Cinematic Convergences, Collective Intelligence: The 45th International Film Festival Rotterdam

Clarence Tsui

Glitz, glamour, and gala premieres may be the general public’s idea of film festivals, but they haven’t characterized Rotterdam—until this year’s opening ceremony, when Máxima, queen of the Netherlands, whipped up a media frenzy when she appeared in a golden-hued jumpsuit, as widely noted by the local press. Even so, the Dutch port city’s annual showcase, now in its forty-fifth year, has never been a circus for the starstruck; barely had the queen and other guests settled into their seats when artistic director Bero Beyer reminded those in attendance of the festival’s true values.

“All over the world, filmmakers we cherish and have welcomed here in the past are prohibited from showing their work, restricted in their movements, put under house arrest, incarcerated or worse,” he said. “Why? The powers that be feel threatened or offended by the outspokenness of their filmmaking art. IFFR salutes those filmmakers.”

Beyer made clear the festival’s stance opposing the snowballing backlash against the hundreds of thousands of refugees stranded across Europe and the rest of the world and emphasized that Rotterdam thrives on diversity, as “the very wealth of our culture is defined by our openness to others.”

That DNA is especially relevant now when Europe—as a geopolitical and symbolic entity—is being called into question by the wildly fluctuating economic and population flows sweeping across the continent and the wildly different responses they have sparked.

Two days after his blistering speech, in an interview at the IFFR’s main venue, De Doelen, Beyer spoke of the festival’s role in providing a public space for social debate. “Europe is going through a lot of changes now, with people coming in,” he observed. “Let’s not call them refugees anymore, but new citizens. This huge influx of people has a direct effect on the way the community works. This is true for many places in the world—before you talk to the other, you have to know who you are yourself.”

The festival has long been an outlet through which the suppressed voices of disenfranchised minorities and independent-minded artists could be heard. “We have always presented filmmakers who swim against the stream, whether artistically or politically,” Beyer said. “We should continue to do so and we should be aware that it’s quite a feat for filmmakers to be doing that. Maybe it’s their responsibility, or maybe it’s their mission, but we have to make sure that we appreciate people who are doing that, and give them a platform.”

He admitted: “For us to [become] a ‘message’ festival may be going a little bit too far. We’re not a political institution, but we are an institution here to celebrate the freedom of cultural expression through cinema.”

A glance at IFFR history supports Beyer’s claims for the festival as a “social producer.” In 2011, its “Raiding Africa” program explored China’s expansion of its global influence into nearly neocolonial economic interventions in sub-Saharan nation states; in 2012, “Power Cut Middle East” showcased the moving images filtering out of the Arab Spring; in 2013, “Inside Iran” introduced a new generation of filmmakers with a very different set of cultural and artistic mindsets from that of such much-heralded veterans as Abbas Kiarostami; and in 2014, the epic, multi-strand “The States of Europe” was near-prophetic in its layered interrogation of the sprawling past, chaotic present, and uncertain future of the continent.

The festival’s 2016 edition was a continuation of all this and more. In a nod to the unfolding migrant crisis in Europe (and elsewhere), the subject line of programs and communiqués introducing filmmakers and films all began with “Please Welcome” and continued into sections gathered in a framework titled “ID Check.”

The emphasis on self-examination and reinvention may equally signal a sense of renewal for the festival itself, with Beyer presiding over his first edition since taking over the reins from Rutger Wolfson a year earlier. But the festival directors also emphasize how the IFFR ensures that what’s happening within the festival “bubble” of films, meet-the-audience sessions, and daily late-night parties remains in
In an unusually early move, Beyer had unveiled the first title in IFFR’s centerpiece competition in September 2015, long before any other films were announced. At the festival, it became evident why Beyer and his team decided to sign up and publicize Fiona Tan’s *History’s Future* so far in advance. It turned out to be the epitome of Rotterdam’s trademark maverick spirit.

*History’s Future* (2016) begins with a man (Irish actor-screenwriter Mark O’Halloran) sleeping in a cinema. Briefly stirring from his slumber, he succumbs again, as his subsequent nightmare flashes on-screen in a montage of news footage of riots, wars, and ships packed with refugees. He awakens only to find himself confronted with the symbols of mortal sin and human folly from Hieronymus Bosch’s legendary painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, purgatory visions that serve as a harbinger of the man’s trauma. In the next scene, he wakes up in a hospital, having lost not just his memory but also much of his cognitive and linguistic abilities. While undergoing psychological treatment, the man-without-a-name, called “MP” in the credits, is confronted with a barrage of questions. Struggling to keep his wits about him, he finally breaks down when asked what he will be doing tomorrow. “I can’t remember tomorrow,” he says. Given the way the opening scenes unfold in reverse motion, with “The End” blaring from the screen at the start and cinemagoers walking backwards “into” the cinema, it could be argued that the protagonist is traveling through time in reverse. Having hurtled through a hellish human future, complete with self-inflicted catastrophes, he is finally ready to embark on a vertical journey across the Europe of the here and now, as he observes and records a new age of ghastly Boschian earthly delights.

Eventually revealed to be a suburban Dutch father and husband, “MP” soon leaves home, is suddenly freed from the constraints of time and space, and morphs among multiple identities. A twenty-first-century *flâneur*, he pops up in one European location after another, entering the Dublin airport to ride the escalators at the Charles De Gaulle airport in

Fiona Tan’s *History’s Future* (2016) had been anticipated since IFFR 2013.
Paris, then sauntering through Trafalgar Square only to pass under the arches of Madrid’s Plaza Mayor. The only place he can rest is a room at a warehouse where, in intermittent scenes, he shapes and reflects on his existence through a growing bank of documents, photographs, and knickknacks acquired presumably from his “travels.”

Then reality seeps into History’s Future, at least for a few moments, when Tan shows footage of a meeting of the Barcelona branch of Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform of People Affected by Mortgages, or PAH), with anguished homeowners discussing their plight and pending foreclosures. But the very next scene shifts tone, showing the protagonist chatting up a woman after a screening at the Irish Film Institute.⁵ He sleeps with her, then gets kicked out after subjecting her to a ludicrous postcoital homily about coincidences and fait accompli. This jarring juxtaposition represents Tan’s film at its most audacious and flawed: rather like her protagonist, the Indonesian-born, Australian-raised, and Amsterdam-based artist tries to be everywhere but somehow ends up nowhere. History’s Future is brimming with fantastic visual ideas attached to a disorienting and sprawling structure that frustrates empathy. There’s too much distanitation at work as well, with Tan and her British co-screenwriter, the film critic Jonathan Romney, taking their audience through one postmodern turn too many, ultimately stranding History’s Future in a dreamlike labyrinth of allegories.

With Beyer’s opening address touching on the need for his film festival (or festivals in general) to engage with the troubles of the world, it’s perhaps appropriate to examine IFFR on the strength of its documentaries. And leave it to an octogenarian to deliver one of the festival’s most artistically intriguing and politically charged treatises. With the explicitly titled Informe General II: El nuevo rapto de Europa (General Report II: The New Abduction of Europe, 2015), Catalan auteur Pere Portabella proved he hasn’t mellowed with age (he is 87) and is still as fiery as he was at the time he made the first General Report film four decades ago.

That first installment, Informe general sobre unas cuestiones de interés para una proyección pública (General Report on Certain Matters of Interest for a Public Screening, 1976), also screened as part of the festival’s mini-Portabella retrospective. Made at a time when Spain was at a political crossroads after the death of dictator Francisco Franco, it showed the best and the worst of times, with a sense of uncertainty embodied in the opening ten minutes of street battles between unarmed demonstrators and baton-wielding, bayonet-for-blood police and an optimism, too, as possibilities bloomed with the end of authoritarian rule. General Report I provided a scintillating platform for the Spanish people to articulate their long-hidden awareness, aspirations, and ambitions. Portabella shows political party leaders, workers, and unionists debating urgent social issues along class and regional lines. Intellectuals who have just returned from exile talk about their experiences fighting the Falangists during the Spanish Civil War; a monarchist discusses his advocacy for a constitutional monarchy. Meanwhile, an actor deadpans a seemingly endless litany of Franco’s unlimited political powers as he tours the tyrant’s former residence at the El Prado palace. In a drastic change in tone, Portabella would later stage a re-enactment of a violent raid in the 1960s of a clandestine printing press, and the torture meted out to those arrested there. With General Report I, Portabella had marked the process in which the Spanish people could foster the birth of a new democracy through what he described, in a special IFFR master class, as “collective intelligence.”

In Portabella’s new film, the zeitgeist is with citizens’ collectives such as the PAH (also seen in Fiona Tan’s History’s Future), the Catalan National Assembly (Assemblea National Catalana, ANC), and perhaps, most famously, the Podemos movement. Sticking closely to his ethos of talking to the masses, however, there are no appearances from PAH’s founder Ada Colau (who has since become the mayor of Barcelona) apart from her speech at a public forum, while Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias, nearly ubiquitous in mainstream media coverage of Spanish politics, is only present in TV news footage. Instead, as in 1976, Portabella instigates and records discussions among ANC activists and members of the Podemos Citizens’ Council, with the latter filmed partly from above, its participants appearing like nodes in a system.

Portabella has insisted that his General Report films are not documentaries, by which he seems to mean that they refuse objectivity; he ran successfully for a seat in the Senate to help draft the Spanish constitution after the first film, and he appears in the new one as a participant of Catalan Way, a human chain formed across Catalonia in 2013 in support of the region’s independence from Spain. Beyond the overtly political, General Report II could also be interpreted as a veteran artist’s contemplation about art, as Portabella dedicates substantial screen time to discussions at and about the Queen Sofia Museum. An initial sequence pinpointing the composition of the museum’s board of directors—big-business representatives, bankers, and bureaucrats—is followed by footage of the managerial staff reflecting on their work and the need for more transparency. A tracking shot of Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, one of the Sofia’s most well-known pieces, issues an ironic clarion call for freedom since it is now guarded by attendants aplenty and is captive to an institution of the state.
While Portabella celebrates the power of the people, Ukrainian director Sergei Loznitsa’s latest film, *Sobytie (The Event, 2015)*, goes one step further by looking at how people have been filming the ways in which this power is expressed. *The Event* was one of the most warmly received screenings at Rotterdam this year. Loznitsa channels his fascination with civil disobedience by way of the found-footage aesthetics he has honed for years. A decade ago, Loznitsa pieced together archival footage in *Blokada (Blockade, 2006)* to depict evocatively how people in Leningrad (now re-rechristened St. Petersburg) withstood Nazi Germany’s 28-month siege of the city during World War II. *The Event* unfolds in the same city, in 1991, as residents rose up to defy a three-day communist putsch against Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Loznitsa’s source material this time round is an archive of black-and-white footage shot by eight camera operators from the Russian city’s state-backed studio. Boasting a freshly sculpted soundscape design by Vladimir Golovnitski, with existent voices tuned up and sounds created to highlight action, Loznitsa’s montage offers a crisp reconstruction of those tense summer days twenty-five years ago, as individualized fear gave way to collective action, protesters built barricades to prepare for a military incursion, and a victorious denouement arrived as municipal officials announced the failure of the coup.

The real punch of the film lies in what comes after, when in an ominous coda, officials are seen struggling to properly seal off the Communist Party’s ransacked headquarters. Ending the film with a long shot of a corridor plunging into blackness, Loznitsa seems to hint at darker times ahead.

*The Event* showed in the festival’s “Community Cameras” strand which, programmer Edwin Carels wrote, was inspired by the notion of people taking over the controls, “above all with the camera at the ready, as a catalyst for the process of emancipation.” In a sort of update of Benedict Anderson’s views on the production of communal cohesion through the printing press, Carels wrote that the camera can be a “binding factor in society.”

This is the argument, too, on which Quebecois filmmaker Dominic Gagnon based his latest film, *of the north* (2015), a 74-minute collage of video clips found online and positioned as a work illustrating how Canada’s indigenous Arctic communities record and represent themselves. The title’s reference to Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922) is explicated in IFFR’s catalogue, which points out that the “idealized portrait of the ‘kindly, brave, simple Eskimo’ is further from reality than ever.” In contrast to Nanook, Gagnon’s film is positioned as showing “the descendants of Nanook in the process of making ‘their own’ cinema... which reveals trashy and unbridled acculturation and takes apart the existing clichés about the Inuit.” Locals wrestle each other, make liquor, stumble around drunk, crash a kiddoo (while drunk, possibly on liquor they made), hack at a beached whale, and vomit.

Yet of the north has raised even more questions about the politics of representation. Inuit artists have denounced Gagnon’s film as insensitive and even racist, criticism which came into even sharper focus when the filmmaker admitted he hadn’t bothered to visit the regions shown in his collage. Despite allegedly good intentions, Gagnon is still a privileged white urban artist-intellectual receiving state funding for his work and has somehow ignored the limited agency of his subjects. Framing the locals’ blurry videos as emancipation, or what Gagnon terms the “cultural avant-garde,” is akin to Flaherty’s construction of Nanook as the noble savage. While the footage may well be filmed by the Inuit themselves, it is Gagnon who selects the materials, edits them into his own film, and represents them at international festivals. Rather like Flaherty before him, Gagnon ends up speaking for the subaltern; even worse, he is appropriating their authorship and presenting their personal images halfway around the world without their knowledge or consent.

Collaboration and contextualization are key to a thriving communitarian cinema. A Kickstarter-funded documentary from the director-screenwriter duo Kurt Vincent and Irene Chin, *The Lost Arcade* (2015) chronicles the fluctuating fortunes of the Chinatown Fair, an amusement center in New York City. While Vincent and Chin found a wealth of archives to outline the seven-decade history of the arcade, the best part of the film is their own footage shot over the years between the arcade’s final days in 2011 and the present. As modern entertainment becomes increasingly atomized, and home consoles and cellphones replace “coin-ops” as gaming devices, hardcore fans rally to keep the arcades’ convivial spirit alive. Through interviews with its Indian American owner, his Chinese American assistant-turned-manager, and their multicultural clientele, *The Lost Arcade* presents community organization in action. Rather than presenting the gamers as geeks or freaks, Vincent and Chin succeed in probing why these individuals find “pride, disappointment, and joy” in “that quarter” they spend on a game—and how this spirit helps maintain diversity in an increasingly homogeneous urbanity.

The disappearance of shared customs is also central to Canada-based Chinese filmmaker Yi Cui’s *Of Shadows* (2016). Revolving around a struggling shadow puppet troupe in the northwestern Chinese province of Gansu, the documentary slowly but sure-handedly reveals the company’s
double life: in order to stage their traditional repertoire in intimate shows at village fairs, they must perform ridiculously bombastic music-and-dance numbers in state-organized events. It’s obvious how the latter task keeps the troupe afloat, but it’s still a painful sight: performers are forced to wear makeup and bizarre costumes, and sing ridiculously worded anthems praising the ruling political ideology of the day. However much the performers express a loathing for such spectacles, there’s no going back to their roots: people in the rural hinterlands are already gravitating toward more sensational entertainment, as shown in one scene when they lose their audience to a film screening on a neighboring stage.

With this feature debut, Cui shows a remarkable sense of contemplation, composure, and control in depicting her subjects’ struggle to keep abreast of social changes. Placing her emphasis on the camaraderie among these oft-wandering players, the young director captures the evolution of an artistic community imperiled by external interference. A musician’s rant against the corrupting nature of market forces is interrupted by his beeping cellphone; an actor’s explanation of the removal of paranormal elements of their repertoire (since officials would frown upon the depiction of ghosts as peddling superstition) is cut short by the roar of bulldozers outside his home; and one performer wanders outside the frame during a chat, leaving behind an empty shot of a ravaged landscape. Of Shadows may show artists being shoved offstage into the wings, but at the end, Cui offers a flicker of hope: the troupe has somehow tweaked their performances enough to strike a balance between preserving their art and connecting to the changing demands of their audience, a survival based on communal diligence and intelligence. Cui acknowledges the performers’ importance by actually crediting them in the “creation” of the documentary itself.

In “Burma Rebound,” a set of video installations hosted in an arts space dubbed “Cafe Mandalay” for the occasion, two pieces considered how a local population makes sense of modern media. Midi Z offers a seemingly more lighthearted take in My Folk in Jade City (2015), which revisits Z’s

**Dominic Gagnon’s of the north raises questions about the politics of representation.**
customary subject, the toil of gemstone miners in the north-
east of the Southeast Asian country; Z’s Jade Miners (2015)
had premiered at Rotterdam last year and City of Jade
(2016) bowed in Berlin this year. In My Folks in Jade City,
Z films miners staring back at the camera and regaining con-
trol of their own image, in a work that pictures laborers “at
their own request.” As the recording starts, the young men
straighten their shirts, strike poses, and find props—a
hammer here, a rock there—to augment their appearances.
Never mind their dangerous line of work and the civil war
being fought around the mines: these individuals—some of
whom are Z’s relatives, thus the title—are keen to leave
some kind of legacy.

Also in Café Mandalay, Wah Nu and Tun Win Aung il-
illustrate cinema’s power to generate a sense of belonging with
Dat Khe, their uninterrupted record of an open-air screening
of the rom-com movie of the same name, filmed with a static
camera that includes the viewing audience and the stalls sell-
ing snacks within the venue. It brims with intertextuality
and autobiography, as the original Dat Khe (Energy Boost,
2002) unspooling on-screen was actually directed by Wah
Nu’s father Maung Wunna, and the filmed screening took
place in Tun Win Aung’s home village. Dat Khe is a very so-
cial, symbolic gesture, with which the artist-filmmaker duo
illustrate the rebirth of the public sphere in a rejuvenated

Burma. By inviting visitors of the installation to “join” the
screening by sitting on a rattan mat placed in front of the
projection of the video piece, Wah Nu and Tun Wing Aung
encourage onlookers who have come from afar and inhabit a
very different reality to tap into the collective spirit of the
audience on-screen.

Another IFFR program from curator Gertjan Zuilhof
(who programmed “Burma Unbound”), the “Letters from
Ethiopia” strand presented four independently produced
films from that country. While Yared Zaleke’s Lamb (2015),
Hermon Hailay’s *Price of Love* (2015), and Hiwot Admasu Getaneh’s *New Eyes* (2015) had all premiered elsewhere, the most interesting work was the 12-minute short *KeEthiopia Yetelake* (*Letters from Ethiopia*, 2016), an IFFR-commissioned effort from Hiwot Admasu Getaneh and Henok Legesse. A primer and manifesto of a new Ethiopian cinema, the piece begins with a quote from the country’s most well-known (but US-based) director Haile Gerima proclaiming that filmmakers concerned with their own cultures don’t have any excuse not to tell their own stories. *KeEthiopia Yetelake* then proceeds to articulate Hiwot Admasu Getaneh’s own history growing up in a village without television or theaters, alongside her creative ideas and her commentary on filmmaking. Supplanting these views are a series of conversations about the sociocultural reality of her country with such major figures as jazz legend Mulalu Astatke, filmmaker Solomon Bekele, and members of her own cohort (including Yared, who talked to her via Skype from New York, the latest stop of his global tour for *Lamb*). With these works and conversations about Ethiopian cinema, spanning the challenges young cineastes face today in terms of moral censorship and the scant resources available in their country, Rotterdam glimpsed a new narrative and hinted at how the future of cinema in the interconnected societies of this world may next be written.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
4. Part of the reason may have been that the Dutch-financed production was part of the 2013 pioneering edition of ART:FILM, a cross-disciplinary think tank jointly organized by IFFR and the Danish documentary festival CPH:DOX.
5. Note that the Irish Film Board is one of the film’s financing bodies.
10. Ibid.