

BERLINALE TALENTS

2017

SEEN THROUGH THE EYES
OF TALENT PRESS

Christo speaking at the HAU Hebbel am Ufer.

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 "Courage - Against All Odds", by researching their long-form essays. Under the tutelage of experienced film critics, they have written several reviews, reports and interviews. In the following pages you'll find the abstracts of their long-form essays.

THE FILM CRITICS

ADEFOYEKE AJAO | NIGERIA "I believe a film critic owes the filmmaker and the average cinephile a fair opinion, withholding such would be depriving these stakeholders of a satisfactory evaluation of the motion picture."

RICHARD BOLISAY | PHILIPPINES "In every article I write there is an unconscious, yet not unnatural, attachment to this country I call home, and my path as a film critic has been defined by it."

ROWAN EL SHIMI | EGYPT "I find much of my writing pivoting in a space between critical engagement with the films themselves and dealing with topics related to censorship, access to knowledge, centralisation of the industry and festival management."

ASLI ILDIR | TURKEY "I consider film criticism as a crucial philosophical inquiry into the perception and interpretation of movies in their context."

PETRA METERC | SLOVENIA "Presenting and inviting people to discover other voices, while also inevitably trying to depict the wider, often political context, places me within cinephile criticism with a slight inclination towards film and other theory."

ARCHANA NATHAN | INDIA "If there is one skill I would deem important for a film critic, it would be the ability to not take oneself too seriously. For me, this skill liberates the critic and the writer in her. It paves the way for an unfettered study and analysis of a piece of cinema, perhaps the closest to an honest one as well."

HÉCTOR OYARZÚN | CHILE "My decision to become a film critic was always driven by how I conceive cinema in my country."

CHRISTOPHER SMALL | UNITED KINGDOM "I am a critic because I like movies. The day I stop being interested in the way films make me feel, and in the ideas they propose, is the day I will lay down my pen."

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Talent Press 2017.

ESSAY ABSTRACTS



Strong Island by Yance Ford.

THE COURAGE TO TELL THE STORY

BY PETRA METERC

Violence towards African Americans is a significant part of American history, and although a black president just finished his second term in office, there is an ongoing threat to black bodies. At this year's Berlinale, three films in particular try to understand and change the narrative around this violence.

One of which is Yance Ford's film *Strong Island* (Berlinale Panorama) which wouldn't have been made if it wasn't for a personal instance of violence – his brother William Ford was a victim of a homicide in 1992. He was shot from afar, yet the official court decision proclaimed he was shot in self-defence, which led Ford to ask himself what the relationship between distance and fear is, and how the legal system measures that, since it seems that all too often fear can legitimize such violence.

This film is a mixture of remembering and retelling of this tragic event, but also dealing with the consequences this event had on his family over the past 25 years. With a strong participatory tone, the film has a specific and thoughtful structure which

includes interviews with his closest family members, old pictures of William and his family, as well as Ford's voiceover. Frontal close-ups share his intimate views with the viewers.

Ford takes this act of violence and regains agency and authority over the narrative by reappropriating the media portrayal and discounts the court's version of this story. He does this by bringing forward the account of William Ford's friend who was with his brother during the murder, as well as by emphasizing the paradox of his parents moving to a Long Island suburb so that their children could live in a safer community.

The director intimately portrayed the violence that was inflicted on his brother and the personal impact it had on his family. Politically, the film reveals a harrowing account of the collective trauma that has affected so many black families in the USA for the last 400 years. By exposing his family's story on the screen, Yance Ford's work is not only strong, but also extremely courageous.

PARTY CRASHERS

BY ARCHANA NATHAN

Every year, approximately 3,000 gay men get on board a cruise for a week-long fete in the Mediterranean. Far from families, the law and the heterosexual world, this cruise, which resembles a no man's land, is a space that is awash with possibilities and is almost unreal in the kind of freedom it promises for these men. What happens when a camera enters this space? Does it alter the experience for the men on board? Tristan Ferland Milewski's crew joined the cruise this year to make *Dream Boat*, which premiered in the Panorama Dokumente section and offers a few insights.

The film follows the experiences of five particular men on board, each hailing from radically different backgrounds and countries. For each of them, this cruise represents an intensely personal search for love.

Milewski's camera, for the most part, does well by being an observer. Quietly hanging out with some of the men in their rooms, the filmmaker certainly manages to capture some uniquely candid moments. However, one cannot help but note that



Motherland by Ramona S. Diaz. © CineDiaz



Dream Boat by Tristan Ferland Milewski.



Spoor by Agnieszka Holland. © Robert Paëka

the camera also veers towards a tendency to entrap its protagonists. This is most evident in the case of Marek, a 32-year-old man from Poland. At least initially, Marek seems comfortable thinking out loud about what he is looking for in a prospective partner, the definition of love, the role that physical appearance plays etc. But over the course of the film, as the camera incessantly follows him around, one feels that it often ends up encroaching on his personal space. Take the scenes where he moves away from the party to steal a quiet moment on the deck and even cry out his confusions over where his life is headed. The camera hovers around as Marek buries his head and a sense of awkwardness prevails.

But the appeal of *Dream Boat*, is partially in the fact that it brings these central questions about the camera and the ethics of the documentary form back to the table. Milewski does not try to mask the effect the presence of the camera has on his protagonists. He acknowledges through his film that he is, indeed, crashing a party. And what validates Milewski's effort is his noteworthy choice to give a platform to diverse and brave voices from gay communities from across the world.

SUBVERTING THE GENRE

BY ASLI ILDIR

Representing political trauma is a hard task, especially for an artist depicting it while simultaneously experiencing it. This challenge is often met most effectively when the feeling of the trauma is captured in a genuine and sensual way. In this regard, genre films can be a surprisingly effective way to explore the political, and to find hybrid forms of representation. Alumnus and guest of the Berlinale Talents, Ana Lily Amirpour, an Iranian-American director, is known for her style of combining different genres to play with the rules of representation and creating a political voice at the same time.

Amirpour states that she believes in the power of extremes. While transforming a woman in a chador to a man-hunting vampire in her debut feature *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (United States), she uses the subversive power of the horror genre. Amirpour's distinctive approach can be considered in relation to two films from the 67th Berlin Film Festival, *Inflame* (Kaygi, Turkey) and *Spoor* (Pokot, Poland) which represent their own trauma within the sensual, even visceral atmosphere of the horror/thriller genre.

Inflame features a young female journalist going insane due to the political repression in her job, and the traumatic memory loss she experiences regarding the suspicious death of her parents in the Sivas Massacre in 1993. Director Ceylan Özgün Özçelik constructs a gothic atmosphere to show the entrapment of her character. She uses the cinematic expectations of a horror movie about a mentally ill person to create the experience of political trauma and subverts these expectations by not giving a satisfying, personal explanation for it.

Spoor tells the story of another "insane" woman struggling against animal hunters in her village in Poland. In her twisted *Kill Bill*-like avenging women thriller, director Agnieszka Holland constructs a humorous allegory of the absurdity of the "state as the legitimate murderer" also referencing the Holocaust. Not as claustrophobic and terrifying as *Inflame*, *Spoor* humorously weaves between different poles of insanity, including the Dionysian, manic phase.

WHEN TO DOCUMENT, WHEN TO PROVOKE?

BY ROWAN EL SHIMI

In a time of political crisis, the role of filmmakers becomes somewhat blurred. Due to the nature of their artistic process, many who have political leanings will find themselves entrenched in the ongoing political process whether as followers of events as they unfold or in being part of collectives and organisations that play a role in the development of the process. This puts these artists in a complex situation of needing to be the ones posing questions and provoking their societies but they also have the skills to contribute to the documentation of an alternate reality to the state's media narrative.

So when does the filmmaker play the activist role? Whether through documentary or fiction films, filmmakers not only provide a document for activism for the current moment but also an archival document to counter the monopolisation of history. And when is the right moment for filmmakers to step back and take the time needed to create visually impactful stories that question the status quo, offer an alternative viewpoint and confront their societies with pressing questions?

Turkish director Ceylan Özgün Özçelik's debut feature *Inflame* (Kaygi) takes a look at one woman's descent into paranoia as she deals with how to remember political events that were erased by history. Özçelik uses a female protagonist, and specific events that unfold in her life to point to larger questions in society using metaphors such as a psychological condition to discuss memory politics and collective forgetting.

On the other hand, we have Askold Kurov's *The Trial: The State of Russia vs. Oleg Sentsov* that chronicles the case of Ukrainian filmmaker Sentsov's politicised case leading to his 20-year-prison-sentence on fabricated terrorism charges. This film, unlike its counterparts, has a loud and clear message: "Free Oleg Sentsov" and does not use strong narrative, compelling characters or visual resonance to say it.

Özçelik expressed that her film took years from her point of conception to its premier here at the Berlinale. While her film is artistically mastered, provocative and relevant, one might wonder how much it can serve the purpose that Kurov's clearly does as a call to action as well as a historical document. But can a film do both? More importantly, should a film do both? Should cinema as a popular art-form even carry this immense responsibility?

PEOPLE IN PERIL

BY RICHARD BOLISAY

In Michael Rabiger's book, "Directing the Documentary," he writes: "Documentaries make human issues palpable in order to exercise the hearts and minds of an audience and raise involvement with other people's lives and predicaments." According to him, each story is a window through which lives can be examined, providing not only a physical view of people but also a sociopolitical understanding of their situations and motivations.

Three documentaries in this year's Berlinale strongly emphasise the human issues Rabiger touches on. Each of them depicts an environment of constant struggle and situations of confinement and threat, but driven by optimism. Their themes are urgent – health, safety, and survival – and the films let the audience formulate critical conclusions based on what is highlighted, both narratively and technically.

At the center of *Motherland* (Bayang Ina Mo, Philippines) is a public hospital in Manila that accepts a throng of laboring mothers daily. They come from poor families, some of them in their early 20s with five or six children, hesitant to do family planning and use contraceptives. Director Ramona Diaz follows several women and documents their stay in the maternity ward, but it also becomes a collective story that reveals voices of poverty from Manila – the hospital serving as the stage on which their predicaments become known – and outside its walls lies an even more ambiguous future for all of them.

A hospital is also the setting of Ma Li's documentary *Inmates* (Qiu, China), a mental asylum in northern China where a group of men struggle, knowingly and unknowingly, with their illnesses. They talk a lot: to the nurses, each other, and themselves. Many of them regard the place as a prison, and the chance of freedom is the only thing that keeps them holding on.

the bomb (Kevin Ford, Smriti Keshari, Eric Schlosser, USA) does not follow particular subjects for interview or scrutiny. It relies on archival and present-day footage depicting people involved in, or affected by, nuclear technology. Presented with live music and with images manipulated for effect, the film draws attention to its technical capability, but the voice emerging from the cacophony of audiovisual elements is definitely human and humanistic. All three films, in Rabiger's words, explore a "corner of reality in order to reveal what underlies human or other relationships." Instead of finger-pointing, they listen to find answers.



Inflame by Ceylan Özgün Özçelik.



The Wound by John Trengove. © Uruçu Media

GUADAGNINO VS. KAURISMÄKI BY CHRISTOPHER SMALL

The striking thing about Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name*, and indeed all of his movies, is its intense maximalism. His movies are distinguished, as well as reviled for their luxuriousness; even their most sensitive moments are shot through with an all-too-Italian enthusiasm for emotional and graphic excess. *Call Me by Your Name* draws on many of the traditions of the films of the Titanus studio, in particular, their strange but potent mix of intimate person-to-person interaction and epic emotional (and sometimes geographical) scope. In this movie, taboos are courageously blasted open in extended, hushed dialogue scenes – that are both literary and naturalistic – drilling into hidden subject areas of potential social transgression. Meanwhile, Aki Kaurismäki's *The Other Side of Hope* (*Toivon tuolla puolen*, Finland), similarly unwincing in the face of transgressive material, trundles down the opposite path.

Call Me by Your Name is a kind of supercollider movie, details swirling into different arrangements of seemingly random narrative value, while *The Other Side of Hope* is a building-block movie.

In building-block movies, both actors and their scenes have a purely functional quality in the context of their director's architectural eye. These grid-like structuralist movies build their steady momentum out of the interrelation of one element with another. Actors function in a muted dialogue with the edits that bind them to their spaces; scenes click together with each other to form droll, long-form patterns. Supercollider movies, on the other hand, come together out of a vast array of tiny material details; the concerns of each scene are less structural than they are physical and founded in ephemerality.

Where Guadagnino's scope is ever-expanding, Kaurismäki's is truncated. Guadagnino atomises scenes into disparate gestures and details, Kaurismäki takes his material, distills it into simple geometric patterns of light and colour, and strips the drama of its affect. As Kaurismäki said in the press conference for the film, "I like my actors to move as little as possible." His movies, built out of big, block-like scenes and straight-faced line readings, are exemplary of contiguity and restraint; in other words, the antithesis of Guadagnino.

ACTS OF KINDNESS AS POLITICAL ACTIONS BY HÉCTOR OYARZÚN

Some of the films in the 67th Berlinale seem like a direct response to the current global preoccupations with security and border protection. Aki Kaurismäki's *The Other Side of Hope* (*Toivon tuolla puolen*, Finland), Camila Donoso's *Casa Roshell* (Chile and Mexico) and Sebastián Lelio's *A Fantastic Woman* (*Una mujer fantástica*, Chile) present different forms of social relations as an act of resistance. Each of the micro-communities depicted in these films shed questioning light upon an entire society – acts of kindness can be political actions.

The Other Side of Hope is divided between two characters in Finland dealing with different forms of separation: Wikström puts his life back together following his breakup, while Khaled seeks asylum from Syria. They are two odd men who find a way of relating to each other through their strangeness. Often in Kaurismäki's films, the pairing of odd individuals is an act of resistance to a society that rejects them. The two sides of "hope" in the title refers not just to Khaled's seeking of asylum, but also in Wikström's desire to help someone, thus showing how hope creates social relationships between people.

Casa Roshell is even more explicit in portraying the state of being a social refugee. It takes place in a transgender club in Mexico where Roshell Terranova gives "personality lessons" to those exploring trans identities. Donoso's film shows a community upholding different rules about gender definition from mainstream Mexican society. The film focuses on daily moments shared between its subjects inside the club, and shows how their meeting can turn into a political act in resistance to an outside world that rejects their identity.

In *A Fantastic Woman*, Marina loses her partner Orlando when he suffers an aneurysm. Marina is deprived of her right to grieve by Orlando's family and Chilean authorities whose conventions cannot accommodate her trans identity. The film contrasts scenes from their burgeoning love when Marina looks happy, with an outside world that doesn't accept her. Love is a safe place in Lelio's film, but when Orlando dies Marina is forced to find her own strength outside of it.

NEGOTIATING A REEL APPRECIATION OF HISTORY BY ADEFOYEKE AJAO

The world is changing fast and it is necessary to document the various states of its evolution. Thanks to the throng of subscribers uploading content to various platforms, the Internet is a vast trove of personal archives. While these virtual biographies serve as a prism for understanding the trends of the present, the events of the past cannot be said to enjoy the same level of devotion. Whenever the word "history" is mentioned, it tends to conjure an image of depressive black and white images fleeting across the screen, voiced-over by an equally dismal monologue that does nothing to generate the viewer's interest in the frame.

Three films at the 67th Berlinale highlight the efforts of contemporary filmmakers who assess pre-existing ideologies within the present political landscape. João Moreira Salles' *In the Intense Now* (*No Intenso Agora*, Brasil) in Panorama, Laurence Bonvin's *Before the Flight* (*Avant l'envol*) in Berlinale Shorts and John Trengove's *The Wound* by Berlinale Talents alumnus screening in Panorama, reveal innovative ways of presenting history and by extension, the state of society, based on their approaches to documenting customs, artefacts and historical events.

Laurence Bonvin's *Before the Flight*, reveals that the current attitudes toward history can be observed through architecture. In 20 minutes, she defines Ivory Coast's post-independence journey by focusing on the apathy expressed towards the country's architectural masterpieces. João Moreira Salles's seemingly innocent archival images convey a multiplicity of interpretations. With *In the Intense Now*, he creates a collage of unrelated events from the sixties by critically assessing random material. John Trengove's *The Wound* tackles the crisis of identity that occurs when traditional and contemporary practices attempt to mix by situating homosexuality within a circumcision camp.

These three films highlight the filmmaker's role as a contributor to the development of conscientious cinema. By expressing historical events and practices through unusual narratives, they reveal the importance of film in facilitating an improved awareness and appreciation of history.



The Other Side of Hope by Aki Kaurismäki. © Sputnik



Call Me by Your Name by Luca Guadagnino.



Dayveon by Amman Abbasi.



Eolomea by Herrmann Zschoche.
© DEFA-Stiftung / Alexander Kühn

REVIEWS & REPORTS

GROWING UP IN THE DEEP SOUTH BY PETRA METERC

Dayveon by the American director-composer Amman Abbasi is screening in Berlinale Forum and is also cross-sectioned with Generation 14Plus. It seems as though the director himself wasn't quite sure whether he wanted to make a slice-of-life art film or a coming-of-age drama.

The film depicts the 13-year-old boy Dayveon living near Little Rock, Arkansas, who, having lost his brother in a gang-related shoot-out, lives with his sister's family. He spends his time as most of the boys his age do: riding bicycles, playing video games, scrolling on their phones, smoking blunts. However, in this poverty-stricken rural environment, free time also involves joining a local gang.

The cinematographic portrayal of Dayveon and those close to him, well-executed by DOP Dustin Lane, mixes a documentary approach with a stylized blurring in and out in scenes of movement, as well as playing with natural light by illuminating faces or various interior spaces.

On the other hand, the 4:3 Academy ratio framing works well with symmetrical compositions of bodies in small rooms, as well as with the many close-ups which emphasize the personal perspective that the film adopts. The close-ups often completely cut-out the surroundings and the camera lingers on characters' faces or even parts of their faces which brings intimacy to these characters portrayed by non-professional actors. Their introspective expressions are highlighted within these everyday scenes.

Rather than the typical depiction of urban gang-violence, refreshingly, Abbasi chooses to focus on teenage gangs within a rural environment. For research, the director workshoped the script with several boys involved in gangs, however the film would have worked better without the all too familiar narrative tropes. There are many clichés that appear in the otherwise casual dialogues, and the melodramatic Yann Tiersen-like piano score feels like Abbasi is instructing us on how to feel. The ongoing metaphor of swarming bees, the interpretation of which preoccupied the audience during the Q&A, didn't seem to get its point across either.

All in all, the realistic violence and threatening atmosphere together with the poetic cinematography would suffice – they are effective on their own and do not need to be explained through the one-dimensional script which should either be more unconventional or completely minimized.

THE ENEMY IMPERFECT BY ASLI ILDIR

One of East Germany's hidden treasures, *Eolomea* (Herrmann Zschoche) is part of the 67th Berlinale Retrospektive programme "Future Imperfect," a wide selection of science fiction films from different eras and nations. *Eolomea* premiered in 1972, the same year as Andrei Tarkovsky's more celebrated *Solaris*, but took a less auteurist and more commercial approach than its Russian contemporary. Looking back 45 years later, *Eolomea* gives a vision of the future imagined within the conditions of the sci-fi genre during the détente period of Cold War era.

Moving past the 1950's "us against other" narratives typified in Hollywood sci-fi films like *War of the Worlds* (1953) or *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Eolomea* takes on the notion of crossing new frontiers. In a future world where human civilization has spread to other planets, the film is built on the mystery around the disappearance of eight space ships during a mission to discover more planets to inhabit. Two scientists, Maria and Tal, are responsible for deciding whether to find or abandon the space ships, while Maria's cosmonaut lover Dan desperately tries to turn back to Earth. Instead of the "friend or enemy" conflict of Cold War science fiction films, *Eolomea* features its characters listening to each other and learning to communicate, which can be appreciated within the political context of the détente period.

Shot in 70mm, Herrmann Zschoche applies sweeping wide-angle shots to a range of visuals, juxtaposing bright, open beach scenes that take place on Earth with the cold metallic spaceships floating in space. The film uses its non-linear structure to create a sense of nostalgia, telling the story of the love affair between Maria and Dan with humorous flashbacks to their old times on Earth. He also adds some unexplained, abstract interludes between scenes of the past and the present, with imagery that suggests a microorganism changing shape under a microscope, or a "big bang" explosion in the outer space. These contradictory ways to regard the same images summarize the general feeling in *Eolomea*: in a post-Cold War world, seeing and recognizing your enemy is not that easy anymore.



In the Intense Now by João Moreira Salles. © iskra

EVICTING HISTORY

BY ADEFOYEKE AJAO

The architectural masterpieces that dot Abidjan's landscape take centre stage in Laurence Bonvin's *Before the Flight* (*Avant l'envol*, Switzerland), selected for Berlinale Shorts. For 20 minutes, the filmmaker offers an expedition of the current functions of monumental buildings – especially the designs of French architect, Henri Chomette.

The direction of this film is not immediately evident until a seamless montage of scenes moves from one edifice to another, incorporating visuals that proceed from sign posts to the buildings' interiors – abstractly linking original use with the current usage and state. Was the condition of the structures a reflection of the current state of Ivorian society? Bonvin leaves this unanswered by focusing more on the inanimate.

With the camera concentrating on portraying the various states of the public structures, human dialogue is rendered negligible. When humans do make an appearance in the frame, they are depicted holding informal interactions within the structures. Thus coming off as passive occupants, indifferent to the surrounding nuances of national heritage, but more in tune with the busy streets of Abidjan (which have more human traffic than the monuments). Instances such as students conducting a prayer session in an empty classroom and a casually-dressed lady slouched at an office reception, while laboriously reading a document are just a few examples of the contemporary appropriation of Abidjan's historical places.

Bonvin evokes a sense of indifference to historical artefacts through the portrayal of deserted masterpieces occupied by self-absorbed bystanders. Even for someone familiar with Ivory Coast's turbulent history of coups and rebellion, Bonvin does not entirely give a motivation for the significance of the featured buildings. With the various structures being in partial use or in states of dilapidation, only bats seem to be at home within them, roosting and taking flight as they please.

Nostalgia is fleeting in a country characterised by socio-political upheavals, a prevailing scourge on the African continent. Why would people be concerned with buildings from a glorious past when they have more pressing things on their minds? While structures can serve as a reminder of the past, they seem to offer no refuge from the despair of the present. *Before the Flight* is a subtle reminder of what was and what could have been; the anti-climax of post-independence enthusiasm within the African continent.

PICTURES FROM THE REVOLUTIONS

BY CHRISTOPHER SMALL

Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a French anarchist and arguably one of the most prominent public speakers to emerge during the Paris students movement of May 1968, becomes a strange locus for many of the ideas that make up João Moreira Salles' *In the Intense Now* (*No Intenso Agora*, Brasil), shown in Panorama Dokumente. Cohn-Bendit himself always stressed that the movement's strength was in its spontaneous forward-motion, driven by an engine of widespread anger and idealism and containing no ordained vision for a future society. In one scene, taken from a contemporary television broadcast in which his charisma hijacked the ostensible agenda of the discussion, Cohn-Bendit berates his conservative counterpart for suggesting that the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was carried out with a specific idea of a new society in mind.

But it would be misguided to call Cohn-Bendit the movie's protagonist, just as it would to focus too much attention on his role in the context of the May '68 national strike. Both the film, about the plurality of revolutionary movements in 1968 around the world, and the historical student-worker coalition are and were defined by their lack of a recognisable centre. João Moreira Salles carefully suggests affinities and contrasts between the libertarian character of the aborted French revolution and the successful authoritarian revolution of China inadvertently documented by his mother in home movies on a business trip.

It's a productive pairing, one well-suited to Salles' calm style of historical overview. Other than those rescued from his mother's own personal archive, this film consists entirely of historical broadcast or cinema images. But he uses the images with precision: a clip of Charles de Gaulle addressing the Republic is therefore, in Salles' conception of things, not only a piece of historically enlightening material, or something useful structurally, but a portrait of gesture and performance, and the catalyst for a study of the role they play in captivating an audience.

Ultimately, the key conflict in Salles' movie is between television spectres: between de Gaulle's on-screen fatigue and Cohn-Bendit's on-screen vitality. Along with the China footage, this pictorial face-off is at the heart of Salles' interest in the mysterious inner life – political and otherwise – of filmed images.

“POLITICAL REPRESSION LIES IN PEOPLE GETTING SCARED OF A STORY”

BY ROWAN EL SHIMI

2034. This is the year Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov is scheduled to be released from Russian prison on charges of plotting terrorist acts. Throughout the 75-minute-documentary *The Trial: The State of Russia vs. Oleg Sentsov* he appears in a small cage in the courtroom mirroring the Kafkaesque absurdity of the trial itself.

Director Askold Kurov, who has several politically charged documentaries under his belt, chronicles the 2014 trial of Sentsov. However, *The Trial* is not an artistic masterpiece and is more like an extended news report with no real narrative arc. It is an important alternative document to the state narrative which sensationalise these types of trials to spread fear of dissent and advance compliance.

Kidnapped from his house in Russian-annexed Crimea on charges based on testimonies that appear to be taken from defendants under torture, Sentsov is accused of plotting to bomb the Lenin monument and Russian public offices. The film argues that Sentsov's activism is the reason for his imprisonment. He took part in the AutoMaidan protests, was helping Ukrainian soldiers during Russia's annexation of Crimea and is a vocal critic of the Russian regime.

The film weaves archival footage of Sentsov's television appearances as a film director, scenes from his trials effects on his family, the activism by the film community for his release and the progression of the trial itself – with a lot of talking heads explaining the trial's proceedings and the larger political context in Ukraine and Russia.

Presented in the Berlinale Special by the European Film Academy, audience members were asked to hold up yellow “Free Oleg Sentsov” signs as part of a wider campaign for Sentsov's release, further demonstrating that the film's relevance lies in its political content. “The Academy had to take this position and help him as a sign of solidarity. Knowing from my own experience of the communist time in Poland, this kind of international solidarity is the only weapon we have to fight this political injustice,” filmmaker and academy member Agnieszka Holland who was featured in the film told the audience after the screening. “Oleg needs us but we need Oleg too. His courage is relevant today, we need this message of courage.”

BEFORE THE WORLD ENDS

BY RICHARD BOLISAY

"The designers of the first atomic bomb were concerned that a nuclear detonation might ignite the earth's atmosphere and kill every living thing on earth. They went ahead and tested the nuclear device anyway." This is the first fact about nuclear weapons listed in the program notes distributed at the Berlinale screening of *the bomb* (Kevin Ford, Smriti Keshari, Eric Schlosser, USA). Such information supplements the harrowing yet completely engrossing experience of seeing it, as the subject relates to dangers of a global scale but one that has been mostly overlooked for decades.

Initially presented at the 2016 Tribeca Film Festival as a multimedia installation, with floor-to-ceiling screens and live music at the center, the version shown in the Berlinale Special section is a 61-minute film that combines archival footage from countries with nuclear weapons such as the United States, Japan, India, the United Kingdom, and North Korea, from the 1940s to the present. Art-directed by Stanley Donwood, these images are manipulated with incredible attention to detail – small and large texts, numbers and scribbles appear and disappear on screen – an effect that heightens the emotional heft.

Enriching it further is the live music by the four-piece rock band The Acid, whose layers of sounds provide *the bomb* with a rather soulful quality. With their perfectly timed crescendos and evocative interstices, and sound simulations of testing and attacks, it felt as though the viewers suddenly found themselves in the middle of a nuclear war and felt its effects. The live score is crucial to the creation of an overwhelming atmosphere of alarm, one that goes beyond technical innovation and towards something more meaningful: a call for action to look into humanity's worst crime, and a reexamination of the role of governments to prevent the total destruction of the world.

It is only understandable that with this multimedia work, the three key people behind it come from different backgrounds. Ford is a director, editor, and cinematographer; Keshari is a multimedia artist; and Schlosser is a journalist and writer known for his essays on Hiroshima and nuclear war, and whose book, "Command and Control: Nuclear Weapons, the Damascus Accident, and the Illusion of Safety", has inspired the project. With numerous audiovisual elements, its effect is full. More than letting the audience experience the enormity of nuclear technology, *the bomb* displays an emotional core that looks to humans for answers and solutions. It is a strong statement on how this urgent problem can be addressed: there is no way to undo all the harms caused, but only humans themselves can mitigate a looming extinction.

WHAT AN EMPTY PROMISE FEELS LIKE

BY ARCHANA NATHAN

"WHY DO YOU WANT TO ENTER THE POLICE ACADEMY?"
"BECAUSE IT SOUNDS SAFE"

This exchange between the police chief of Mei Chang, a small city in The People's Republic of China and Lynn, a 16-year-old girl, pretty much sums up Huang Ji and Ryuji Otsuka's film *The Foolish Bird* (*Ben Niao*, Berlinale Generation 14Plus). The entire film can be seen from this prism – of a young girl's search for a sanctuary in a city that seems to have been abandoned just when it was on the brink of a transformation.

But who can blame Lynn, for seeking refuge? Take the landscape of Mei Chang, for example. It's bleak: grey fills the screen,

empty construction plots, half-finished buildings, demolitions and overall, a general sense of isolation prevails. Then there is the personal story of loneliness of Lynn whose mother is forced to work far away, leaving Lynn to encounter her teens, her sexuality and her youth all by herself.

Everything around Lynn is threatening her. The film opens with the news of the rape and murder of a young girl. The smart phone revolution seems to have gripped Mei Chang and its youth but with the absence of a sense of purpose to the people's lives in this empty city, the presence of these phones seems menacing. The phone itself, while initially giving Lynn a taste of freedom (even liberating her sexually), gradually, imprisons her in a murky world of rape, venereal diseases and corruption. The camera follows Lynn obsessively trying to get a peek of her even as she tries to bury her face in her tresses in search of an escape.

Through the story of one teen, *The Foolish Bird* tells a story of a city left behind in the global race of smart and super smart cities. It tells the story of haste, of too much being done without adequate thought and ground work. It literally shows you the inherent violence that is at the foundation of mindless 'development'. And, it is a cinematic portrayal of what an empty promise looks and feels like.

Packed with powerful frames of the city, *The Foolish Bird* also features a phenomenal performance by the young woman and plays the central character of Lynn. She straddles and epitomises the twin worlds of adventure and entrapment brilliantly. *The Foolish Bird* is a searing portrait of the times we live in.

STYLE IS THE ANSWER

BY ASLI ILDIR

"Style Is the Answer," is a song that Iranian-American director Ana Lily Amirpour has been listening to repeatedly for the past few weeks. Playing the song at her Berlinale Talents talk "Walking Home Ideas: Inspirational Flows," she mentioned that she has been criticized for being overly preoccupied with style. Her response to this criticism is: "Be preoccupied with whatever you want!"

As a big fan of Bruce Lee, westerns, horror films and other "weird stuff," Amirpour is into what she suggestively describes as "the wormholes". The idea behind her first long feature, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) seems like one of these discoveries she made on her journey into these wormholes. A spaghetti western horror film set in an Iranian ghost town named "Bad City," it features a young vampire woman hunting down male harassers from under the cover of her chador.

Amirpour says that she is like the mad scientist Doc Brown from the *Back to the Future* series. She accepts herself as a mad but lucky person because she has her films to apply her madness. She likes to invent things and go to extremes. Giving us her insights on the horror genre, she says, "I have no loyalty to the physics of the real world with logic. The extreme elements can help push something even more into the spotlight."

Her last film, *The Bad Batch*, which premiered in the Venice Film Festival, also looks to extremes, a cannibalistic story in the middle of the desert. "I make dark, twisted, perverted fairy tales," she says, but she does not agree that she is preoccupied with style even though she shoots hybrid genre films. Her films defend the idea that what people feel is interconnected with the context of the world and systems that we're living in. "Everything is politics: love, life, identity," she says, while wearing a "Fuck Trump" hat on stage.



Ana Lily Amirpour and moderator Christoph Gröner on stage at HAU2.

THE COURAGE TO FAIL

BY PETRA METERC

For Ahkeem (USA), a documentary by Jeremy S. Levine and Landon Van Soest, having its world premiere in the Berlinale Forum, tells the tale of what it's like to be young, gifted, and black in 2017.

Coming-of-age narratives need to be inventive in order to succeed. *For Ahkeem's* storyline includes violence, constant fear of dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, as well as incarceration, and certainly fits the milieu of films depicting the difficulties of growing up in economically depressed black communities. Yet what makes it stand out is the candidness with which the two filmmakers engage in this long-term documentary, the production of which spanned over three years and, more importantly, they really got to know Daje, and considered her an active participant in telling her own story. The directors did not need to construct a coming-of-age story, and rather could focus more on meticulous editing that allows the narrative to emerge.

The film kicks off with Daje Shelton, nicknamed Boonie, who has enrolled for the Innovative Concept Academy, the last haven for troubled teenagers whose (sometimes quite stupid) mistakes almost cost them their education. The film makes it clear that the black youth from St. Louis, Missouri, are too often defined by a single mistake for their entire lives. The juvenile court and educational systems may demonstrate an understanding that it is the kids' social conditions and race that often pre-define them and their "problematic" behavior, yet this does not mean they are spared the consequences. The kids feel as though they are expected to fail from an early age, so why even try?

What at first seems like distant observational realism echoing Frederick Wiseman (especially with the high-school scenes), gradually morphs into an extremely intimate portrayal that gets so close to Daje that we soon forget this is not fiction, especially when her diary entries are shared through her voice-over.

While it is Daje's personal story that is in the foreground, the strong social and political commentary of the hardships of her community are consistently present. The filmmakers include footage of the media coverage of the urgent protests in Ferguson, making it evident that it is only the media that presents the murdering of black youth as something new, yet for those affected, this is obviously old news. With the media constantly lurking for the next big story, intimate films like *For Ahkeem* actually give a spotlight and voice to the individuals living those stories.



the bomb by Kevin Ford, Smriti Keshari and Eric Schlosser.



For Ahkeem by Jeremy S. Levine and Landon Van Soest.



Video-essayist and film critic Kevin B. Lee.



Casa Roshell by Camila José Donoso.

FOOTAGE RIGHTS

BY HÉCTOR OYARZÚN

Kevin B. Lee is a filmmaker, film critic and one of the most prolific video-essayists, with more than 300 works under his name. His "desktop documentary" *Transformers: The Premake* was praised as a work that defied genre definitions. His work updated the found-footage genre and it opened artistic ways to explore film criticism on Internet platforms. I sat down with Lee at Berlinale Talents to discuss the political aspects of video essays, film footage rights and his views on his work's evolution.

HOW DO YOU THINK FOUND-FOOTAGE CHANGED AFTER THE INTERNET?

In the 60s, and earlier, there were artists who were using found-footage in a way that were much more radical and critical. Then in the 90s, media became more personalized, and in the 2000's with the Internet, the ability for people to use found-footage became a lot easier. It sounds like a great thing, but the problem is it seems harder to have this critical viewpoint because people take as normal that we live in a society that consumes media.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT HOW VIDEO-ESSAYS INTRODUCE TECHNICAL CONCEPTS OF FILM TO A WIDER AUDIENCE?

It is really important for the audience to understand how films are put together, but one thing that is missing from these analyses is a sense of poetics. The other thing that is missing is an awareness of the social-political dimensions of film. Using found-footage is like saying: "I have a social and personal right to do something with this." But that comes with a second question: What do I do with it that is worthy of this right?

IS THERE A NEED TO TAKE A STEP FORWARD WITH VIDEO-ESSAYS? I'M THINKING ABOUT YOUR TRANSFORMERS: THE PREMAKE AND KOGONADA'S COLUMBUS?

This practice is about how to exercise my thinking through audiovisual form. I'm always going to look to films and media as my subject, but it is the way that I engage with it that hopefully can create a new form and style.

OPEN WOUND

BY ARCHANA NATHAN

Filmmaker John Trengove does not believe in comfortable resolutions. And after watching his debut film, *The Wound* (which opened the Panorama section), one begins to see why.

Set against the backdrop of Uk Waluka, a ritual that initiates boys into manhood within the Xhosa people of South Africa, Trengove tells a compelling story about same sex desire, one that is as disquieting as the ritual of circumcision that he opens the film with. "None of us can really know what it can mean to hide a part of yourself at all costs and the kind of violence that that can engender," he says.

The Wound is about an impossible relationship between two young men of the Xhosa community recruited to be mentors of young boys who have just gone through their initiation ceremony. We discover their forbidden love story through the eyes of a boy from the city, sent to the mountains of the Eastern Cape to

be turned into a man. In more ways than one, it is this boy that serves as our entry point into the narrative. And as Trengove admits, the boy often tended to be his voice too. "I knew that same sex desire would be the lens with which I would enter the film. I'm a South African filmmaker, a queer filmmaker, but in the context of the initiation rituals, I definitely was the outsider. And I needed to embrace that fact. I think there is a lot about the ritual that I learnt gradually, but felt that it was really not my place to comment on them. What is not known about the ritual is the transformative effect it has on a lot of men. It helped to have an outsider be my voice," says Trengove.

An alumnus of Script Station at Berlinale Talents, Trengove plans to release his film in South Africa sometime in the middle of this year and he does anticipate controversy. "The ongoing discussion on Twitter gives a sense of the kind of disparate responses the film is likely to have. It is going to be an interesting year for me".

FREEDOM OASIS

BY HÉCTOR OYARZÚN

"Casa Roshell" is a real club in Mexico City where Roshell Terranova gives "personality lessons". Men who are afraid of showing themselves publicly as transvestites learn how to dress correctly, wear make-up convincingly, and explore what it means to be a woman in a safe place. Like in Chilean filmmaker Camila José Donoso's previous film *Naomi Campbell*, *Casa Roshell*, challenges social definitions of gender.

The film's introduction takes an observational documentary approach to Roshell's transformation process. Donoso makes a slow-paced depiction of a transvestite's make-up process and films it with an odd blocking that doesn't let us see her face directly. We see her back from different angles, but all the glimpses we get of her are exclusively in reflection. When Roshell's transformation is over we can finally see her taking frontal control of the frame. The shy person who was calmly preparing appears now as a master of ceremony of a secret club.

From this moment on the film takes a leap from observation to a chaotic collage of daily moments that wanders through casual conversation and romantic encounters in the club. It is in these casual conversations where Donoso's political perspective emerges. Masculine and feminine qualities are discussed in a place where men presenting as women flirt with "masculine" men. In one conversation, a bisexual asks a straight male, how he can be a heterosexual at this club, to which he answers "but they are women." This shows that inside "Casa Roshell" social gender rules are absent, and anyone can choose their gender or, as Roshell would say, "their personalities".

With the highest rate of transgender killings in Latin America, there is severe discrimination and danger in Mexico's capital, but "Casa Roshell" deliberately ignores the outside world. Donoso doesn't speechify on these issues, and shows a different kind of political resistance. It is a film inspired inevitably by a larger world of violence, which it chooses to answer through this community based on friendship and freedom.

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Programme Manager Berlinale Talents
Florian Weghorn
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Contact Berlinale Talents
talents@berlinale.de
www.berlinale-talents.de
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