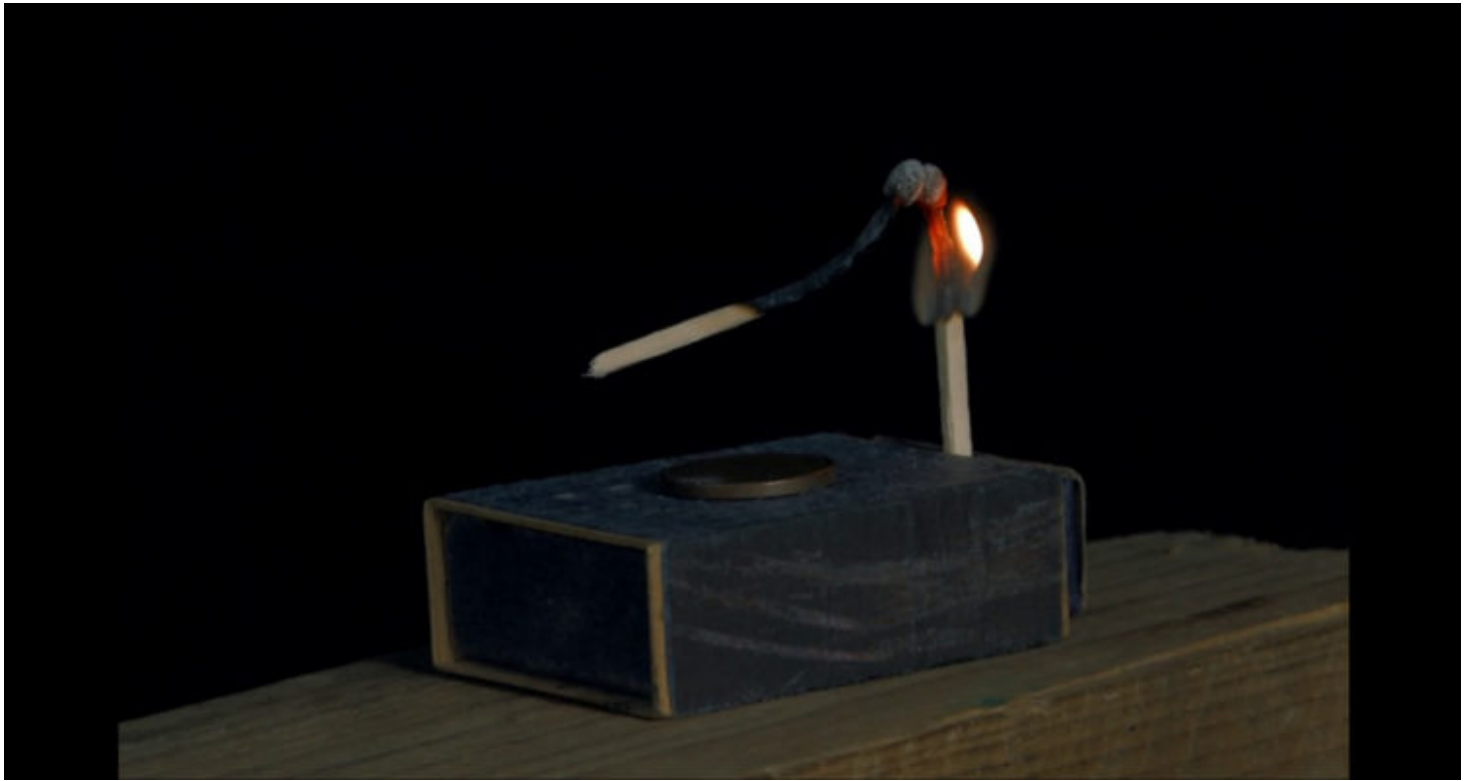


What Is It?: The 27th FID Festival International de Cinéma Marseille



Mariana Caló & Francisco Queimadela's *A trama e o círculo* (*The Mesh and the Circle*)

If the success of a festival is measured by all the many places its films end up, then the Festival International de Cinéma Marseille, or FIDMarseille for short, has been on a major upswing of late. While only a few weeks and a couple of hundred kilometres separate it from that other significant festival on the southern coast of France, it's actually worlds apart from its glitzier neighbour, whether in terms of its all-embracing conception of cinema, happy disdain for the pressures of the marketplace, or the leisurely feel of its setting. Over the past years, FID has proved the perfect launch pad for such heterogeneous, startling, boundary-ignoring works as *A trama e o círculo* (*The Mesh and the Circle*, Mariana Caló, Francisco Queimadela, 2014), *Le beau danger* (René Frölke, 2014), *Toponimia* (Jonathan Perel, 2015), *Mille Soleils* (*A Thousand Suns*, Mati Diop, 2014), and *Rastreador de estatuas* (*The Monument Hunter*, Jerónimo Rodríguez, 2015), while also throwing its weight behind such directors as José Luis Torres Leiva, Philip Scheffner, Eduardo Williams, Ben Russell and Philippe Grandrieux; a roll call of titles and names that speak for itself. Always intimate enough to make mingling unavoidable, the festival has benefitted greatly in this respect from the move to the new Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditer-

ranée (MuCEM) and Villa Méditerranée complex that was opened two years ago, two immaculate architectural coups perched on the entrance to the city's old harbour where screening, discussion and relaxation can easily overlap.

It would be tempting to connect FID's recent success to its decision to drop the "documentary" epithet from its name back in 2011, with only the D in FID left as a tacit reminder of the festival's narrower origins. The fact that this year's retrospective was dedicated to Hong Sang-soo felt like the clearest statement of this shift in alignment yet, as it would require some pretty generous interpretation to place the South Korean auteur's work in the realm of the documentary, regardless of how broadly you define the term. If FID is thus no longer a festival of pure non-fiction, the obvious question is what it is instead, a question that already contains the basis for a possible answer. Faced with a curatorial blueprint that pours scorn on standard categories and embraces all formats, perhaps the best way of engaging with the program is to simply ask "What is it?" of each individual film it contains, albeit in the happy knowledge that a straightforward answer won't be forthcoming. Much like for the films mentioned above, FID functions at best as a collection of wonderfully unique objects, their one common characteristic being a desire to challenge and astound.

This year's International Competition had its own fair share of singular objects, a set of complex, often provocative composites where no one constituent part was necessarily characteristic of the work as a whole, whether history, advertising, contemporary art, the written word, YouTube clips, politics, opera, film excerpts, dance, theory, and even, yes, the documentary. But for all the irrepressible desire to juxtapose and amalgamate on display, some of these combinations inevitably worked better than others. Vienna-based Selma Doborac's *Those Shocking, Shaking Days* pushes at the boundaries of how much text a film can hold, with her stimulating philosophical treatise on the representability of conflict by way of the Yugoslav wars putting almost every line of its lengthy argumentation on screen to be read by the viewer. Although this form of spectatorial positioning is undoubtedly bold, it also creates a troubling inequality; regardless of how smart the reasoning may be, when there's no opportunity to re-read or pause for reflection, the person doing the arguing can feel awfully superior.



Selma Doborac's *Those Shocking, Shaking Days*

Another evocation of the former Yugoslavia, Portuguese director André Gil Mata's *Kako sam se zaljubio u Evu Ras* (*How I Fell in Love with Eva Ras*) moves back and forth between the everyday life of a Sarajevo cinema projectionist and the excerpts of the Yugoslav canon she's responsible for showing. While there are obvious parallels to be made between the lives of the women on screen and that of the woman behind it, the film has little idea how to make these two elements properly interlock, the classic case of a smart concept that skimps on the necessary elaboration. A similar problem of execution plagues Zoe Beloff's *A Model Family in a Model Home*. Hearing Bertolt Brecht give testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 is undeniably fascinating, as is discovering the details of the films he planned to make in the US; weaving an unwieldy mix of song, dreamy 16mm, puppetry and ad footage around these interesting nuggets and topping them off with a declamatory voiceover doesn't, however, seem the best way of making them shine.

Yet the strongest films in the competition program had no such problems with implementing their concepts or making their disparate elements gel. Bertrand Bonello's 24-minute *Sarah Winchester, Opera Fantôme* brings together a series of seemingly unrelated parts and gradually lets them bleed into one another: a ballerina and her director rehearsing a solo in the vast empty auditorium of the Opéra Bastille to a soundtrack of grinding electronic beats; the opera choir filing in to practice some unidentified classical piece; copious intertitles aided by ghoulish sketches that detail the tragic fate of a certain Sarah Winchester, wife to the inventor of the famous repeating rifle. The

connections that slowly emerge between them all pivot upon haunting and possession: the dancer's solo is to give physical form to Sarah's infinite anguish, the choral piece channels the desperate entreaties of the ghosts that surround her, and soon the bloodied apparition of Sarah's long-dead daughter begins to wander the dark recesses of the theatre.



Bertrand Bonello's *Sarah Winchester, Opera Fantôme*

Bonello's decision to turn an opera into a haunted house is a logical one, for what else is opera but a present-tense conduit for emotion constructed in the past, performed in venues that practically shimmer with the residue of all the performances they've housed? But the glue that ultimately holds this audaciously diffuse ghost story together is his unceasing ability to find individual, yet slyly overlapping articulations of dread: the first few stabs of music that shatter the all-enveloping silence of the cavern-like auditorium, the dancer forcing her reddened, callused feet into golden pointe shoes, the written description of how a particular disease plays havoc with muscle and flesh placed beneath a semi-abstract watercolour of a baby's skeletal form, the dissolve from the sketch of Sarah's impossible domicile into two flights of stairs that lead only into darkness, a tiny figure at their foot. It's actually the character of the director who provides the key to fully grasping *Sarah Winchester, Opera Fantôme* when he finally asks the dancer to perform the solo in her head, for Bonello's film is akin to a fragmentary performance piece designed not for the stage but for the mind, where its different snatches of plot, physical sensation, rehearsal, and music can merely hang in the air rather than taking on one definitive form.

It's even harder to say what Israeli artist Roe Rosen's *The Dust Channel* actually is, a dense, unpredictable bricolage that exhilarates and disturbs in equal measure, the hands down strangest object of the festival in a competition full of them. Rosen's film would have made the perfect double bill with Bonello's, as both works share the same love of dislocation, not least in how they take the world of opera way out of its comfort zone. As one might expect, the overture of *The Dust Channel* establishes the (musical) themes which will structure the rest of the film. The camera looks down on a man and his wife lying next to each other in bed asleep, caressed by the sound of plucked strings, harpsichord, and bowed cello. The only thing to disturb this image of perfect domesticity is the wife's indecorously conspicuous armpit hair, although once the man gets up, he's also left an embarrassing stain behind on the sheets. As it becomes clear that those playing the music are also in the house, the wife's armpit hair is highlighted in an exaggerated black vignette, with first a plant with sharp green leaves and then an orange becoming superimposed onto it. The orange gives way to an egg yolk, the yolk to the man's eye, and the eye to a razor, before a finger slices across the pristine white bed sheet to break the yolk and usher in the surreal, whereupon a gentle breeze strikes up and the singing begins.



Roe Rosen's *The Dust Channel*

The resultant duet is dedicated to the Dyson Seven vacuum cleaner, which is behind both the breeze and the pristine condition of the couple's home, with both man and woman in unison extolling its tremendous ability to suck. The double entendre is entirely intentional here and echoes even louder once the husband starts to take a peculiar interest in one of the musicians cleaning the toilet and his wife attempts to dip

her tongue into an unseemly pile of brown muck but can't quite bring herself to do so. Voices soar, automated vacuum cleaners dance, the apartment is cleaned to within an inch of its life, and appliance sex ensues, even if a glance out the window reveals an endless desert landscape only broken up by the fortified walls of a refugee holding centre. As night falls, the Dyson extricates itself to watch television alone, constantly flicking through different channels to catch snippets of Sir James Dyson expounding upon the creativity of the design process, news reports and interviews on the prison-like conditions at Holot detention centre, vacuum cleaner porn and Harun Farocki's *Nicht löschesbares Feuer*. While Rosen's rapid-fire collage of incompatible signs permits a multiplicity of possible readings, the urgency of its political message pushes itself to the foreground, a comment on a society far too concerned with scrubbing away at its own transgressions to engage with the world outside; modern comforts always permit a window to be shut and a television channel changed. The harshest riposte to this view lurks at the very end of the credits, in the crushing revelation that the arty photos in the house are in fact of structures assembled by Holot detainees. Try as you may to shut it out, reality will always find some way in.

After *The Dust Channel*, Alexandra Cuesta's *Territorio* felt positively conventional, as most things would, which doesn't mean that it isn't quietly unique. Ecuador-born, US-based Cuesta's first feature is deceptively straightforward, nothing more than a series of sustained static shots of different people in her home country engaged in everyday activities – a boy astride a motorbike staring at the sea, a man having his head shaved with a set of blunt clippers, a family curled up together watching the remake of *Planet of the Apes*. Little seems to connect at the first glance them other than their location and unhurried approach to life. It's equally difficult to pick out one unifying formal strategy, as Cuesta constantly appears to settle into a rhythm only to break it again: sets of close-ups of faces give way to whole bodies against the landscape, the voice of the director is never heard until conversations are suddenly struck up, and humans even vanish the frame at times, to be replaced by dogs, chickens, or simply the night sky. What is immediately apparent, however, is Cuesta's talent for both framing and editing, with each of her discreetly composed images held long enough to give all the delicate shifts they contain a chance to breathe: the play of light on a window pane, two boys moving their eyes and heads in response to the noises around them, an elderly man suddenly introducing himself after what feels like minutes of silence.



Alexandra Cuesta's *Territorio*

At a time when many experimental documentaries rely on grandstanding structural ideas or aggressively awe-inspiring camerawork, Cuesta's more muted approach is refreshing, particularly once it becomes clear that she's also making more subtle, yet equally far-reaching gestures of her own. The first of these is so simple, yet so fundamental that you wonder why it's so rare: no attempt is made to hide the presence of the camera, with nearly all of those being filmed either casting it a quick glance, reacting directly to it, or even intentionally moving across or through the frame as if measuring out its limits. In this way, Cuesta speaks to an inescapable truth of all observation that most films seek to play down: no one remains unaffected by being observed and the moments which actively reflect this are at least as valuable as those that don't. The flickers of self-consciousness or curiosity that run through *Territorio* don't just add an extra layer to the film's portrayal of its protagonists, but also mark Cuesta's position towards them: this is not a director imperiously staring down her subjects, but one more than willing to let their looks interact with her own.

While a distance is still maintained between Cuesta and those she is filming, her overt outsider position actually flows into the film's ultimate concept. It's only the final titles that reveal the precise locations for each of the film's shots, a set of dots on an unseen map of Ecuador that when joined together reveal Cuesta's path through her homeland. But this is not the only line to be superimposed on to the country, as almost every shot in the film deliberately includes elements that lead out of the frame: one boat crossing the path of another before disappearing from view, children walking home from school that stop to pose for the camera before passing right by it,

the person in some unknown location with whom the girl on her mobile phone is conversing. If all these invisible lines stretching out of the image intersect with those marking the director's journey, an almost infinite lattice is created that marries Cuesta's movements within the country to the movements she finds within it: marking out a territory neither fixed nor objective but rather personal and imaginary, territory as comprehension rather than control.



Ignacio Agüero's *Como me da la gana II*

There was just as much subtlety and finesse on display in Ignacio Agüero's *Como me da la gana II*, paired with the sort of wisdom and freedom gained from over 30 years of sustained engagement with cinema. As the title suggests, the veteran Chilean documentarian's latest work is a sequel of sorts to his second film *Como me da la gana*, a comparatively conventional short he made back in 1985. This earlier 30-minute work involved Agüero visiting various filmmaking colleagues on set to ask them why they're actually making the film in question, with their answers revealing many of the difficulties of creating cinema in a country still in the grip of dictatorship. The same strategy is employed in the new film, with Agüero once again paying a handful of contemporary Chilean filmmakers (including Pablo Larraín, José Luis Torres Leiva and Christopher Murray) a visit on set to ask them about the ideas behind their films, revealing a wealth of different approaches along the way. But this time around, his final question, couched in slightly different terms every time, pushes further: where does the cinematic lie in what they are doing? This deceptively banal, yet utterly pertinent line of questioning is unsurprisingly met with a mix of responses, with considered thought the exception rather than the rule, with many of the filmmakers coming

across as unwilling to engage, baffled, or even vaguely panicked. Even for those who work in it, defining cinema is a slippery task.

Yet as if inspired by the question he keeps posing to others, Agüero also applies himself to the very same task, taking relish in filling the gaps between the interviews with his own casual-seeming set of responses both direct and indirect, expressed via voiceover or just uncontextualised images. As he would have it, the cinematographic lurks almost everywhere: in the hats dancing through the black and white footage of his grandparents' wedding or along the streets of Moscow, in private moments showing toenails being clipped and breasts revealed, in sounds and pictures lent out from other people's films, in the faces of children themselves bathed in the light and movement of a cinema screen. As Agüero gently meanders through a whole life's worth of moving pictures, he occasionally becomes self-conscious and starts chatting with his editor in voiceover about where their roamings have taken them, even returning to the title sequence on a number of occasions to start the film again when he deems they've wandered too far. This self-consciousness feels like pure fiction, however, as there's never a sense that Agüero isn't in total control of what he's doing, leading the viewer back and forth on a merrily intuitive dance between past and present, between his own previous filmmaking and what it has become now, between old images and new ones.



Ignacio Agüero's *Como me da la gana II*

Like most films about cinema, *Como me da la gana II* is also a film about marking the passage of time, about cataloguing what has changed over the last 30 years and what

remains the same. The political context in Chile may have shifted beyond belief, but the syllabus of a children's film workshop has yet to need retooling; filmmaking has become easier in some ways and more difficult in others, but still all film sets look much alike; whether shot on film, video, or digital, a beautiful image is a beautiful image. But of all the partial evolutions on display in *Como me da la gana II*, the most striking is that of its maker, as the gap between the first film and its sequel reveal a documentary filmmaker who has completely liberated himself from the potential confines of that epithet over time. So it couldn't have been more fitting then when the jury awarded Agüero's film the Grand Prize: a festival and its winning film in unusual harmony, each asking "What is it?" of cinema in full, joyous expectation of an open response.

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