narrative of a tragic genius. *Uncle Howard* nevertheless fills a missing page in a personal family album and the chronicles of New York's counter-culture community.

Margarida Vila-Nova gets *Letters from War*

A ROMANTICIZED ATTACHMENT TO HOME

BY ISABELLA AKINSEYE

Ivo Ferreira's novel adaptation *Letters from War* premiered in this year's Berlinale Competition.

The Berlinale Competition film *Letters from War* (*Cartas da Guerra*, Portugal) is based on a book by renowned Portuguese author António Lobo Antunes. The film focuses on the letters that Antonio, a young army doctor, sent to his wife from Angola between 1971 and 1973 during the colonial war.

Ivo Ferreira's film is narrated chronologically, starting from Antonio's first letter dated January 14, 1971, which he wrote when still on board the Vera Cruz sailing to Luanda, Angola. Antonio expresses sadness about leaving his pregnant wife behind in Portugal. This sets the tone for a series of letters he would write throughout the three-year period. His wife, who has very limited screen time, is heard reading each of his letters. We are only given glimpses of her responses, or lack thereof, through Antonio's missives.

The director presents the Portuguese soldiers in a positive light; as victims fighting a "stupid war" which they neither understand nor support. Paradoxically, the black soldiers are the ones killing their fellow black Angolans, a sight that Antonio cannot bear.

Despite his fascination with the African landscape and the warm reception he receives from the locals, Antonio does not fully blend in and remains faithful to his wife and country. While he becomes a godfather to one of the newborn babies and even temporarily takes in an orphaned child, his views on African traditions remain imperialistic. Witnessing a child marriage, Antonio expresses his disgust towards it in one of his letters. Yet he is powerless to do anything when a man says that he'd rather let his wife die at home than have her moved to a nearby town for medical testing. "Only elephants go away to die," he says.

While the film succeeds in presenting a romanticized version of his attachment to his homeland, one finds Antonio's attitude inconsistent, vacillating between hope and despair without ever coming to his own. In what feels like an abrupt ending, he urges his family to join him in Angola in a last letter written against a picturesque rising sun.



The brilliant Carolyn Genzkow as Tina

THE SHAPE OF OUR INNER FEARS

BY ELIZABETH CHEGE

On the short list for the German Film Award "Lola": *Der Nachtmahr* by Akiz.

Structured in the style of a dream, *Der Nachtmahr* (in the Lola @ Berlinale section) centers on teenage girl, Tina (portrayed brilliantly by Carolyn Genzkow), who stumbles upon a strange and frightening creature after a drug-fueled late night rave. While initially it seems to be the outcome of her imagination, when the blind creature turns up in her home, we know it's there to stay. This grotesque figure succeeds in terrifying her and the encounters morph into visceral, all-consuming experiences. To the detriment of Tina's mental wellbeing, this apparition is only visible to her, which leads to fractures in her friendships and family relationships. With the threat of being placed in a mental hospital looming heavily, the only choice left is to find a way to deal with her new circumstances and protect her fragile psyche. After her psychiatrist surprisingly advises her to talk to the beast, challenges pile up when the creature refuses to obey. She soon realizes that she and her newly found companion are stuck together.

Artist and filmmaker Akiz aimed to portray the ogre as a manifestation of Tina's fears. In a similar vein to Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*, Akiz uses camera techniques, non-chronological editing and color to convey the inner unravelling of our protagonist. We are often told to "overcome" our fears, but an interesting idea posited by Akiz is that perhaps there is something to be said about feeding those fears instead. After growing accustomed to the presence of the creature, Tina starts to literally feed it, suggesting that she is on her way to mastering her own phobias.

While the director succeeds at presenting teenage angst realistically, *Der Nachtmahr* falls short of convincing us that the character's journey evolves, even in light of what appears to be her final acceptance of the newfound state of affairs. The initial premise of a macabre psychological thriller is sidestepped when the director chooses to offset the story and moves in a disappointing direction in the final coda. Where the film truly triumphs is in its strong performances, stunning visual effects, non-linear structure and soundtrack whose dissonant score is in line with the film's disorientating tone.

DEPICTING THE REFUGEE CRISIS

BY RASHA HOSNY

Rasha Hosny reports from the Berlinale Talents panel "No Time to Remember: Films on the Move".

"It is hard to film these crisis in cold blood as if it is a calm and ordinary situation", said German filmmaker Philip Scheffner, one of the participants in the "No Time to Remember: Films on the Move", a panel at this year's Berlinale Talents 2016. Moderated by Rasha Salti, the discussion focused on the role of both narrative and documentary filmmakers in depicting the refugee crisis around the world.

Scheffner's phrase reflects one point of view on these filmmakers: to refuse filming with sentimentality. On the other hand, he considered his films to be about looking and observing: "As a refugee, you look at certain points to find the horizon and say the future is over there on the other side. But it could be the border also."

Avo Kapealian, the director of *Houses without Doors*, filmed his documentary about the daily routine of his Armenian neighborhood in Syria from his balcony, showing how war affected people's everyday activities. "When I was a child, there was a very big book in my house about what happened to the Armenians, it was full of pictures, and it made me wonder how somebody can capture these photos without thinking about doing something else at that very special moment. That leads me to think about documentaries and how they could be effective in such situations," Kapealian said. This personal experience was Kapealian's approach to making his documentary.

Most of the participants have experienced migration and displacement themselves, such as Khalid Abdel Wahed, who was raised in Syria and went to the United States for one year. His short film *Slot in a Memory* is about two Palestinian and two Syrian children playing on a swing as bombs explode outside their refugee camp in Lebanon. The camp once only served Palestinians but is now also receiving refugees from Syria. "Children in this camp have a shared memory even in different political situations," Khalid said, suggesting that politics leads history to repeat itself.



Philip Scheffner (right) on the "No Time to Remember" panel

THE PORTUGUESE TAKE OVER THE BERLINALE

BY RUBEN DEMASURE

Ruben Demasure on Portugal's exploding film scene and the eight films they present at this year's Berlinale.

Berlinale Talent and Portuguese producer Pedro Fernandes Duarte has a cameo in his compatriot, Gabriel Abrantes' film *Freud und Friends*. Screening in Berlinale Shorts, the film travels inside the brain of artists and filmmakers and documents their dreams. Similarly, Duarte tries to access the minds of the creatives of his country for us and discusses why they are in the spotlight in record numbers at this year's Berlinale. With four features and four shorts – one in the main competition, two competing shorts, and the others in Berlinale Forum – he says that it's a sign of "a film scene achieving a certain maturity."

Duarte notes a paradox in this year's Portuguese invasion. Of the eight that have films in the festival, most of them live abroad. Only Abrantes and Salomé Lamas, represented in the Forum with *Eldorado XXI*, currently reside in the country. Because of the crisis, almost half of the young population has emigrated, Duarte explains.

He and his partner, Joana Gusmão, are among the few young producers in the country. With Primeira Idade, they founded a new, independent production company. Previously, the twenty-nine year old was working for Rosa Filmes, producing work by his former film professors. Now he wants to make an impact by helping emerging filmmakers.

Another paradox Duarte highlights is although the Portuguese are present at prestigious festivals, the country's film industry is disadvantaged by the fact that there's almost no national funding. In November 2015, all budgets were frozen because of the financial crisis, but now, the Ministry of Culture is solving the problem because of the popularity of Portuguese films at the Berlinale.

An older generation of Portuguese filmmakers were praised by prominent film critics but their films weren't at international festivals. The major change Duarte sees is that the country now has professionals that know how festivals work. Until the 1990s, Portuguese producer Paolo Branco was the only exception. Being the European producer that has produced the most feature films, this living legend is present at the festival with Hugo Veira da Silva's Forum film, *An Outpost of Progress*. Duarte concludes that he wants to preserve this tradition with new and young voices.



Pedro Fernandes Duarte in front of the HAU, @ Looi Wan Ping



We are family: *Midnight Special*, © Ben Rothstein, 2016 WARNER BROS.



A filmed theatre act in *Between Fences*

THE (ALIEN) CHILDREN ARE WATCHING US

BY SERGIO HUIDOBRO

Midnight Special, Jeff Nichols' fourth feature and third premiere at the Berlinale, merges road movie formulas with a sci-fi plot.

Regarding his previous features, it's clear that Jeff Nichols has some respect for seventies and eighties Hollywood mainstream classics. It's also clear that he's not going after any proven formulas or nostalgic advantages. As Nichols' *Mud* (USA 2012) revealed a fortunate appropriation of coming of age narratives, his recent premiere in the Berlinale Competition, *Midnight Special*, takes a creative, personal twist on sci-fi thriller materials which recall Spielberg's alien-themed films or an *X-Files* episode.

Starring Nichols' amulets Michael Shannon and Sam Shepard, along with Joel Edgerton, Kirsten Dunst and Adam Driver, *Midnight Special* follows a father (Shannon) and his sickly child (Jaeden Lieberher) as they are pursued by both a religious group and the federal government when they learn that the kid has special powers. Joined by the child's mother (Dunst) and a deserter trooper (Edgerton), they are all on the run both to evade the NSA to make a foretold appointment so that the kid can go back "where-he-come-from", which could mean either death or an alien abduction.

That's only an example of how the film constantly deals with ambiguity and disseminated information. But ironically, it's unclear if it even succeeds in doing it or not. Sometimes it does and sometimes hints are left strangely unsolved. Surely it takes too long to know what is really going on or who isn't insane, since everyone seems to have deep religious, political, scientific or new-aged expectations entrusted in the boy's unusual skills. Nevertheless, Nichols' script is compelling when it comes to building suspense and mixing drama with thrilling action sequences.

Nichols' screenplay may evoke references such as *The Twilight Zone*, but *Midnight Special* still feels like a pure Nichols film. It has the same ethical ambiguity as seen in *Mud* and that mood of menace upon an average American family that made *Shelter* work so well, and with Shannon playing a similar role here. Does that make Nichols an auteur? Maybe it doesn't. But it makes him a filmmaker who's worth watching.

WE ARE ALL THEATRE

BY SEVARA PAN

A review of Avi Mograbi's compelling *Between Fences*, screening in the Berlinale Forum.

Following the principles of Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," *Between Fences* (Israel/France), directed by the great Israeli auteur Avi Mograbi and theater facilitator Chen Alon, aims to bring about legislative change and social justice through art. The director engages both African asylum-seekers and Israeli citizens in a dialogue and critical reflection on the refugee crisis by introducing them to theatre. The film documents workshops in the Holot detention centre near the Egyptian border which houses thousands of rejected asylum-seekers whom the state of Israel officially designates as dangerous infiltrators but is unable to deport due to the country's policies. Asylum-seekers from Eritrea and Sudan stage scenes from their own lives – roleplaying the drama of those who decide to stay and those who decide to leave. By filming theatre acts in an empty hall or wardroom, the director draws our attention to the African asylum-seekers turned actors, who are often mere "shadows of the streets of Israel" as Mograbi himself pointed out during the Q&A.

The use of ordinary objects such as chairs or kerchiefs denies us the opportunity to deflect from the raw emotion of drama which feels far too real to be fictional. In some scenes, actors are seen sculpting their own bodies into static images that depict their internal feelings of forced migration and discrimination. While the notion of theatre in prison has been explored in earlier documentaries from the Middle East (e.g. Zeina Daccache's *12 Angry Lebanese*), Mograbi's *Between Fences* not only erodes the stigma associated with prisoners but also dramatically reverses established roles, thus negotiating the concept of the Other in society. As the theatre workshop unfolds, Mograbi makes a daring move by involving Israeli men and women in the theatre troupe and assigning them the role of African refugees who are trying to cross the Israeli border. "This is not very real," one of the African actors says. "Well, the words are real, but the colour is not," he adds. *Between Fences* is a compelling and poignant film that shows how the temporary identification with the oppressed fosters a more profound understanding of what it means to be free in a society that detains those seeking protection.



Cars – the ultimate symbol for freedom becomes a connotation for prison in *The Yard*, © Ita-Zbronic Zajt

OF SHINY NEW CARS AND MODERN SOCIETY

BY TARA KARAJICA

In the Berlinale Forum: Måns Månsson's *The Yard*.

Based on the prize-winning semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Kristian Lundberg, Berlinale Forum film *The Yard* (Sweden / Germany) follows a single father and struggling poet who suddenly loses his job as a literary critic after reviewing his own book. With no formal education and nothing to fall back on, he tries to maintain his position in lower middle class society as the sole provider for his young son. A temp agency ironically called "Dream Job" places him at Yarden, Malmö's transshipment hub for import cars. In this cold and gloomy place where solidarity between workers no longer exists, he is renamed 11811, working among immigrants and under the strict regulations of Swedish management. At home, the relationship with his teenage son quickly crumbles as their lifestyle begins to decline.

Celebrated Swedish cinematographer and director Måns Månsson is an unconventional social observer who defies the narrative conventions of cinema, brilliantly concocting a subtle political study of human loneliness and the structures of authority. He examines how people deal with the issues of integration and what drives the choices they make. Although the book was written in 2009, the film is thoroughly contemporary. The rise of immigration has created "us vs. them" social tensions, and Månsson perfectly conveys it here. His film gives a straightforward take on modern day Sweden, and his approach to the material is not at all sentimentally manipulative. He uses the yard as a mirror of modern society, a prison and labor camp but also the distribution center for the ultimate symbol of freedom: shiny new cars that reflect an ideal hardly anyone can afford. Moreover, he eschews background information on the protagonist or the reasons behind his earlier behavior, but in the current state of affairs, it is not difficult to relate to him.

Social commentary aside, *The Yard* is technically impeccable. Ita Zbronic-Zajt's grey lensing is evocative and reflective of the film's subject and atmosphere. The choice of the operatic score is excellent and combined with Patrick Stromdahl's sound design, gives the film more texture and intensity. As far as the key performance is concerned, theatre actor Andres Mossling is outstanding as 11811. All in all, *The Yard* is a cinematic, soberly observant, powerful and provocative film that raises more questions than it gives answers to.

THE VIBRANT BUNKER

BY XIN ZHOU

An interview with *Bunker Drama* director Mike Crane.

New York-based artist Mike Crane traveled to Lithuania and found a training camp that unemployed teenagers are sent to at the expenses of the European Union. The purpose of these camps is to recreate the socialist way of life in order to remind the younger generation of the benefits of the free market. We sat down to discuss the artist's unexpected discovery for *Bunker Drama* (Berlinale Forum Expanded).

What was the history of the bunker that you shot this piece in? It was an audiovisual archive that stored 16mm newsreels. The idea is that if the Soviet Union was destabilized by nuclear war, they would broadcast all of the films in the bunker, which contained every newsreel that the Soviet Union ever produced. It was never used, because nuclear war never broke out. Essentially, it's a site outside of the Soviet Union that was intended to be the go-to place, to continue to broadcast and to make it look like the Soviet Union is doing fine.

Could you talk about the low resolution of the film? I chose to work with a camera that has a super 16mm sensor that simulates the look of a super 16mm film. It's a little Black Magic Pocket cinema camera, small, and light-weight. I was interested in using a camera that simulates the way that those 16mm newsreels simulated the era. The intentional use of artifice, simulation, and staging is what the work really focuses on.

Can you elaborate on the context of these military drillings? January 2016 was the 25th anniversary of the independence from Soviet rule in Lithuania. It was also the 25th anniversary of the US bombing of Baghdad, which initiated the first Gulf War. Both of these events are being replayed today. The ongoing war in Iraq led to the US extraordinary rendition programme using foreign black sites for torturing suspected terrorists, which we're now learning Lithuania played a role in, and the rising fears of a Russian takeover of the Baltic states in light of the recent events in the Ukraine. Many of the fears expressed by the Soviet General's impersonator in the camp touched upon the repercussions of these two scenarios. I was interested in looking at the formal techniques used by this actor and their connection to Soviet avant-garde methods for shaping audience subjectivity, the use of real and simulated torture under the guise of neoliberal economic policies.



Maricarmen Durán in *Panamerican Machinery*

NO ONE HERE GETS OUT ALIVE...NOR DEAD

BY SERGIO HUIDOBRO

The dramatic comedy *Panamerican Machinery* from the Berlinale Forum.

One can say that young Mexican filmmaker Joaquin del Paso knows what a dark comedy is. There's a brief scene in his debut feature *Panamerican Machinery* (*Maquinaria panamericana*, Mexico) that proves that. In a murky one-company-building, a phone rings over and over again. A secretary transfers the call to her neighboring worker without asking. Then three or four times again, from one desk to another, within the same shot. Meanwhile, viewers laugh increasingly but then, a mournful weep as a result of the call creates a sudden silence over both the ringing and the laughing.

Located inside a defunct machinery import business in Mexico City, the film describes a group of underpaid workers' reactions upon finding their boss dead in his office. They descend into a kind of communist tribalism, hiding his corpse until they find some proof of hidden money in his accounting books, so they can save and take over the business. Despite some sparks of brilliant visual humor like the one described, this dramatic comedy that premiered in the Berlinale Forum sometimes feels like one of the aged machines alluded to in the title.

Born in Mexico City and a graduate of the prestigious Lodz Film School, del Paso fails when it comes to making a farce out of the dusty industrial environments or the lives wasted within them. The film has a healthy sense of irony, but if we read its plot as a metaphor for an economy broken by corruption, we can hardly tell if it's motivated by social criticism or is purely mocking it. It takes advantage of its naïve non-professional cast (despite some fortunate casting choices) like a mediocre bureaucrat who turns into a kind of self-motivational populist leader.

It seems natural for the film to premiere in Berlin, as five of its crew members are Berlinale Talents alumni: del Paso, three producers and two members of the editing team. Unfortunately, the resulting film is an example of an outstanding idea without proper development, or creative choices made because of a lack of funding, despite an often good sense of mise-en-scene and sensitive timing when it comes to mixing drama and laughs.

IMPRINT

CIRCULATION 1,000

EDITORS Oliver Baumgarten (V.i.S.d.P.), Aily Nash

SUPPORT Marie-Therese Meye, Daniel Bickermann, Matthias Campe (online editors)

MENTORS | TALENT PRESS 2016

Kevin B. Lee, Aily Nash, Alin Tasciyan, Giovanni Vimercati

PHOTOGRAPHY Berlin International Film Festival, Peter Himsel, Lydia Hesse, David Ausserhofer, Bettina Ausserhofer, Chiara Ferrau

PRINT bud Brandenburgische Universitätsdruckerei und Verlagsgesellschaft Potsdam mbH

PUBLISHER

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Berlinale Talents is an initiative of the Berlin International Film Festival, a business division of the Kulturveranstaltungen des Bundes in Berlin GmbH, funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.



Festival director Dieter Kosslick with Berlinale Talents managers Florian Weghorn and Christine Tröstrum

IN COOPERATION

Talent Press is a programme of Berlinale Talents in cooperation with the Goethe-Institut and FIPRESCI.



In cooperation with



Die Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien



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